Falls the Shadow

by Cookie

Summary

The King is dead. Long Live the King. Camelot is Arthur's now, and Merlin had believed they would achieve their destiny together. But when Arthur pulls away and betrays Merlin utterly, he goes to find the one person who understands his hurt the most.

Notes

Many people to thank – my wonderful artist altocello, who stuck with me even when writer’s block slowed progress to a total crawl. Her art is absolutely fabulous so please go and leave her lots of love. My beta Fredbassett, who did such an excellent job even though Merlin isn’t her thing! Thanks, dear, you continue to be a rock. Thanks, too, are due to the mods for keeping this challenge going – what a brilliant job you’ve done - and everyone in chat who had to put up with me weeping and wailing when the words wouldn’t come!

You can find the artpost here Please do go and leave lots of lovely comments and kudos - she deserves it!
Chapter 1

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

T.S. Eliot

The old man’s eyes.
Were not old mans’ eyes.
“You’ve killed him!”

“No.”

When Merlin heard Arthur talk to Gwaine and Leon about pursuing Julius Borden to ensure the destruction of the dragon’s egg in the Tower of Ashkanar, he’d wondered if this time he’d be going with them. For the past few excursions, he’d been left at the castle and while he’d been quietly upset at the exclusion he hadn’t worried too much. The outings had been short and Merlin had simply added a few extra spells of protection to Arthur’s armour and left it at that, trying not to dwell overmuch on the reasons he never seemed to be needed lately. If Arthur didn’t want him this time, then Merlin would have to make his own way to save the egg from both Borden and the king.

Merlin sighed as he considered his worsening relationship with Arthur. Arthur had been silent in his company recently and at first, once he finally took note of it, Merlin had merely assumed there was something troubling him and Merlin would inevitably find out about it when Arthur was ready to talk. As days slipped into weeks and Arthur’s attitude didn’t improve, Merlin became increasingly concerned. Initially, all his enquiries were met with vague comments, which eventually became a vicious order to mind his place. Since then, Merlin had been careful in what he said and resorted to sticking to those conversations relating to his duties for Arthur. The change in their relationship made Merlin uneasy but for the moment he’d no way of addressing it.

When Arthur turned to him and demanded he get ready to accompany the expedition he felt too pleased to be bothered by Arthur’s off-hand and clipped instructions. Arthur simply ordered Merlin to ready supplies and to try not to be useless. Merlin had responded by bustling about drawing together everything they might need and tried not to appear too elated at the mere fact he’d been included. He spent some time considering the weather and whether he should take extra blankets and ended up trotting rapidly down to the stables when he heard the unmistakeable sounds of horses and men preparing to leave. He was slightly taken aback when he got there and realised they hadn’t saddled his usual horse. Merlin loved her and quietly believed Arthur had picked the mare especially for him because of her placid but willing nature, which had always convinced him that she took special care of him.

Puzzled, he turned to the stable boy. “Where’s Daisy?”

The stable boy rolled his eyes at Merlin. Daisy actually possessed some ridiculous name Merlin had difficulty pronouncing, so he’d called her Daisy and ignored Arthur’s teasing, claiming Daisy liked her name.

“King Arthur had her sent to the stallion.”

Merlin was surprised at the depth of his disappointment, and an uneasy chill travelled down his spine. When he turned to look, he could see Arthur standing by his own stallion and was staring at him almost as if he’d never seen him before.

“Get on a horse – the knights are ready to ride and they shouldn’t be kept waiting by the likes of you.”

“No need to be rude,” Merlin said, shocked beyond words when Arthur took one stride forward, drew his arm back and smacked the side of Merlin’s head hard. Merlin stumbled and would have demanded what Arthur thought he was doing until he caught sight of his expression and any thought
of rebellion withered and died within him.

Instead, his face searing with mortified heat and his head reeling from the blow, he attached his pack and took the reins of the horse. He mounted as quickly as his spinning head would allow, sitting uneasily on the unknown quantity of horseflesh he’d been offered. As they left the courtyard, he managed a brief survey of the knights’ faces. Leon and Percival looked sympathetic, Elyan confused and Gwaine – Gwaine who was supposed to be Merlin’s friend, not Arthur’s – rode ahead at Arthur’s side and hadn’t spared Merlin a glance. He wondered uncharitably whether Gwaine’s noble blood had finally asserted itself now he had become a knight of Camelot, and immediately felt ashamed at the thought.

A knot formed in Merlin’s stomach, feeling acutely abandoned and hard done by. He continued to sulk until he realised Arthur seemed not to have noticed and the others were following their king’s lead and leaving him on his own. At which point his sulking became real hurt and confusion, not understanding what he’d done to be treated like this. The easy camaraderie he’d known was still readily apparent in the way Arthur and the knights interacted, but for the first time Merlin was rarely included in it, and never by Arthur.

They rode throughout the day as they followed the trail, and Merlin could almost see the murky aura of Borden in the air as they travelled. The weather stayed fine and dry, the ground firm beneath them and they could travel swiftly. They stopped occasionally to rest and water the horses and to eat standing holding the reins. Merlin kept busy looking after the horses while the knights disappeared into the trees to take care of their own business, and he only just managed to grab a piece of bread and a couple of handfuls of dried fruit before they were on the move again.

He sighed in relief when they stopped for the evening, expecting the knights to help in setting up the camp. One of the benefits of common men becoming knights had been the way they didn’t expect to be waited on hand and foot, and usually tasks were divided between them enabling Merlin to get on with the cooking. Arthur had picked a wooded glade close to a stream and, as it looked dry underfoot, it promised to be a comfortable camp. Merlin smiled at Arthur in satisfaction, his smile fading when Arthur didn’t react.

True to form, Percival turned to offer help but paused when Arthur stopped him.

“Come and have some wine, Sir Percival. You have to learn to let the servants work for their keep, you know. That’s why we brought him after all. He doesn’t have much else to recommend him.” He said it with a laugh, but the humour for Percival, not Merlin, who found himself fixed with a cool eye and an offhand. “Try not to take all night.”

Merlin offered a clearly hesitating Percival a weak smile and turned away to find firewood, making a list of the tasks he’d have to do and in what order. Somehow, he knew he couldn’t afford to make any mistakes. Getting a fire going, the food cooking and the horses tended to were the first priorities and he set to work, trying to ignore the laughter of men he’d thought were friends, blocking out the chatter as they passed the wineskin around. Once he’d completed his initial list of tasks and the stew beginning to bubble, he set to gathering wood enough to last the fire for the rest of the night.

Merlin almost stumbled as he came back to the campsite and dropped the fuel onto the pile he’d been amassing. As he looked at it to judge whether he needed more he rubbed his head, the dull ache from Arthur’s blow making him feel dizzy and sick. The knights had already served themselves from the pot and were looking for another helping. The teasing, when they pretended to have finished it all, almost proved the last straw but he managed to laugh along with them, determined not to give Arthur the opportunity to cast any further comments in his direction. He could hardly believe how grateful he felt when a still steaming bowl of food appeared and he could fill his empty stomach. Once he’d
finished, he looked across the campfire and almost brought everything back up. Arthur’s frown left Merlin with the conviction there wasn’t supposed to be any food left for Merlin at all.

Finally, when he found himself banished from the warmth of the fire and had to sleep outside the ring of protection the knights offered, he let slip the smile and don’t care attitude and, under the cover of his blanket, worked hard to hold back tears of exhaustion and unhappiness. Eventually, head, eyes and heart sore, he slept.

Merlin came back to consciousness slowly, not wanting to leave the dream with Arthur running a hand through his hair as if to check where his blow had landed the day before. He sighed, and then stirred as the dream ended. Abruptly, a boot nudged him and he heard Arthur’s voice, cold and hard.

“Get your lazy arse up and ready the horses.”

Merlin’s day turned out every bit as bad as the one before. The knights seemed less willing to talk to Merlin, picking up on Arthur’s mood and even their occasional teasing seemed to pick up a meaner edge. Merlin bit his lip, tried to laugh it all off and steadfastly ignored the growing knot of misery. If it hadn’t been for the need to save the dragon’s egg, he would have turned around and headed back to Camelot – on foot if his blasted horse wouldn’t oblige.

When they stopped for the night there was no teasing, and once again Merlin, tired and dispirited, worked his way through the chores. This time at least there was some stew left for him, and he managed a smile as he bent to the pot. His pleasure lasted only as long as it took for him to discover a poultice in the midst of the meat. Staring round at Arthur and the knights, he could already see the effects and knew if he didn’t act quickly they could die. He didn’t know how Borden had managed to get close enough to put poison into their food, but somehow he’d deposited something strong enough to kill. Desperation lent Merlin’s magic an extra edge and he crafted and worked a frantic spell to save them. Only once he knew the poison had been expelled and they slept naturally, did he head out after Julius Borden. Something in him tolled like a bell and he knew with a certainty he couldn’t explain that he was close and he had to get there before Borden or Arthur.

In a way, Borden had done him a favour. Merlin knew the knights and Arthur would sleep at least until the morning, which gave him enough time to find the egg and hide it. The traps set were ridiculously easy to evade with his magic, which led him to wonder whether it could have been a deliberate ploy of the long-dead Ashkanar to ensure no common thief would survive an attempt to steal the egg.

When he saw the dragon’s egg sitting on its plinth, shining white with the blue at its base, a fierce protectiveness took root deep in him and the presence of Borden with his clumsy attempts to win Merlin over seemed pitiful.

“I’m a sorcerer,” he said, and enjoyed the way Borden’s face paled. “This egg and the life it contains are magic and no concern of yours.” Then he let his magic free, channelled grief and hurt into it, and Borden slammed backwards until he met unforgiving stone and fell to the floor. Merlin didn’t know whether he’d killed him or not. He didn’t really care. Instead, he lifted the egg carefully, wondering at the sheer joy washing over him. The building rumbled and groaned and the floor heaved,
banishing elation and leaving fear in its wake. Instincts kicked in and, holding the precious egg close to him, he ran for both their lives.

Merlin struggled with the adrenalin still surging through him when he made it back to the camp. The knowledge Julius Borden hadn’t made it out of the tower and Merlin had left him there had his stomach clenching and he’d needed to swallow hard to try and keep down his meagre breakfast. He hadn’t had much time to compose himself before he faced Arthur again and he endured a number of frowns from Arthur when he thought Merlin wasn’t watching. Merlin wondered about the fleeting looks, almost afraid Arthur had some idea what had happened and would stop and insist on searching the baggage. Merlin shivered at the thought of what Arthur might do if he found the egg and stayed quiet, keeping to the back of the group and trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. For the very first time since he’d met Arthur, he really felt like a servant.

Only the thought of saving the egg from destruction kept him going. Once he could find somewhere safe to keep it, he’d try to talk to Arthur and make another attempt to find out what he’d done wrong.

Making a decision to talk to Arthur was easy. Finding a time when they were both alone, as well as a way to broach the subject without triggering Arthur’s temper, turned out to be another matter entirely. Merlin tried on several occasions, only for Arthur to cut him off or order him from his presence. Eventually, Merlin landed on the idea of reverting to the way he’d usually reacted to Arthur. Maybe Arthur would slip back into those familiar behaviours too, and whatever had been bothering him would fade into the past.

With that heartening thought, he made his way to Arthur’s chambers, entering without knocking and ignoring the heavy frown of disapproval as he knelt at the fire.

“Where’s my blue doublet?” Arthur’s tone held an edge Merlin had learned to dread. His good idea suddenly felt almost dangerous, but in the absence of anything better, he decided to plough ahead.

“What do you need it for?” Merlin continued to tend the fire, as he would have done in the past and concentrated so much on it he didn’t notice the extended silence at first, not until it became a still, heavy, almost tangible presence. By the time Merlin turned his head to face Arthur, he could feel the hair on the back of his neck rising.

Arthur waited until he had Merlin’s full attention.

“Since when have I been required to explain anything to my manservant.” Arthur’s eyes held no warmth at all and his voice was ice. “Where’s my blue doublet?”

Merlin reached for a teasing reply, for some way to bring them back to their usual easy back and forth but even with his earlier resolution still fresh in his mind, nothing came to mind. He felt almost overwhelmed as he finally acknowledged how many weeks it had been since Arthur had spoken to him with anything approaching friendliness. The realisation brought with it an overwhelming wave of sadness and he looked down at the grate to hide his burning eyes.

“It’s in the wardrobe.”

The same tense silence permeated the air until Merlin pulled himself to his feet, dusted his hands off on his breeches and fetched the garment. About to hand it directly to Arthur, something in Arthur’s eyes stopped him and instead he laid it carefully on the bed and helped Arthur to change without
further comment. He hesitated as Arthur flinched at his touch and when he’d finished he stood quietly and waited with a certain amount of dread for Arthur to speak, hardly able to breathe for the grief choking him.

“I’ll be going hunting this morning and I’ll return in three days. The steward has a list of chores for you. I want my chambers clean and tidy before my return.”

“I’m not going with you?” What if something happened? What if Arthur was attacked? How could Merlin protect him if he wasn’t even there? Short trips with Merlin still close at hand were almost bearable, but even if Merlin knew something had gone wrong, there’d be no time to reach Arthur.

“No,” Arthur strode to the door without further explanation. Once there, he paused. “Sir Agravaine has all authority while I’m away. You’ll obey him as you would me.” Cold eyes raked Merlin. “I’ve allowed you a certain amount of leeway in the past. But take warning. Do not forget my rank.”

“I… I’m sorry, sire.”

Without another word or gesture Arthur left the room and Merlin remained staring at the wood, his eyes wide and uncertain.

What have I done, he wondered, to make him hate me? The one thing to spring instantly to mind was obvious, but he was convinced if Arthur knew he had magic, something would have been said already. The thought of what else it could be occupied his thoughts and kept him awake the nights Arthur was gone.

He was so terribly afraid of the answer.

Only now with Arthur absent and their friendship apparently a thing of the past did Merlin understand how protected he’d been. Everyone seemed to know he’d lost favour and reacted accordingly; other servants were offhand or avoided him as if afraid of being noticed as one of his friends. Even Gwen would hesitate before she spoke to him, glancing around as if to check Arthur wasn’t close by and Merlin took to avoiding her as much as possible. His jealousy over her closeness with Arthur seethed within him, too, even though he hated himself for it. Some of the knights – in particular those who’d been Uther’s men - began to take delight in ordering him around and complaining about everything he did. Even after Arthur returned it didn’t stop and in some ways was worse, because Arthur didn’t seem to notice the rising tide of petty irritations that were becoming a part of Merlin’s every day.

It started with verbal abuse, and escalated to an occasional shove and slap to the back of the head when it became clear Arthur didn’t seem interested or about to stop it. Only if Percival or Leon were around did the treatment cease. Leon would intervene and send Merlin off on another errand. Percival would scowl at the knights and glance nervously at Arthur but, even if he seemed concerned at what the King might think, he always manage to insinuate his bulk between Merlin and whoever was tormenting him, allowing Merlin to make his escape. Merlin felt unspeakably grateful for their support even in the face of Arthur’s disapproval, but mourned at the lack of a similar response from Elyan, and especially Gwaine. Occasionally, he caught Gwaine looking at him and could see guilt and concern, but his one time friend stayed away from him and actively avoided any time when they might be alone.

At the moment Merek and his sidekick Ulric were taking the lead, hooting and laughing as they
shoved Merlin back and forth between them. Grimly, Merlin attempted to twist away, knowing he couldn’t afford to give them any leeway or excuse to accuse him of anything. Desperate and dizzy, he glanced around for either Leon or Percival. Elyan, while he didn’t take part in the teasing, had never made an attempt to help him, to Merlin’s dismay. All he could see was Arthur, but with a queasiness that couldn’t only be put down to the maltreatment, he didn’t expect any help from that quarter.

Arthur stopped it, though, striding up. “If you’ve quite finished with your fun, training is about to start, gentlemen.”

With a final push, in full view of Arthur, Merek sent Merlin stumbling away and Merek laughed aloud as he and Ulric offered Arthur a sketchy salute and sauntered off towards the training field. Merlin couldn’t name the expression on Arthur’s face as he frowned after them, but then Arthur turned back and his mouth settled into the thin line Merlin had come to hate.

“I assume you’ve got work to do. Stop loitering and get to it.”

Merlin didn’t wait for anything further, he turned on his heel and darted off, letting the cool morning air take the colour from his cheeks as he ran. The steps up to Gaius’ chambers stopped his headlong flight and he leaned against the wall half way up, panting and pressing his hand to his gut. One of the many aspects of Arthur’s disfavour meant that Arthur had someone else take him his meals. In the past there had always been plenty left for Merlin, and at one stage, Arthur had even taken to dumping food on another plate for Merlin. Now, there was never enough, and less time to eat even when he got the chance. Arthur’s lack of thought and the change in his behaviour towards Merlin was felt so much more keenly on the top of an empty stomach and bones weary from work and tension. Not that he found it easy to eat anyway, as misery kept his stomach in a state of constant knots.

Merlin rubbed angrily at his eyes and walked slowly up the remaining stairs, pushing against the door and entering, immediately soothed by the smells of herbs that permeated the room and the sight of Gaius pottering around the space. The familiarity was comforting. Here at least there he could be sure he’d be treated like a human being.

“Merlin, there you are. I wondered if you’d mind going out into the forest to get some herbs I need?” Gaius was busy packing up some meat, bread and fruit. “I’ve sent a message to Arthur to say I’ve need of you today.” Gaius had said little about Merlin’s change in circumstance, but he was doing everything in his power to help and Merlin appreciated both his forbearance and his practical approach to aiding Merlin.

In response, Merlin nodded and slumped onto a stool. He folded his arms and rested his head on them for a moment. He was so tired. A hand pressed against his shoulder in silent sympathy and Merlin sat up, scrubbing the back of his hand across his eyes.

“Gaius, do you think Arthur could have been enchanted? He’s so different these days.”

“I’m sorry, Merlin, I don’t believe that’s the case,” Gaius moved around the room, gathering up ingredients for whatever potion he was intending to work on. Merlin saw lettuce, white poppy and coltsfoot – a sleeping draught then. “There’s nothing other than his treatment of you that suggests any involvement of magic.” He paused, and Merlin heard the fear and worry in his voice. “Perhaps you should go and visit your mother for a few weeks. It’s been a while since you saw her.”

Merlin shook his head, stubborn. This wasn’t the first time Gaius had made the suggestion. “No, I have to be in Camelot to protect Arthur. I’d never forgive myself if anything happened to him and I wasn’t here.”
Gaius moved to sit opposite him, “Merlin, I’m worried he suspects you. What else would make him behave this way?”

“It’s like he hates me,” Merlin had to swallow hard.

“I know you don’t want to leave him, Merlin, but just think about it, hmm? It doesn’t have to be forever, you know.”

Merlin nodded in defeat, unable to speak. He pulled himself to his feet, and Gaius handed him the pack of food with an encouraging smile that did little to mask his concern.

There was no improvement in Arthur’s treatment of him over the next few weeks, and it seemed to Merlin as if he was being watched constantly. Between that and the bullying, Merlin took to creeping along corridors, avoiding the most travelled routes and using his magic to sense if people were nearby. Gaius looked increasingly worried but hadn’t raised the subject of Merlin leaving again. Merlin felt worn ragged, and knew he’d become thin and nervous but even when he was feeling his worst, he found it impossible to walk away, to leave Arthur at the mercy of any magical attack. The knowledge Agravaine was in league with Morgana meant the threat was far too close to home.

Agravaine.

Another one who took great delight in Merlin’s fall from grace. Merlin might have been able to overlook it, mixed in as it was with the poor treatment from so many others around him, but Agravaine’s malice extended to Gaius and Merlin had to work hard not to use his magic to inflict as nice a case of boils and pustules as he could in places on Agravaine’s body where it would hurt most. Gaius was no longer welcome at the council table and when Merlin had discovered what had happened he’d found it difficult to subdue either his anger at Agravaine, who had engineered it, or the throat-closing mix of anger and disappointment in Arthur, who had allowed it to happen.

By this time Merlin knew better than to try and talk to Arthur about it. He’d learned the hard way to speak only when spoken to, and to keep his tone low and respectful, taking the occasional blow without flinching, but with increasing resentment and dislike. The day before, Arthur had used the buckle end of his belt, smacking Merlin hard across his back in retribution for some imagined slight to Agravaine.

His expression hard, Arthur had informed Merlin, in Agravaine’s presence, that Agravaine was a member of the Royal family and was to be treated as such. There was more, delivered in Arthur’s cold, cutting voice, but Merlin was smarting too much both physically and emotionally to be able to take much notice. He’d felt the power roiling within him, desperate to escape and take retribution for the physical assault. Horrified at the impulse, he’d fixed his eyes firmly on the floor and spent the time fighting against his feelings and his magic. Eventually he’d been released, making sure to bow low before them and only just resisting the urge to spit in their faces, and had taken his leave as quickly as he could. The strike had been hard and strong, and Merlin knew he was bruised, but he didn’t dare tell Gaius.

Instead, he’d decided Gaius was right and it was time to leave. Then they’d see just how long Arthur Pendragon managed without any protection. Merlin no longer cared about his destiny. Arthur had become Uther and there was no longer any hope for magic here, let alone the idea of a united Albion.
He made it back to Gaius’ chambers, where Gaius, with one sharp look, didn’t attempt to talk to him and didn’t try to stop him as he climbed the stairs to his room.

“Merlin?”

“Gaius?” Merlin shook himself from his brooding and shrugged at the raised eyebrows. A night’s disturbed sleep had eased most of his physical pain but left him more conflicted about whether he should leave Camelot.

“I need you to take this pack to Leon and the company. They’re heading out on patrol this morning and they’ll be gone for several days.”

“Who’s going?” These days Merlin could only find a modicum of interest in those he thought of as ‘his’ knights.

“Leon is taking out Gwaine, Percival and Elyan.”

Merlin’s heart sank, and he clutched the pack he now held to his chest.

“On you go now, my boy. Don’t keep them waiting.” Gaius’ own anxiety translated into a sharpness of tone but he patted Merlin on the shoulder in apology as he obviously noticed Merlin’s wince.

He scuttled away, choosing corridors where he was less likely to see either Arthur or any of the other knights, moving as swiftly as he could until he was in the courtyard and could jog up to Gwaine.

“Gaius asked me to give you this, Sir Gwaine.” Arthur had recently snapped at Merlin about remembering his rank and everyone else’s. That it had happened was bad enough, but it had been done in the full council session and the dressing down Merlin received had obviously vindictively amused several of the knights.

“Thanks, Merlin.” Gwaine hesitated and then pressed a quick hand to Merlin’s shoulder. Just as quickly, he spun away to fix the pack to his horse.

It was a simple touch, but it brought sudden tears to Merlin’s eyes and he scrubbed angrily at his face. He wanted to speak, to wish them a good journey, but his throat seemed stuffed full and he couldn’t swallow enough to find voice or words. Managing a weak smile for a concerned Percival, he turned on his heel and ran from them, ignoring Arthur and Agravaine who’d just arrived in the courtyard. No doubt he’d pay for the lack of obeisance later but for now all he could think of was getting away.

Merlin left an uneasy silence behind him.

Merlin hadn’t expected Arthur to be present in his chambers, so hadn’t thought to knock before he entered. Gaius had sent Merlin into the lower town earlier to deliver various mendicants and also to get him out of the way of some of the knights. As far as Merlin was aware, Arthur was scheduled to spend the afternoon in a council meeting. His heart leapt to his throat in alarm at the sight of Arthur sitting on the bed. For a moment he was held still, taking in the broad muscled back. Arthur was in
the middle of changing, but for the moment he was sitting with his head buried in his hands. Merlin must have made some sound, or else Arthur’s instincts kicked in as he turned his head and Merlin gasped at red-ringed eyes.

“What are you doing here?” Arthur cleared his throat and moved to the table, downing whatever was in the goblet standing on the surface.

“Sire, I’d like to request a leave of absence to visit my mother.”

“No.”

“No, I – “

“I don’t intend to repeat myself. Once you’ve proved you’re a half-decent servant I might consider it. Until then, get on with your duties.”

“Why – “

“I’ve suffered enough with your insolence, boy. Take yourself off before you feel my belt again.”

Arthur appeared furious and it was anger well matched by Merlin’s own. For a moment they stared at one another and Merlin knew he couldn’t possibly be hiding just how much he disliked Arthur.

“Out. Now.”

The rasp in Arthur’s voice sounded like pure fury and was enough to pull Merlin back from venting his own anger. Merlin managed the sketchiest of bows and shut the door with exaggerated quietness behind him. Despite apparently hating him, it seemed Arthur wouldn’t even let him leave.

Sadness washed over him as he mourned what he now knew he had irretrievably lost. He pressed his forehead to the wood, startled by the sudden thud as something hit the other side of the door.

Stumbling away, he ignored the sounds of destruction coming from Arthur’s chambers and made his escape.

With the departure of the only knights Merlin had received any friendship from, the teasing intensified until it began to take on a more sinister edge.

Merlin had never thought he was particularly naïve, he was brought up in a small country village, for goodness sake, he understood all about such things. But when Merek cornered him in the armoury, Merlin had expected more physical abuse and was steeling himself for it, only to be shocked into stillness as Merek reached out with a thumb and pressed it into Merlin’s mouth.

“You’ve got a pretty mouth, boy, especially now you’ve learned to keep it shut.”

Merlin kept his breathing even, though every instinct was screaming at him to get away, and he was aware of his magic simmering under his skin. Terrified it would lash out to protect him of its own accord, he closed his eyes and willed it to calm.

“Why don’t you put that mouth to good use, eh?” Merek moved his other hand to Merlin’s shoulder and was beginning to press down when there were sounds of someone else approaching.

Merlin pressed himself against the wall, as far away from Merek as he possibly could.
Merek leaned in close, foul breath washing over Merlin and adding to Merlin’s urge to vomit. “Tybalt and Ulric will be joining me in my chambers this evening. You’ll bring a pitcher of wine at the ninth candlemark.” His eyes were dark with lust as he stepped back. “You have your orders, servant. If you don’t obey them, I’ll make sure the King hears about it.” He spun away with a swirl of his cape and strutted out of the armoury.

Merlin stayed where he was, too weak with the release of tension to do anything else. He breathed deeply and tried to gather some composure, forcing down the overwhelming urge to be sick. Aware of someone moving closer, he started in alarm and scrambled out of the corner into the centre of the room where he wouldn’t feel so trapped.

Sir Lamorak was checking over a piece of armour, and was taking no notice of Merlin whatsoever. Merlin kept his steps light and worked his way around him. Lamorak had teased him from time to time, but with nothing like the malice of some of the others and had never laid a finger on him.

“Don’t go to his room, Merlin.” He’d made it to the door before Lamorak spoke, the man’s voice delivering a low warning.

“He’ll tell the King.”

“Nevertheless, don’t go.” Lamorak abandoned the armour to look at Merlin, though he didn’t move closer, for which Merlin was grateful.

Merlin managed to nod his thanks for the advice, and then slipped away, making himself as invisible as he could. He almost ran past Gwen, ignoring her call to stop and the worry on her features and took himself out of the castle, racing across the green sward and into the forest beyond. He was well known as Gaius’ apprentice and had the authority to come and go from the castle at will. Never had he appreciated it as much in this moment, not feeling as if he could breathe until he’d made it into the cover of the trees. Moving deeper into the wood, he found somewhere quiet and set up a barrier to inform him if anyone came close and then he let his magic go, pouring his grief and anger up into the sky and down into the earth.

Across Albion, people looked to the sky in trepidation, wondering why, for a brief instant of time, the world shuddered unsteadily under their feet and as if the heavens above had paused.

Merlin didn’t go to Merek’s chambers.

Once he returned from the forest, calmer if not happier, he hid down in an old cave deep under Camelot until the early hours of the morning. He couldn’t even remember how he’d found this place, but he knew no one else would bother him there. As he sneaked through the corridors to his room, all he could think about was getting away. He’d tell Arthur he was leaving. He wasn’t a slave and there was nothing Arthur could do when he announced his intention to leave Camelot forever.

Before he could put his plan into action, they came for him, Merek, Ulric and Tybalt. The latter two grabbed him and marched him along while Merek strutted through the corridors with his hand on the pommel of his sword. Gaius protested but ignored, so he brought up the rear, going as quickly as he could, but gradually falling behind.

Merlin concentrated on keeping his feet, too off-balance to even attempt an escape. Although still early there had apparently been news of Morgana and a full council was already in session when Merek gestured at the guards and the doors were flung open. A sea of faces, curious, affronted,
Merek, Ulric and Tybalt should never have been knights, in Merlin’s humble opinion, but the days when anyone would listen to him were long gone. He concentrated on his own growing anger rather than the shame of being hauled along so ignominiously in front of the council and so many of the servants. The knights dragged him down the full length of the hall and threw him at the foot of Arthur’s chair.

Arthur stared down at them, disapprovingly. Agravaine was by his side as he always was these days. Merlin didn’t dare get to his feet, but he moved until he was no longer sprawled on the floor, staying on his knees and meeting Arthur’s eyes fearlessly and with dislike. His trust in Arthur had been eroded so far, he found it impossible to believe he’d receive any support.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“This cur has refused to obey our commands. Sire, we all heard you order him to pay due respect to his betters.” Merek booted Merlin back to the floor and made sure his voice could be heard all around the hall, the clever phrasing making it impossible for Arthur to ignore the charge, even if he wanted to.

Merlin struggled back to his knees, letting his outrage overcome his fear of Arthur’s reaction. “I’m not going anywhere near their rooms,” he said, his tone defiant and he hoped it covered his very real terror. “I’m not going to be on my own with them.”

For a moment, Arthur showed every sign Merlin recognised of contained fury, a banked, simmering incandescence, but then Arthur’s expression became a shuttered and cold mask. “You disobeyed them?” Arthur’s voice sounded brittle and he waited for only a few moments. “Answer me.”

“Yes.” Merlin met his eyes then and the last tiny kernel of hope shrivelled and died within him.

“Three lashes for your insolence.” Arthur delivered the sentence without even looking at Merlin. “Now get out.”

“Sire, please.” Gaius stepped forward to protest.

Arthur did not let him continue. “Three lashes. And the next person who speaks out will receive the same. And the servant will receive six. I don’t have time to spare for the misdemeanours of serving boys.” His flat, cold eyes were on the knights, and they stirred uneasily, aware they’d displeased their king. “The next time, arrange his punishment accordingly.”

Merlin struggled to his feet, fighting against the nausea at the knowledge Arthur had just given the knights a free hand in their treatment of him. And not just him, he thought, as he looked swiftly around the room and catalogued the worried faces of other servants. He ignored the malicious grins on the knights’ faces and the satisfaction on Agravaine’s. He grabbed Gaius’ arm, whispering, “Don’t, please, you’ll just make it worse. Please, I’ll be fine.”

Gaius held him close for a moment. “Come to me when it’s done, my boy.”

Merlin nodded and then he stood tall, squaring his shoulders. He ignored the gleeful knights behind him and bowed low to Arthur. And when he looked up, he knew that for the first time he was glaring at Arthur with hate. Even so, a part of him mourned and hoped, so he turned away and headed for the dungeons to undergo his punishment. Trying to get away would only result in worse and might mean trouble for his friends and he knew he would have to endure this final indignity. Deep, so very deep inside there was still a kernel of belief in their shared destiny, but hope was
fading and he was spending too many nights wondering whether the way he was living now, whether the type of man Arthur was becoming, was worth what was happening to him. Based on today, Merlin had even less reason to stay.

He walked straight to the dungeons and sought out the head jailer there.

“T’ve to have three lashes – order of the king.”

Gaden had been in charge of the dungeons since Merlin had arrived in Camelot and, despite his job, had always seemed like a fair and just man. Even the sorcerers held there before their deaths had been provided with food and drink and a comfortable pallet on which to spend their last, miserable nights. One night, hoping to provide some comfort to a young man sentenced to be beheaded the next morning, Merlin had sneaked down the stairs, only to pause at the quiet rumble of Gaden’s voice. Merlin had listened for a while, realising Gaden had been talking about the family he’d lost long ago and about the last summer they’d all spent together. It seemed an odd thing to talk about but on peeking round the corner he could see the young man sitting close to the bars, his eyes hungry and listening closely to every word.

Now, he had to face a questioning look and he struggled to keep the keenly felt injustice from showing. Gaden narrowed his eyes.

“Well, lad, best get it over.”

He took Merlin to the rack set up for such punishments and Merlin shucked off his shirt and reached up to the leather straps. He’d never been beaten in his life but had seen Gaius treat the odd man who’d been flogged. Uther had used the punishment sparingly and only for the worst of crimes and up until now, Arthur had eschewed it completely. Merlin swallowed hard and tried not to show just how scared he was.

The clatter of approaching feet broke the quiet and covered the sound of Merlin’s panicked breathing. He glanced behind and his heart shrank at the sight of the three knights.

“Something you need, sir knights?” Gaden had stepped into the entrance of the cell, barring their entry.

“The boy’s insult was for us. Seems only right that we serve him one lash apiece.”

“The meting out of the King’s punishment is my role. Only the King Arthur’s direct order would give me leave to do otherwise. You may watch if you wish, but I’ll flog the boy, not you.”

Gaden’s great bulk stood in their way and Merlin felt grateful that, for the moment at least, they couldn’t see how he trembled in fear at the very thought of these men being allowed to whip him. He trusted Gaden, though, and tried to use that to calm himself.

“We’ll watch – make sure you do it properly and if you don’t we’ll tell the King that.”

“As you wish.”

“Wait.” Merek had stepped forward. “Use this whip. The one you have there is worn and soft – it’ll hardly leave a mark. We want him scarred for his affront to us.”

“It’ll hurt him enough,” Gaden responded, his tone mild but with enough steel beneath the words to silence them. Merlin heard the grumbling behind him but they seemed disinclined to argue further and he blocked it out, as he felt a soft touch to his bare shoulder. “Brace yourself,” Gaden said softly, and then murmured, “Make me look good and yell a bit.”
Despite his situation, Merlin had to bite back a laugh, but managed a slight nod to show his understanding.

When the whip cracked through the air and striped across his back the shock alone had him letting out a shout. The next two followed in quick succession and he yelled at each of them, forcing his anger and humiliation into every reaction.

Merlin was crying, not from the pain because there was remarkably little, but because Arthur had put him here. Without asking for his side of the story, without even acknowledging he might have had a reason for his refusal to follow orders, Arthur had sent him to this.

“It’s done, sirs, time for you to be about your business. I’m sure the King has need of you.”

Only when all sounds of them had faded, did Merlin release his hold on the straps. Gaden helped him slip his shirt on over the marks on his back.

“I need to get some salve for my knees from Gaius. I’ll walk with you.”

Merlin nodded, only half-aware in his misery as he paced alongside a limping Gaden. Briefly, Merlin wondered when Gaden’s knee had started to hurt, he didn’t recall him limping earlier, but then his own woes intruded again and he didn’t think to question him.

Merlin was glad enough of his company, however, when they reached the stair to Gaius’ rooms and Merek and Ulric were loitering at the foot. Merlin kept his head down until they’d gone, unaware of the unwavering look Gaden had sent in their direction. He stumbled up the stairs and straight into the arms of a white-faced Gaius.

“He had me whipped, Gaius. Arthur had me whipped. How could he do that? How could he?” The growing misery of the past weeks came to a head, and Merlin brushed away tears he couldn’t seem to stop.

“I’m sorry, my boy. I’m so sorry. Let’s get that shirt off and take a look shall we?”

Merlin shrugged out of his shirt once more, and felt cool fingers on the heat of his back.

“Gaden?” Gaius’ voice sounded surprised.

Merlin looked round in time to see Gaden shrug. “I carried out my orders, Gaius.” There was something in his voice, something Merlin in his weariness hardly noticed although he did see the considering look Gaius cast at Gaden. “Three strokes were ordered – three strokes he got. I’ll look in on him later.”

“Thanks, Gaden.” Merlin was more grateful than he could say. Even without being able to see, he knew Gaden hadn’t broken his skin, which meant no real threat from infection.

Gaius repeated the thanks, though there was a level of puzzlement in the look he bestowed on Gaden that, in addition to that earlier appraisal, even managed to impinge on Merlin’s misery.

“What is it, Gaius?”

“Nothing, my boy. Let’s get some salve on those bruises. A couple of days bed rest and you’ll be fine.

Merlin, safe with the one person in Camelot he was sure he could really trust, shut his eyes and, under the gentle touch of Gaius’ hands and the numbing of the cool salve, he was soon fast asleep.
It was two full days and three nights before Gaius expressed enough satisfaction with Merlin’s condition to let him leave their rooms. Merlin insisted he felt fine and Gaius was satisfied enough and exasperated enough by his fractious patient by then to let Merlin resume his duties.

Merlin padded through the corridors to Arthur’s chambers, keeping his eyes down and trying to avoid any interaction with the people he passed. Most of the servants had a quiet hello, or said his name as he passed by and he responded with a quick sideways smile and though he didn’t stop, he at least felt a little warmed by their obvious support. It was a change from the months of cold-shouldering he’d endured from so many of them, and he was too grateful to hold a grudge for earlier mistreatment.

Only Gwen stopped him, placing a hand on his arm so that it would’ve been rude not to pause and acknowledge her. There was a soft sympathy in her eyes that almost annoyed Merlin and he looked away rather than face it, not entirely sure why her kindness and concern should make him react so.

“How are you, Merlin?”

“Fine. Really, really fine. Thanks for asking.” He stepped forward, attempting to move past her but she tightened her grip.

“Arthur shouldn’t have done it, Merlin. It wasn’t right.”

The old part of Merlin wanted to find excuses for Arthur’s conduct but it was obliterated by the sudden acid memory of the knights and the lash. He didn’t know what was in his face when he finally met Gwen’s gaze head on, but her hand left his arm as if she’d been stung, and she stepped back a pace.

“I know he shouldn’t have done it. But he did, didn’t he? That’s the type of man he is – the type of king he is. We’re common people, you and me, Gwen and so we don’t matter. You’d better keep that in mind.”

With that vicious parting shot, he walked away and this time she didn’t attempt to stop him. He knew he should have felt ashamed, Gwen had done nothing to merit such treatment from him but he couldn’t deny that jealousy had prompted the response. Gwen still seemed to have Arthur’s favour – for the moment at least - and had always been treated by Arthur as someone important in his life. Merlin had to accept that he’d been nothing other than the butt of jokes and a convenient whipping boy when occasion demanded. Merlin smiled wryly, as his role now seemed to be as a literal whipping boy, too. Somehow, he knew this wouldn’t be the last time. Not if he spent any time close to Arthur. No, the friendship he’d believed they shared was clearly only a figment of his imagination. And he was done with it.

Reaching the door of Arthur’s chambers, he paused to gather his courage, then knocked and entered.

His resolve along with his hate almost deserted him as he took in the sight of Arthur sitting at his desk, his features pensive and dark circles shadowing his eyes. When Arthur saw who’d entered, however, his whole demeanour altered and instead Merlin was faced with the remote stranger he’d come to fear – and to actively dislike.

“Why are you here? What do you want?”

Merlin took a deep breath, Arthur’s expression when he entered had shaken his conviction, because
even now the slightest hint that the Arthur he’d cared about was still there somewhere was enough to make him reconsider his decision.

“Gaius needs my help more these days. I’ve come to resign as your manservant – you don’t really want me around anyway.” He couldn’t keep the bitterness from his tone and he stared at the floor, cursing the tiny part of him that still waited for Arthur to tease, to be the way he used to be.

Arthur moved until he was leaning back in the chair, and when Merlin looked up in hope, he saw a king relaxed and cold. Bleakly, Merlin acknowledged that the miniscule hint of the man Arthur had once been had gone as if Merlin had dreamt it. Perhaps he had. Perhaps this was what Arthur had always been and it was Merlin’s foolish hope that made him think Arthur was anything noble and good.

“You could have told the steward this – he’ll organise a more efficient servant. Is there anything else you’ve neglected to tell me, Merlin?”

It was the first time Arthur had used his name for months and the sound of it cracking whip-sharp made Merlin jump. Wary, he met Arthur’s eyes and felt real fear. There was something in his look, the hint of knowledge suppressed suddenly terrifying and Merlin backed away.

Arthur’s favoured him with a bitter rictus of a smile. “Off you go then. Do make sure I see as little of you as possible.”

It held all the menace of the threat it was and Merlin managed to bow quickly and leave, standing in the corridor, one hand steadying himself against the stone. He ignored the sidelong curious glances of the guards and as soon as he felt his legs would carry him, he fled.

Merlin did what Arthur had suggested and stayed out of his sight as much as possible. Gaius was still pressing him to leave Camelot for a time, but there was still something within Merlin that wouldn’t let him go.

Despite his best efforts, though, he was aware of Arthur’s brooding presence everywhere he went. Agravaine was always by Arthur’s side, sending out directives and orders in Arthur’s name and becoming an ever stronger power in the land. His eyes were often on Merlin and their malice was almost palpable. The very atmosphere felt taut and there were times Merlin could hardly breath for the pervading misery haunting his every waking moment. Every night as he flung himself on his cot he made the decision to leave and yet by morning he found he couldn’t.

At least the knights had ceased most of their bullying and neither Merek nor any of the other knights had approached him. Merlin thanked the stars for those small mercies, even as he struggled through yet another endless day.

He was carrying a load of laundry down the steps when he stumbled, stopping himself from falling by slowing time enough to get his feet under him. When he gathered the bundle closer to him and started walking again he realised he wasn’t alone. Arthur was watching him. Merlin remained calm and passed him with a deferential nod. Surely there was no way he could have seen. Trembling, Merlin dumped the laundry and headed back to Gaius in a fever of anticipation.

Nothing happened.

Nothing happened the next day.
Nothing happened the day after that.

Arthur hadn’t seen.

Merlin relaxed.

“Merlin.”

Merlin turned at the sound of Fendrel’s voice, frowning slightly at the tone. Fendrel was one of Uther’s men, men Arthur seemed to have been spending more time with over the past few months. Fendrel was a person Merlin had always been wary of, too aware of his fanatical adherence to Uther’s policy on magic and magic-users. Merlin’s blood ran cold. The knight stood tall, in full armour and cloak and with his hand poised on his sword. Merlin swallowed and felt his fear intensify. Two guards were standing to attention behind him.

“Do you know what he wants?”

“It is the King’s command – he needs provide no explanation to me or to you.”

In the past, even with some of Uther’s men, Merlin would have ventured a tease, seeking to shake the man’s stuffy attitude, but the breakdown of his relationship with Arthur and changes in the way others treated Merlin made him loath to experience the resulting reaction from someone who’d never had much time for him in the first place.

Instead, he nodded and turned to walk towards the throne room, only too aware of the hulking presence striding along just slightly behind him. As he reached the end of the corridor another two guards fell in behind them.

When he entered the room the entire council was present, silent and tense and Merlin stumbled at the expressions on their faces, searching around for some sense of reassurance and support from any of them. He recognised many of them, but even those he’d thought liked him were studiously avoiding his gaze and when he looked round frantically for Gaius or Gwen, they were nowhere to be seen. Others, like Agravaine and Merek, watched his progress with obvious relish. Numbly, he made his way up the centre of the room and didn’t dare to look at Arthur until he reached the front.

Arthur was standing, strong and king-like in mail and Pendragon red cloak, his features fixed in stern disapproval and his eyes like flint. He didn’t look directly at Merlin, as if he couldn’t bear to see him.

There was a long silence before Arthur spoke, but once he began the words resounded around the still, waiting room.

“Merlin of Ealdor, you stand accused of the crime of sorcery. How do you plead?”

Merlin’s tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth, and there was a wild moment when he thought to offer a denial. A brief glance at the knowledge in Arthur’s expression was enough to dissuade him. At the very least, he could try and explain his actions. “I admit I have magic, but Sire, I’ve only used it to help –”

In amidst the sudden tumult in the room, he didn’t see the blow coming, reeling and dropping to his
knees as Agravaine’s fist crashed against the side of his head.

“Silence, dog, your master didn’t ask for your mewling excuses.”

Agravaine wasn’t much liked in the court and his rise to prominence had displeased many, so there was a murmur, almost of sympathy Merlin had to hope, as he stayed on his knees with his head down bent and waited for the spinning to stop.

Please, Arthur, he begged silently, please don’t do this, please. He’d no hope left, not really, not when Arthur would stand there and allow a prisoner to be mistreated.

“You don’t even deny your perfidy. Under the law I have no option other than condemn you to death. You will burn.”

Merlin would never have believed Arthur could ever sound so cold.

“Then Camelot will fall.” He couldn’t stop the words as they tumbled from him, struggling to his feet and fighting against the guards as they placed the shackles around his wrists. The moment the iron – cold iron – closed tight, the pain hit and his magic roiled and screamed within him, protesting against being caged and trapped.

He echoed his internal agony as he screamed out loud, the sound tearing from his lungs as he fought for air, fixing his gaze on Arthur and letting his pain show as a plea.

For the briefest moment Arthur started and some indefinable emotion flashed across his features but it was gone the moment Agravaine shouted.

“Even now the traitor threatens Camelot.”

No, Merlin thought in despair, fighting for air and words, that’s not what I meant at all.

Arthur’s features had settled into harsh, unforgiving lines as he spoke.

“Take him to the dungeons.”

Merlin sobbed as he finally accepted there was no mercy here for him. The guards hauled him up using the chain and the iron burned into his skin.

He could only scream again, and again, and again, until he welcomed the darkness swallowing him.

“Gaius, you must come with me.”

Gaius was slow to look up, almost afraid to face Arthur and yet how could he refuse when Merlin had endured, even as the person Gaius knew Merlin loved most in the world denounced him and sentenced him to burn. If Arthur’s stance against magic had hardened to such a degree that Merlin was not safe, then Gaius held out little hope for his own survival.
He looked up and met his king’s eyes squarely. He wondered, briefly why Arthur was on his own. But then, what harm could one old, broken man do him, even with the magic which Gaius realised Arthur must know about.

Maintaining his composure, Gaius nodded once, folding his hands together into the sleeves of his robe, so that Arthur couldn’t see them tremble.

“I’ll follow where you lead, Sire,” And let Arthur take that any way he pleased. “As does Merlin. We’re here to serve you and Camelot as we have always done.” He knew his expression was defiant now and he wondered at the way Arthur’s mouth twisted, almost as if he was in some way amused.

Arthur inclined his head and stretched his arm out. Gaius accepted it as an unspoken invitation, stepping in front of him and out into the corridor.

Merlin was huddled in a corner of the cell. It wasn’t one of the worst cells by any means, there was even a clean pallet and blanket and fresh water. It was still a cell, though, and was a clear enough indication of his situation. In the distance he could hear the sounds of people working in the square and knew they were building a pyre. Building a pyre for him. Merlin swallowed nausea emanating more from grief than fear, though there was plenty of that, too. He was unable to deny the part of him keeping his faith in Arthur strong and he couldn’t believe Arthur would let him burn. They’d been through too much together, had saved one another’s lives so many times. Surely Arthur, as hot headed as he was, would remember everything they’d shared and would find some way to forgive him, would understand and accept in the end what Merlin had done to keep him from harm.

So it was with hope in his heart and expression that he looked up at the sound of someone approaching the cell.

Arthur, in full armour and armed, two guards hovering closely behind, halted at the entrance. Arthur’s eyes glinted, mouth drawn into a flat thin line. He looked beautiful and deadly.

“Your accomplices have been stopped in their attempt to rescue you. They have been executed.”

The words made no sense. “Who?”

“The sorcerer, Gaius – and the maid.”

“Gaius? Gwen? You killed – No, no, Arthur, you can’t have. They loved you. Gaius has cared for you since the moment you were born. Dear Gods, please tell me it’s not true.”

Arthur was implacable, still and silent as the reality settled within Merlin and he realised everything he’d believed in, their great destiny, was nothing more than dust and ashes.

After a few moments Arthur spoke again. “I can’t allow traitors to live. I can’t allow someone who brought a sorcerer into being live either.”

It took a moment for Arthur’s meaning to sink in.
“My mother? No. No, you wouldn’t.” He searched Arthur’s expression for any sign of him relenting and saw nothing but ice. So Arthur Pendragon had finally shown his true colours and they matched his father’s in all ways. “What harm has she ever done you? You bastard, you stinking bastard!” Rage bubbled up from nowhere, fury and grief combining potently in his blood. His fists clenched, and if he had access to his power at that moment he would have blasted Arthur to dust. “I thought – I thought nothing could ever make me hate you. I’ll never forgive you, Arthur Pendragon.” Merlin was aware there were tears streaming down his face but he couldn’t care about such weakness when he was facing the ruin of all his hopes, the death of everyone he loved and the end of the dream of Albion.

“You’ll be executed at dawn.”

Merlin hauled himself to his feet and lifted his chin. “I’ll haunt you for the rest of your days and beyond, Pendragon. You’ll never be free of me. And without me, your land will wither and die. You’ll be forgotten and Camelot will fall into despair and ruin. And it will be your doing, Pendragon, not mine.”

Arthur met his eyes, his own shuttered and cold. How could he still be so beautiful when he’d just destroyed them all, Merlin wondered. Arthur’s cape swirled around him as he stepped from the cell and walked steadily away, as tall and straight as ever.

Once he was out of sight Merlin slid down the wall, hugged his knees to his chest and buried his face in his arms. For a few moments he let the grief overwhelm him, until he thought once more of his mother and knew if there was any chance at all to save her, then he had to find a way out of his prison. Wiping his hands across his face, he sniffed once and turned his attention to the cold iron shackles that bound his wrists and his magic. Earlier, he’d thought there was some movement in them but while he was still hoping against hope that Arthur would see sense he hadn’t looked too closely. Now, however, he examined them closely, noticing one of the rivets holding them together had sheared and allowed enough movement that he thought he’d be able to slip his hand through if he worked at it.

He persevered, ignoring the tears rolling down his cheeks as he moved the metal back and forth until sheer desperation had him crying out with furious, seething syllables. The cold iron may have stopped the spell from working properly, but now he began to understand just what being Emrys meant as the spark inside fizzed through him and into the metal. One last tug and it was free. His magic rushed through him, tightening all his muscles and he arched backwards in a terrible, frozen rictus until it passed. Trembling, he lay on the pallet and caught his breath for a moment, until he felt calm enough to pad across to the cell. With a few whispered words the guards outside slumped to the floor and were snoring as he slipped past them. Pausing, he retrieved a sword and dagger and then was on his way, wrapping his magic around him to walk silently and firmly from the castle and past the sentry at the gate. When he reached the trees, he cast away the weapons and began to run. As he did, he heard the warning bell sound out and increased his pace, using his magic to try to mask his progress as well as speed his feet.

Merlin wasn’t sure if it was the temporary prison of the cold iron, or the fury and hurt driving him, but it felt as if something had shifted in his magic. He’d always had a certain ability to work instinctively, but now the magic thrummed through his veins and only waited for him to act, turning thought to deed. He paused for a moment, turning to look back at the castle, and knew he had the power to raze it to the ground. He hesitated and raised his hand, but something within him as yet unmoved to hate, protested and instead he turned away and ran.

It wasn’t long before Merlin heard the sounds of pursuit. Even with magic to help him, he wasn’t going to be able to outrun horses. He was almost more frightened of himself if they caught up with
him; his magic was running wild through his blood and if he was faced by knights he’d known and trusted, he wasn’t sure what might happen.

Merlin drew in another gulping breath and staggered onward. The spell he’d been using didn’t seem to mask his scent and he could hear the baying of hounds drawing ever closer. Sobbing, he contemplated just stopping, letting the dogs find him and rip into him until there was nothing but mangled flesh remaining.

It couldn’t possibly hurt any more than he hurt already; the pain of a shocking betrayal and the loss of everything he thought he understood and believed in. Arthur had… Arthur had…

A shout startled him from the despairing cycle of his memories, driving him into action despite his earlier thoughts of giving up and he increased his pace. The voice continued to call out directions, but appeared to be drawing further away, rather than running him to ground.

There was no time to rest. If there was any chance of saving his mother then he had to make it to Ealdor before any of Pendragon’s men. With the loss of the hounds driving him, he settled into a steady jog, slipping through the forest as if he was already a ghost.

He staggered into Ealdor in the afternoon, heading for his mother’s home and praying he was in time. As he shoved open the door, he knew he was already too late. The very fact the door was closed at this time in the afternoon provided the first indication; the disarray in his home was another. Hunith would never have left the place like this if she’d had a choice. Merlin sank to his knees and let despair take him. So many tears already, lost hopes and lost lives and one man, one single man who had destroyed all his hopes and dreams, and taken all the people he loved.

Pain and anguish congealed within him, turning him as cold as the cursed iron that had encircled his wrists. Pendragon would pay. All of Camelot would pay and any thought of a united Albion could sink into oblivion. Merlin no longer cared.

Merlin no longer existed.

Getting to his feet, he stared around the ruin of the room and wiped away the moisture on his face impatiently, features settling into harsh lines. Looking around, he picked up enough to put together a pack of supplies. If he was going into the forest, he had to take everything with him.
He needed to find the one person who hated Pendragon just as much as he did. And while she hated Merlin, too, if not more, Merlin felt quite sure she would put that aside long enough to destroy Pendragon and all he stood for. Merlin would help put Morgana on the throne and after that – well, he didn’t much care whether she waited until then to take her own revenge on the person who had tried to kill her.

Walking out of the building, he saw one of the village elders approaching.

“Merlin, the King’s men were here. They took your mother.”

“When?”

“Three days ago.”

Three days. Pendragon had planned all this then. Merlin nodded his response and strode past.

“Merlin, where are you going?” The man seemed agitated, and Merlin wondered how close Arthur’s men were.

“I’m leaving. You’re not going to try to stop me, are you?”

“The Lord Agravaine came here yesterday. Merlin, he said if you managed to escape and we didn’t hand you over then he’d raze the village and sell us all as slaves.”

“Well then, you’d better run and hide, hadn’t you? Because you won’t be handing me over to anyone.”

“Merlin –“

Once upon a time Merlin would have understood their dilemma and would have done his best to find a way to help them all. Once upon a time he had. He glanced around and saw the men of the village manoeuvring around him, trying to entrap him. They’d learned the lessons Arthur had taught them well.

“My name is Emrys. Merlin, son of Hunith is dead. Tell the Lord Agravaine that.” He flung out his hand and saw them all scuttle backwards as his eyes flashed gold and they finally saw him.

Shouldering his pack, he walked steadily by, and none put out a hand to stop him.

Emrys hunkered down and extricated the rabbit from the trap, adding it to the brace he already held. Padding through the wood, he made his way to his small camp and began readying them for the fire. Casually, he checked his wards, reaching out with his senses to touch on any living creatures close by. Most of the birds were roosting, though he startled an owl on its nightly hunt, and a badger stopped suddenly and then bustled away in another direction, heading away from the strangeness that touched her animal consciousness, her cubs tumbling and playing as they ran with her.

The slightest of smiles softened the austere line of Emrys’ mouth before it flattened again. He poured some water over his hands and cleaned them off before dragging his fingers through his hair and beard.
“So do you have something to say to me or do you intend to stay there all night watching me?”

“Emrys.” The man walked out of the shadow and into the meagre light of the fire.

Emrys remained in his place, sitting cross-legged and tending to the meat as it cooked.

“You’re a Druid.” Emrys did not ask a question.

“I am.”

“I rather thought you were all avoiding me.” It was true. Emrys had found Iseldir and his band quite easily when he’d left Ealdor and had informed him what had happened; that Arthur would be continuing the Pendragon persecution of those with magic and now was the time for the Druids to fight back.

Iseldir had regarded him calmly but with some puzzlement. “That isn’t our way,” he’d replied.

“Then you’ll all die.”

Iseldir’s voice had sounded just as puzzled inside his head. Emrys, I wish you well, but we can’t help you in this.

Emrys had been tempted to bring the cave down around them but had left without offering any response or asking any more from them.

Since then, the Druids had been conspicuous by their absence and despite his best efforts, Emrys had been unable to find any trace of them or Morgana.

His attention returned to his guest as the man spoke.

“Not all Druids believe we can continue without fighting. There are some of us who have come together to plan, to hone our skills until the day comes when we can wreak havoc on Camelot and erase the Pendragon line from the earth.”

“Why are you here?”

“We felt your power and we know you. Emrys is foretold and we come to ask you to teach us, to help us become ready so that some day – “

“I’m not interested in some day,” Emrys responded. “I’m interested in now or soon. I want Pendragon to die at my hand – as painfully as possible and as soon as possible.”

“Then let us help you, my Lord.”

In response, Emrys removed the meat from the spit and handed some across to the other man. “We leave at first light.”

“My name is Ruadan. I am –“

Emrys glanced up and Ruadan stopped talking, swallowing and turning his concentration to the food.

They did not speak.
It took them three days to make their way to the camp. Emrys was aware Ruadan was leading him on a circuitous route, hoping to keep the actual location of the camp a secret. Emrys let him have his deception and didn’t provide any indication that he knew exactly where they were at any given time.

They walked during the day until not even Emrys’ magical light could help them in the oppressive darkness of the forest and they had no choice but to stop. Setting up camp was carried out in silence, they shared the campfire in silence, and then they slept.

Eventually they stepped through a stand of trees and a shimmer of magic shielding and were in the grounds of a ruined church. Emrys recognised it as being from the new religion that was sending out its devotees to preach their tenets. This should have been a relatively new building and yet it looked old, torn down and tumbled, and festooned with ivy as the forest accepted it back and the old religion took the ascendance once more. He glanced around without much curiosity, more interested in whether the person he wanted to meet was here.

They’d disturbed the controlled activity of a camp, as everyone stopped and stared, clearly unused to the sight of a stranger in this place.

Almost thirty people were scattered around the space, mainly men who were obviously warriors, hard-bitten and suspicious with swords and daggers swiftly in their hands. There were a small number of women, but they were barely distinguishable from the men as many had cropped their hair. Even when they had not, it was tightly braided and coiled close to their scalps.

These people bore little relation to the Druids Emrys was used to seeing. Tunics and trousers replaced robed, for ease of fighting and it was obvious this was a warrior band. Emrys stood quietly and let his eyes assess their strength. Despite their numbers, even the entire group together would pose no threat to him.

A ripple of movement alerted him to the arrival of the one person who could conceivably harm him if – if she got lucky.

For the briefest of moments Morgana seemed shocked. Emrys raised his chin and met her glare dead on.

“You!” Her eyes flashed with fury and magic.

Emrys didn’t even move; let her see how powerful he is. He was barely aware of the shocked cries as Morgana’s magic, indiscriminate and unfocussed even with Emrys directly in front of her, caused shockwaves to surge through the air, smacking people out of the way as leaves and branches rose and swirled around them.

Power broke against the shield Emrys had raised and he waited until it washed over and then was absorbed, strengthening his defence rather than weakening it. When it was over there was silence apart from the sound of Morgana’s rapid breath. It wasn’t long before she raised her chin and met his eyes again.

“So, you’re doubly a traitor, Merlin. Kinslayer.” She spat the word at him.
“My name is Emrys.” He couldn’t deny the satisfaction he felt as he saw what little colour she had drain from her face. She swayed.

“Are you here to kill me then?”

Emrys could only admire her courage. He shook his head. “I wronged you, Morgana. I knew it even before – “ A vision of Arthur, head thrown back in unbridled laughter, had him confused for a moment, before he remembered. “I’ve come to offer you my help and my power.”

Morgana just stared at him.

“I was told my destiny was to help the Once and Future King, but Pendragon has finally proved to me what you knew all along. He is his father remade. I won’t have a King. I’ll have a Queen.”

“You really expect me to believe you?”

“No. I was too foolish for too long. I gave him my loyalty – and my love –“ He paused as his magic swirled unhappily within him and he took a few moments to ensure it was more tightly controlled. “Pendragon has taken everything from me. He had me flogged, he put me in cold iron, and he’s killed everyone I cared for.”

“Who?” Morgana sounded almost fearful.

“Gaius, my mother, and Guinevere.”

Emrys fought against emotion he couldn’t entertain, couldn’t succumb to. He saw a fleeting sorrow in Morgana’s eyes, too and saw the way she gathered herself. He’d trust no one. He was Emrys. And Emrys was revenge.

Morgana was still suspicious; no doubt she always would be. “You said he put you in cold iron. Your magic couldn’t have withstood that. How did you escape?”

“I’m Emrys. There’s no one in this land more powerful than I am. Even cold iron couldn’t stop me.” He carefully ignored the fact cold iron would stop him as it would stop any other sorcerer and only a weakness in the cuffs had allowed his magic enough leverage to act.

Almost as one, the Druids sank to their knees. Had Emrys retained any ability to feel, he might have been embarrassed but as it was he merely made a gesture telling them to stand and raised an eyebrow as he stared at Morgana, waiting for her response.

“And if I don’t agree?” she asked.

“Then I’ll leave and take my revenge on Camelot alone, and I’ll take my time killing Pendragon. Afterwards it’ll be up to you to win the throne against Agravaine.”

“He’ll follow me.”

Emrys shrugged. “I don’t care. I want Pendragon dead.”

“I still don’t trust you.”

Emrys nodded. He’d expected this and during the journey to the camp he’d thought round ways to ensure Morgana would work with him.

“I’ve crafted a spell,” he said. “A spell that’ll ensure I won’t betray you.”
Her eyes brightened at that. “Tell me more.” Keeping plenty of distance between them she moved as gracefully as she ever had, and seated herself carefully on a large block of hewn stone.

Emrys sat on the ground and crossed his legs and explained about the spell he could cast on his body, how his own words would act against him if he by act or thought betrayed their joint purpose.

The moon was full and Emrys’ magic was at the height of his power as he stood naked in the centre of the glade they’d travelled to for the ritual. Away from the muddying influence of the new religion, he let the energy of the space fill him and settle his own magic.

As if it sensed what he was about to do, his magic swirled and eddied within him, agitated and uncertain. It didn’t matter. Emrys had enough certainty to carry him and his magic through and was able to find wry amusement at the light in Morgana’s eyes as she hefted the sharp knife she’d have to use upon him. He may well just end up with his throat cut, but he couldn’t find it within him to care. At least if she did so it would all finally be over.

As the moon reached its zenith, Morgana approached and the silver light caught the blade and was reflected back until it shimmered. Emrys stood still and waited until the point of the knife broke the skin just below his eye. Odd that there wasn’t any pain. He watched as the steel was removed, beaded with the darkness of his blood. Morgana looked surprised, as if she hadn’t expected him to go through with it, or believed he would flinch as he was cut.

He met her eyes and nodded once, before he began the incantation. The language was old and unfamiliar on his tongue, different from what he normally used to cast his spells, but it was old, old and oh so powerful and he felt the curse sink within him as he continued, battering down the part of his magic still fighting against him. In the moonlight, he stood unflinching, speaking the words as Morgana carved them into his skin.

At the end, once she’d stepped away, breathing heavily and looking as if she was drugged, he cried out the final words of the spell. White light washed over him and the runes etched on his skin writhed before they stilled and settled on one side of his face, flowing down his neck to spill across his shoulder and right arm ending up across half his chest. When the light ceased, the blood and gore had gone and only the words remained, black against his pale skin as if they’d been tattooed in ink and not carved in blood.

Silently, Emrys dressed and then faced Morgana.

“Now it’s time to plan our attack.”

Morgana had spent her time profitably, building relationships with other disaffected groups and mercenary bands. It still took weeks to amass their allies and finalise negotiations but Emrys could only admire her diplomatic abilities as she promised them little and yet managed to win their allegiance. Quietly, the warrior bands gathered, and with Emrys and Morgana working together they could shield the encampments from any of Camelot’s patrols. They’d still be a small number, but
with magic on their side, there was little anyone in Camelot would be able to do against them. The aim was to put Morgana on the throne and she wanted a land to rule. It was a lesson learned from her last sojourn, and she asserted her wishes to them all. The citizens of Camelot were to be left unharmed, and property respected. She argued fiercely that only by ensuring as little disruption to people’s daily lives as possible could she hope for a peaceful transfer of their loyalty.

A part of Emrys was unhappy at the thought he wouldn’t be able to raze it to the ground, but Morgana was his queen and he would obey her commands.

“We should kill the knights,” Emrys said. Anyone who stood with Camelot was an enemy to him, even Percival and Gwaine, steady Leon, and especially Gwen’s brother who’d done nothing to save her.

Morgana disagreed. “I’ll need the knights.”

“They wouldn’t bend to your rule before.”

“Uther and Arthur were alive then. This time they won’t be. The knights will see the need for order and if they’re assured of their place then they’ll follow me. Those that don’t will be dealt with.”

“As you wish.” Emrys shrugged. He didn’t really care as long as Pendragon died.

Morgana was silent. She’d neither forgiven him nor trusted him, Emrys knew, but they were united in their wish to see Pendragon die and it had proved enough to enable them to work together so far.

“We’re expecting a report from one of our spies in Camelot. She’s copying the keys we need for the lower gates. Once we have those we can enter the tunnels and mount the attack.”

“And what of Agravaine?”

It was Morgana’s turn to shrug. “He has Arthur’s favour. I expect he’ll wait to see which side wins.”

“I thought he was loyal to you?”

“Agravaine is loyal to Agravaine. I’ve no illusions about that.”

“Then you’re not expecting help from him?” Emrys wasn’t surprised at her dismissal of Agravaine. It seemed that as Agravaine’s power and influence with Pendragon grew, so his much vaunted loyalty to Morgana diminished. Emrys knew she couldn’t have seen Agravaine for some time before he arrived in her camp, because she hadn’t been aware of his magic.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. It doesn’t matter either way. Our plans haven’t included him.”

Ruadan approached them. “Sefa has returned from Camelot.”

“Does she have the keys?” Morgana was eager.

“She does. We’re ready.”

“Then let’s go and kill a king.”

For the first time in many months, Emrys felt his mouth stretch into a smile.
Arthur Pendragon glanced around the tables in the great hall. The knights were together at one end, laughing and well into their ale. He frowned suddenly at the lack of discipline, but there was nothing to be said for the moment. Shifting in his chair he picked over his food, wondering at the tight feeling in his gut screaming at him to be wary. He avoided his wine completely and called for water instead. Agravaine beside him appeared unperturbed, attacking his food with his usual good appetite and had sunk most of a pitcher of wine, his face flushed with its effects.

There was no reason for Arthur’s uneasiness and yet he’d a sickening sense of something approaching. He’d already sent Gwaine a glance that had the knight, one of the few sober ones it seemed, slipping from the room. When he returned sometime later he’d caught Arthur’s eye and shrugged. Arthur nodded in response but noted Gwaine calling for water. Arthur was left wondering if Gwaine was feeling the same unease, or whether Arthur had simply infected him with his own. Leon leaned across and had a quiet word, at which point he glanced sharply towards Arthur before sitting back and staring blankly at his mug.

Arthur shrugged aside the by-play and attempted to pay attention to Agravaine’s slurred advice on how to run his kingdom, wondering at his uncle’s lack of caution when every other sentence began with: “If I was king…”

It was an interminable evening and more than once Arthur glanced behind him, seeking to share rolled eyes or a quiet comment with –

Scowling, heart sore, Arthur tuned out his uncle and disappeared into his own weary thoughts.

The warning bell didn’t sound.

The first Arthur knew of trouble was the unmistakable clash of swords meeting in anger. Surging to his feet, he called his men to arms.

“Knights of Camelot, we are under attack!”

His own sword was at his side and it rasped as he pulled it free of its scabbard, but many of those who wore the trappings of knights had not brought their weapons. Arthur cursed them roundly. Percival, Gwaine, Elyan and Leon were all present and properly armed, as were a handful of others. Agravaine was looking stunned as he struggled out of his chair, staggering as the wine fully hit him. He looked shocked, something Arthur noted and would think on later – assuming he survived this. The knights were quickly pushing the tables against the back wall, people tipping them on their sides to hide behind, while clearing most of the hall to give the knights room to defend their king.

As Arthur headed for the door, pushing milling, panicked nobility out of the way, there was a resounding boom and the great doors flew open.

When the dust cleared, Arthur could see two figures, both slight and dark, though one was taller.

Merlin and Morgana stepped into the room and Merlin’s eyes flashed. People tumbled away, out of the circle he’d created with one look. Arthur felt his breathing quicken as he witnessed just how much power Merlin possessed. His stomach lurched as he saw Merlin more clearly as he approached. His fair skin was tattooed with a black pattern that covered the whole side of his face
and spread down his neck to disappear beneath his tunic. Arthur wasted a moment of his attention as he wondered what it might mean. Merlin stalked forward and thrust out his hand.

Without warning, Arthur felt himself forced to his knees and however much he struggled, he couldn’t get back to his feet. He raised his chin instead, and faced the sorcerers who’d invaded his kingdom.

Merlin stared at Arthur and the hate in his eyes was suddenly more than Arthur could take. It was time. Surely it was time. Morgana stood to one side, apparently enjoying the spectacle of Arthur’s once-trusted manservant in a position of such power over his master. Arthur looked at her for a moment, really looked at her, and his heart ached anew.

The magical hold on him eased and he managed to get to his feet, ignoring the way Merlin scowled at him.

“Whatever we’ve done to you, Morgana, please believe me when I say I’m sorry; from the bottom of my heart I’m sorry. You’re my sister and whatever you’ve done or may do now or in the future, I’ll always love you.”

He’d shocked her, and for a moment the cruelty and madness in her expression was washed away by regret and pain. Watching, Arthur saw her struggle and then regain her composure, features settling into mockery and disdain.

“How very sweet, dear brother, but my plight won’t trouble you for long. You can have no idea how much pleasure it will give me to watch Emrys kill you.”

Merlin’s laugh resounded harshly, and there was a cruelty in the sound Arthur would never have believed Merlin capable of making. He had to work hard to suppress a shiver as the echo of it rolled around the throne room. Behind the shimmering wall Arthur could see his knights watching in horror as they witnessed their king at the mercy of the people who hated him most.

Almost.

“With your death, magic will be restored to Camelot and the male Pendragon line will be scoured from the earth. Morgana will bring magic back.” There was an almost exultant note in Merlin’s voice now.

“You do remember the last time she ruled in Camelot, Merlin? When she almost destroyed the kingdom in a week? What makes you think this time will be any different?”

Morgana threw out a hand and Arthur found himself slammed backwards, pressed against the solid wood at the base of his seat. He stared at Morgana.

“I think I’ll help Emrys kill you.”

Arthur couldn’t help his sorrow at this vision of hate and madness, even though his obvious compassion seemed only to enrage her further. With a deep sigh, he began the struggle back to his feet, surprised to find it easier this time, almost as if Merlin’s magic had recognised him. For a moment it felt as if a helpful hand had been slipped under his elbow, supporting him as he stood. A quick glance at Merlin showed obvious signs of confusion and frustration.

Once he could stand tall once more, he spoke. “It’s over, Morgana. I’m sorry.” Arthur turned his attention to Merlin, even as both sorcerer and witch raised their hands and called their power.

“Merlin, you have my trust.”
Eight months ago

“I just want a chance for people like me to live in peace.”

“You’ve killed him!”

“No.”

A blast of power sends him flying backwards, left on the floor winded but unhurt as the old man runs from the room in a flurry of whirling robes.

Leaving him unhurt.

Leaving him remembering the teasing; the humour in an old man’s eyes; an entreaty he couldn’t begin to understand.
“Merlin!”

Arthur woke abruptly, shaken out of his dream by the shock of an epiphany that shouldn’t really have been a surprise at all. Looking round, he noticed the drapes were open and allowing the sun to wash through the room. It seemed Merlin had already paid a visit this morning and the lack of Arthur’s usual rude awakening seemed telling.

He sat up, punched a pillow into shape and shoved it behind him to rest against the headboard. There hadn’t been much of a feast following his coronation the day before. The spectre of Uther’s death still hovered over them, suffusing warmer emotions with a pall of grief and regret. Arthur had felt a weight of destiny, duty and sacrifice on his brow the moment the crown placed there and he’d turned to face his people. Arthur thought of the tense features of his father’s oldest advisers and Agravaine’s expressionless eyes though his face had been wreathed in smiles. Then he recalled Gwen’s gentle approval, Gaius’ soft pleasure, the fierce loyalty of his knights – and Merlin. Arthur had seen a Merlin he scarcely recognised. Merlin had stood tall and strong, his voice full of fierce fire and pride as he joined in the acclamation.

“Long live the King.”

Arthur couldn’t decide what to think of this new version of his manservant and had been quiet when he finally retired for the night. Merlin had picked up on his abstraction and curbed his own conversation, obviously believing Arthur needed time to come to terms with being king, when in fact it was Merlin himself who formed the focus of Arthur’s thoughts.

Arthur’s current confusion over Merlin was only interrupted when the door opened quietly – and, honestly, when had Merlin ever managed to be so quiet? Arthur watched with interest as Merlin manoeuvred deftly through the door with a laden tray, all his concentration on the task at hand.

Wisely, he waited until Merlin had placed the tray carefully on the table before he spoke.

“It’s about time.” Arthur took a guilty and slightly malicious pleasure when Merlin jumped about a foot in the air before spinning to face him, his face losing colour in his fright as he pressed a hand against his chest.

“Gods, don’t do that!” Merlin said.

Arthur smirked and then took a longer look at Merlin, noting the underlying pallor even when his colour returned, and though Merlin scowled at him in an approximation of the usual teasing interchange Arthur was so used to, it seemed half-hearted. Now, with his new knowledge settling within him, he took the time to consider Merlin. It was a luxury he’d seldom allowed himself in the
past, too aware of his own weakness, although he tried to deny it. Merlin was special. Merlin had always been special and now Arthur realised at least part of the reason why.

Merlin puttered around setting out Arthur’s breakfast, though his usual chatter was conspicuously absent. Arthur felt a whole slew of tangled emotions, heated questions, and angry accusations bubble and seethe within him.

What have you done?

Why didn’t you tell me?

Who are you?

For once, Arthur didn’t let his anger take hold though he wondered why he experienced no accompanying sense of betrayal, for surely Merlin had betrayed him? Yet, here is Merlin, serving Arthur his breakfast in the same way he had for the past nine years, one of the minor tasks he carried out. Merlin supported him in so many different ways, always close or nearby, and Arthur realised now that Merlin must have been using his special skills – Arthur couldn’t quite bring himself to use the word even silently to himself – to protect him. So many of the oddities he’d ignored over the years now made sense. Perhaps that was why he wasn’t brimming over with righteous fury, because in some way, he must have known and decided to ignore it. If he’d questioned some of the things they’d experienced, if he’d consciously thought through some of their close shaves, he’d have had to acknowledge a truth that had been staring him in the face since the first moment a young country boy talked back to Prince Arthur.

Merlin was still, so very still. His hand was curled around the wine jug, but his wide, shattered eyes were on Arthur. Arthur lifted his chin and stared back, watching as the little colour remaining in Merlin’s face drained away. For the first time, Arthur saw Merlin as a man, not as a clumsy manservant, or the butt of his teasing, or the fey creature so often haunting his dreams and leaving him aching with want, but a man full grown with his own fears and secrets. Merlin looked exhausted, worn down and at the very end of his tether.

Merlin sighed, his eyes skittering away from Arthur’s stern regard as he slumped into one of the chairs and stared despondently at the wooden boards.

Arthur clambered out of the bed and crossed to the table. With another look at Merlin, he poured two goblets of the watered wine, placing one in front of Merlin as he sat down to face him. It reminded him forcefully of Gedref and what he was willing to do to protect Merlin.

After a long drink, Merlin pulled out a piece of jewellery from a hidden pocket. It spun on its chain; seemingly silver and innocuous if not for the expression on Merlin’s face as he stared at it before he placed the medallion on the table in front of Arthur.

“Gaius found this around Uther’s neck after he... The spell should’ve saved him, Arthur, I promise you, but this medallion... it reversed the magic I used and magnified it ten-fold. I didn’t even think to check. I’m sorry, Arthur, I’m so sorry. I would’ve saved him for you. I wanted to save him for you.”

It reversed the magic I used. There was every suspicion confirmed and Arthur could still find neither anger nor censure. Well, perhaps a little anger.

“And if my father had discovered what you’d done and what you were - he’d have had you killed without a thought. Merlin, you fool.”
Stubborn, jaw locked tight, Merlin said, “He’d never have known, and even if he’d suspected he wouldn’t have said anything.” It was a veiled acknowledgement of what Arthur had come to understand and Merlin had clearly known for some time. When it came to House Pendragon, Uther would have flouted his own laws without compunction.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence until Merlin finally whispered, “I’m so tired.” He was staring down at his hands where they were clasped tightly together, and he bit his lip, as if the confession had slipped out unwanted.

Something happened to Arthur then, stripping away all the barriers and the pretending, leaving him aching in sympathy with this broken man, his friend and the person who meant most to him in his life. Compassion washed through him.

“Then sleep, Merlin.”

The shock suddenly animating Merlin’s features almost brought a smile to Arthur’s face. A shadow of it must have shown in his expression despite his best attempts to hide it, because the shock changed into something altogether softer and more affectionate – and grateful.

“Are you giving me the day off?” Merlin asked, and there was a teasing note in his voice that had been missing for too long.

“Well, you’ll not be much use to me as you are. Really, it’s for my own benefit – nothing to do with you at all.”

“Of course, sire.” Merlin hesitated. “If you finish your breakfast, I’ll take the dishes to the kitchen before I go back to Gaius.”

For some reason, Arthur didn’t want him to leave. “You’re dead on your feet, Merlin. Stay here. I have knights’ training and then the council meeting. You won’t be disturbed.”

Merlin’s mouth and eyes were open in shock.

“Really. Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You don’t have to – you reek of impending cheek. Just do what you’re told quietly for a change.”

Arthur was treated to a raised eyebrow that even Gaius couldn’t have bettered, but at least Merlin dragged himself to his feet and stumbled across to the bed.

“Take your boots off.”

“Of course, sire, I usually sleep with them on, but just for you.”

Arthur pretended he was busy getting himself ready, but half his attention was on Merlin, watching the man as he struggled with the boots and shrugged out of his jacket. Despite himself, Arthur found concern rising to swamp him at the bruised shadows under Merlin’s eyes, at the lack of covering over the bones sticking out at his shoulders as his shirt slid to the side and exposed him. Merlin was worn thin and Arthur cursed himself for not noticing the state he was in before. He might never have admitted it to Merlin, but Arthur considered Merlin as his closest friend; it appeared he hadn’t been making a very good job of it lately.

By the time Arthur had washed and dressed himself, Merlin was curled in a nest of blankets and was
already half-asleep.

Arthur stood by the bed and stared down at him. Merlin reached out and grabbed his hand, “Arthur.”

It was a word redolent with regret and apology.

Arthur squeezed the fingers. “I know, Merlin” He watched, feeling slightly divorced from himself, as his other hand reached out and let dark hair slip through his fingers. “We can talk later. For now, sleep. I’ll let Gaius know where you are and that you’re not to be disturbed.” His hand curved around Merlin’s cheek for a moment, his thumb wiping away the dampness he found there. “Rest now.”

By the time Arthur had closed the curtains around the bed, Merlin was already asleep.

Arthur’s first call was to let Gaius know where Merlin was, and to reassure him Merlin was safe. As he made his way to the physician’s chambers he acknowledged there was no way Gaius hadn’t known about Merlin. Arthur paused for a moment while he wondered how to explain this new state of affairs to Gaius, hating himself for the sudden suspicion that occurred when he thought about the medallion and who could have placed it around his father’s neck. Merlin said Gaius had found it there. What if…

He bit his lip and resumed his walk deciding to keep the knowledge of Merlin’s magic to himself, and insist to Merlin that he do the same. For the moment at least, it would stay between the two of them.

Arthur slipped quietly into Gaius’ chamber, wondering as he did so what he was expecting to achieve with his stealth. Gaius was poring over an old book, a picture of some herb carefully rendered in colour on its pages. Was it a healing herb perhaps, or something altogether more dangerous? Conflicted, he wasted no time with Gaius, unable to hide the coolness in his tone as he informed Gaius that Merlin was running an errand and Gaius shouldn’t expect to see him today. He ignored the obvious concern and didn’t allow Gaius the time to formulate any questions. Unable to reconcile a lifelong fondness for Gaius with the knowledge of his deception, all he could do was escape his company as quickly as he could.

When Arthur finally returned to his chambers after a long day and a longer evening listening to Agravaine’s ideas on how to rule the kingdom, he was exhausted. Opening the curtains to the bed, he was captivated by the sight of Merlin, still fast asleep and curled around one of Arthur’s pillows. His heart thumped in his chest. Even in sleep, Merlin’s brow was furrowed and Arthur reached out to draw a light finger there, as if he could smooth out the lines and take on himself the worries they expressed. Despite the frown, Merlin looked better with the flush of sleep lending some colour to his pale skin. He showed no sign of waking, however. With a sigh, Arthur undressed, deliberately being as messy as possible, hauling out half a dozen shirts from his wardrobe and adding them to the clutter with a satisfied smirk, before he clambered into the bed.

“You’d better not snore,” he said to the unconscious man beside him.
The only response from Merlin was a murmur and a wriggle backwards until he was as close as possible to the warmth of Arthur’s body. Arthur swallowed, unable to resist leaning into Merlin’s sleepy heat. He wondered what nubile serving girl Merlin was dreaming of as Merlin sighed happily, only to find his heart thumping in his chest as he heard the name he murmured.

Arthur swallowed a sudden lump in his throat and gave into the impulse to curl an arm around Merlin’s spare frame and pull him closer still.

Despite his own weariness, Arthur found it impossible to sleep. Throughout the day he’d been kept busy, his mind and body occupied with physical and mental activity. Now, however, there was nothing to distract him from the new reality in which he found himself, finding himself reviewing the years since he’d met Merlin in an entirely new light. In some respects he felt stupid, as if he should have realised so much earlier; but then he was left wondering how he would have reacted if he’d admitted to himself what he must have known deep within. How else could Merlin have gained some of the knowledge he possessed, how could Merlin have survived in some of the situations they’d found themselves – and if he thought about it, how could Arthur have survived, too? The only thing that made any real sense was the presence of magic.

Arthur buried his face in the nape of Merlin’s neck and tried not to think at all.

Merlin woke slowly, awareness returning as he swam his way out of somnolence, stretching and wondering when his bed had become so comfortable. The covers over him were warm, the pillow under his head a delectable downy delight and he pushed his face into its softness, sighing gently and stretching his limbs to enjoy the press of cool, fresh linen –

This wasn’t his bed.

Swallowing, he cracked open one eye just a sliver and managed not to squeak in alarm as well-beloved features filled his immediate view. Arthur was leaning up on one elbow, staring down at Merlin. For a moment Merlin wanted to bolt, and then his still sleepy mind woke enough to catalogue the expression on Arthur’s face, hardly crediting the fond exasperation could be real given what Merlin’s memory was supplying about the day before.

“Finally ready to rejoin the world, then, Merlin?”

Grief and regret washed over Merlin and he swallowed hard against it. “Arthur.”

A finger brushed across his cheekbone, wiping away the moisture. Arthur’s expression changed again and he leaned forward. Merlin’s breath caught in his throat and he reached up to touch the bright gold hair.

The sound of a fist rapping at the door startled them apart.

“Who is it?”

“It is I, Sire. May I speak with you?”

“A moment.” Arthur replied, pressing a warning finger to Merlin’s mouth.
Merlin stayed where he was as Arthur left the bed and pulled the curtains closed, casting one final, speaking glance at Merlin as he did so. Merlin understood and was grateful he didn’t have to face Agravaine. He made himself comfortable under the covers and listened to the unfolding conversation.

“Uncle, it’s early for a visit.” There was a pause. “You can speak freely.” Arthur’s voice was calm and Merlin couldn’t help a smug grin as he knew Agravaine was wondering whose virtue Arthur was protecting. He probably thought it was - Merlin shut down the thought and concentrated on the conversation instead.

“Sire, Arthur, I’m sorry to trouble you, but I had to bring my suspicions to you as soon as they occurred to me. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t speak and something happened to you.”

Merlin just managed not to snort at the solicitousness in Agravaine’s voice and wondered if Arthur could hear the same falseness in it that he could.

“What do you mean?”

“This is difficult to say, Sire, but I’m concerned about the loyalty of the court physician and his apprentice – your manservant.”

“Gaius and Merlin?” There was disbelief in Arthur’s voice. “On what grounds do you base these suspicions, Uncle?”

“The injury to your father. I’m sorry, Arthur, but I don’t believe it should have killed him. And it was Gaius and Merlin who found the sorcerer who finally murdered Uther. I’ve thought long and hard before bringing this to you, Arthur. I know you think highly of Gaius, but how else can we explain what happened?”

“How indeed.” There was a long silence and Merlin, angry and afraid, waited for Arthur’s next words. “I need to give this some thought, Uncle, before I act. Say nothing to anyone else.”

“Of course, Sire.”

Merlin didn’t dare move, even when he heard the door close behind Agravaine and waited until Arthur drew the curtains aside and stared down at him, eyebrows drawn together in a brooding frown. Only then did he break into furious speech.

“You can’t believe Gaius or I would betray you? Arthur – “

Merlin had to stop talking as his throat closed with a sudden grief. He fixed his eyes on the cover he was currently twisting in his hands, unwilling to show Arthur just how much the thought was affecting him.

The smack to his head was little more than a light tap, but it brought his attention back to Arthur. Arthur’s head was tipped to one side and Merlin couldn’t quite decipher his expression, but at least he didn’t appear to be angry.

“I do wonder about Gaius.” Arthur held his hand up to forestall Merlin’s automatic rebuttal. “He’s obviously harboured you, Merlin – don’t even try to tell me he didn’t know about your magic. That alone makes him a traitor under Camelot’s laws. It makes you a traitor, too.”

“All we’ve ever done is protect you.” Merlin couldn’t stay silent for a moment longer. “Gaius had all the knowledge and experience I didn’t have. He’s helped me so many times – to save you and to
save your father.”

“You really have no sense of preservation at all.” Arthur sighed, and perched on the side of the bed next to Merlin, rubbing his hands over his hair and face.

“If you hadn’t already told me of your magic, I’d be seriously considering asking Agravaine to interrogate Gaius.” He spoke over Merlin’s gasp. “Yet again I’ve put family above years of service. I’ve known Gaius my whole life, you’ve been at my side and have proved yourself ready to die for me. You’re a sorcerer, which means you’re everything I’ve been taught to fear and despise. How can I ever know who I should trust?”

Merlin looked at the hunched shoulders, the aura of defeat around Arthur that left him looking so young and uncertain. For a moment he floundered himself, unsure of what he could say to help and so afraid of making things worse. In the end, he reached out and pressed his fingers into Arthur’s thigh.

“Trust your heart, Arthur.”

“That’s a terrible piece of advice to offer a king, Merlin.” It was a gentle mocking, and was further eased by the warm hand settling over his.

“Tell me what your heart says, Arthur.” Merlin wondered what Arthur would think of this piece of whimsy and was surprised when he received a response.

“Ah, Merlin, my heart tells me that Gaius loves me as he’d love a son and would protect me with his last breath. My heart tells me you’d raze the world to save me. My heart tells me you love me.”

Merlin stared at him, not quite sure how to respond, how to react when Arthur had pinpointed the reality with such precision, even if Merlin was only beginning to understand it himself. He admired Arthur and the strong, compassionate king he’d become, but more, he loved the man – his grumpiness in the mornings, his impatience with those who stood in his way, his sudden laughter and the way his teasing of Merlin always felt like something else entirely.

Arthur was right, and when a slow, sweet smile was directed at him, Merlin knew his own features must have betrayed him. He put his palms against his cheeks, feeling the burning heat but he returned Arthur’s smile with one of his own.

Arthur finally broke a long, comfortable silence as he stood and turned away to stare out of the window.

“I should demand explanations from you. I should demand a list of every time you’ve used magic and what you’ve done with it.”

“I’ll tell you everything, I promise.” Merlin bit his lip as he thought of some of his more questionable actions, the times when even with the best of intentions, it had all gone horribly wrong – Morgana, the dragon, other times when what seemed like the right choice had turned to bitterness.

When he looked up Arthur had turned and there was understanding in his gaze. Merlin supposed kings and princes, too, had more than their fair share of regrets.

“I don’t want to hear it, Merlin. Not yet. What I want to do is decide how this new knowledge can help me. I want my people to live in peace and I want them to be safe. I’m not my father. I know he instilled in me a distrust of magic and magic users, but you’ve demonstrated that magic can be good, too.” His gaze turned thoughtful and calculating. “How do we use this to get a lasting peace?”
Merlin stared at Arthur, saw him limned in the light streaming through the window and thought him a god. Swallowing, he struggled to find voice and words.

“Use me,” he said eventually. “Use me to smoke out your traitor and Morgana. Denounce me as a sorcerer. I’ll go to Morgana and become her ally.”

Arthur moved to sit by him again and regarded him with so little shock and surprise on his expression that Merlin realised the same tactic had already occurred to him. Of course it had. There was something else in Arthur’s expression, though, and it took Merlin a few moments to recognise the sadness.

“Yes,” Arthur said. “But it won’t be quite so simple, will it?”

Merlin thought of what he’d done to Morgana, about her hate, and dropped his eyes to his hands, watching them instead as they betrayed his fear and anguish.

Arthur reached over and placed a hand on Merlin’s, stilling their frantic movement.

“I have council this morning and training this afternoon. I want you to go about your duties as usual. Say nothing to Gaius. Bring dinner to my rooms this evening and we’ll decide what to do and how we do it.”

Merlin nodded and stood to leave, feeling suddenly bereft as if Arthur had drawn away from him, but when he met Arthur’s eyes again there was that new kindness, as if Arthur could see to the very heart of him. Perhaps it was so. Merlin had always said he was an open book, and with his one secret uncovered there was no reason for him to hide. Now Arthur saw him clearly. Merlin was grateful it was kindness in those eyes, when it might have been so many less welcome emotions.

“Dreaming again, Merlin?” Arthur’s voice interrupted him and he attempted to rearrange his features into a scowl, only realising he was grinning instead when Arthur rolled his eyes and shook his head. But he was smiling, too, and the slap to the back of Merlin’s head was more like a caress as Arthur’s fingers tangled in dark hair and curved around his skull for a moment.

Arthur cleared his throat. “My cloak, Merlin.”

Merlin scurried to obey and as he settled the deep red fabric around Arthur’s shoulders, he watched the transition from man to king. With a final nod of acknowledgement, Arthur strode from the room and Merlin was alone.

The enormity of what had happened and what they’d discussed overwhelmed him for a moment until another thought intruded.

“I really am a rubbish servant,” he said to the empty room, filled with remorse when he realised he’d sent Arthur off without any breakfast.

Despite being able to retain a certain sense of calm, certainly enough to fool Merlin, it seemed, Arthur’s thoughts as he stalked through Camelot’s corridors could best be described as a fine muddle. Merlin’s revelation had been less of a surprise than he might have expected and was the first
point to address. On some level, Arthur admitted, he must have had his suspicions, even if he’d never allowed himself to actually admit them until now, until his final dream had made it all too clear.

Merlin’s suggestion of using his sorcery as a way to trap Morgana and the traitor in Camelot was a good one, even though Arthur hated to admit so, too aware of the ramifications of such a ruse. The fact Merlin had put the idea forward demonstrated a selflessness he should have learned to expect from Merlin. It had real merit, but Arthur was strategist enough to see the elements needed to be put in place to make it work — and to recognise it could possibly destroy the closeness building between them. It was something he really didn’t want to lose, but knew Merlin would expect nothing less of him. Camelot and her people came first — and while Merlin seemed to be more devoted to Arthur than he’d ever guessed, Merlin knew Arthur well enough to understand where his priorities lay and even more astonishingly, to accept them as right.

The thought of a traitor in Camelot sickened him, though it didn’t surprise him. Surely not Agravaine? Surely not his own uncle, his mother’s brother? He didn’t agree with Agravaine’s thoughts on how to rule, but they’d spent a number of evenings in conversation and from Agravaine he’d finally learned about his mother, about her kindness and strength, her love for her people and the hint of mischief that showed through from time to time. Arthur had soaked it all up, a deluge after a drought, and had been more grateful to Agravaine than he could express.

Arthur’s troubled thoughts had kept him company all the way to the council room and he gathered himself together as the tall doors opened and he strode through. As he walked to the great round table he saw Gwen, and knew there were more difficult conversations to be had there. The loss of Lancelot had affected them all, but Gwen’s eyes were still red-rimmed every morning. His own love for her had settled into something fond and more that of a brother, he accepted, especially since he’d begun to accept the inevitability of Merlin in his life. He smiled at her as she stood to the side but she’d no longer sit beside him. Instead, she’d quietly resumed her duties as a maid.

His eyes surveyed those whom he considered as his knights alone: steadfast Leon, thoughtful Elyan, gentle Percival and Gwaine. Ah Gwaine, refusing to conform even now as he slouched in the seat and munched his apple. Another apple sat, rosy and large, on the sacred surface of the table. One of these days Arthur would have to tell Gwaine he knew exactly who he was and his pedigree. For now, he’d let him have his veneer of being a common man.

The sight of the apple reminded him that in all the revelations of the morning, Merlin had neglected to provide breakfast. As Arthur walked past, he snagged the spare apple, ignoring Gwaine’s spluttering, and took a healthy bite. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Gwen’s mouth quirk, and saw her murmur to one of the other servants, who scuttled off and he knew bread and meat would arrive before too much time passed.

Agravaine and Gaius were both in attendance, as was Geoffrey. The other seats were taken by knights, many of whom had been his father’s men - Lamorak, Merek, Ulric, Fendrel, Tybalt and others, all tightly clustered around, resplendent in mail and Pendragon red with the gold dragons on their shoulders catching the sunlight slanting through the high windows. Agravaine was there, too, looking assured as he settled into the seat at Arthur’s right hand, the very act a reflection of his need to assert his position and Arthur grieved at the thought Agravaine might betray him. Gaius was seated on his other side, his mouth down-turned and his hands gripping the armrests of the chair. Geoffrey was humming gently to himself and appeared oblivious, but Arthur noticed how his bright eyes darted to and fro, taking everything in.

Arthur’s attention settled on Gwaine for a few moments, only half aware of doing so until Gwaine straightened up in his seat and tipped his head to one side, an eyebrow raised.
Without acknowledging the regard, Arthur brought the meeting to order and began the business.

Merlin spent the day in something of a daze, which was fine when he could hide in Arthur’s quarters under the pretext of cleaning the king’s armour, but was less appreciated by Gaius when Merlin wandered into the physician’s room after lunch. Arthur hadn’t returned to his chambers and Merlin, suddenly ravenous, had recalled that he hadn’t eaten at all and had found his way to the kitchen to pilfer some bread and meat. He’d smiled at a harassed-looking Gwen on the way, but hadn’t attempted to talk to her, as something like guilt assailed him at the very sight of her.

In the end, after two broken pots and a spoiled potion, Gaius sent Merlin off with an exasperated command to find some herbs in the forest and stay out of Gaius’ way until he’d rediscovered his senses.

Merlin used his magic to locate what Gaius had asked for and then found a comfortable piece of ground to throw himself down on. He stared up through a quietly rustling canopy of leaves to the scudding clouds above as he considered the new world he’d woken to and began to convince himself of this new reality.

Arthur knew.

Arthur knew and didn’t hate him.

Arthur knew and didn’t hate him.

Merlin wanted to leap up and down; to roar for the dragon and tell him the news; to send the clouds scuttling away reshaped as unicorns and griffins and wyverns until only the blue of the sky and the bright ball of the sun remained.

Arthur knew.

Despite the glad tumult within him, Merlin was still, his hands clasped across his stomach as he thought what it all might mean for his future.

Arthur knew and trusted him yet.

Arthur knew and –

Merlin smiled, enjoying the moment, the sense of relief and of coming home. He’d always believed his magic was at the root of his inability to feel as if he belonged in Camelot, but now he realised it wasn’t so at all. It was because he’d never been able to be honest with Arthur and there’d been an insurmountable barrier between them. Now it was gone and he felt as keen a commitment to Camelot as he did to Arthur. This wasn’t about Arthur’s destiny any longer – it was about a shared destiny for them both and Albion with them.

Merlin dived into Gaius’ room, garbled a greeting, shoved the bag of herbs at him and then left just as quickly, completely ignoring Gaius’ attempts at a scathing commentary on the uselessness of physician’s apprentices. The complaints had little impact when Gaius couldn’t hide his smile and
twinkling eyes and Merlin had grinned in response. Despite all the sleep Merlin had indulged in over the past few days he’d still been tired enough to doze off under his leafy roof, probably helped by the judicious use of his magic to alter the ground surface beneath him until it matched the comfort of Arthur’s bed. He’d woken only when the sun had dipped enough to leave him in full shade and lower the temperature of the air around him.

When he made his way to Arthur’s room, their dinner balanced precariously on the tray, his king merely raised an eyebrow at his tardiness, as if he hadn’t really expected anything else. Merlin barely resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at him, and settled instead for a wide grin that startled Arthur and stopped any immediate teasing as Arthur smiled and shook his head wordlessly.

Once Merlin had served the food, Arthur neatly divided it and gestured at Merlin to sit. It was only then Merlin realised how familiar this scenario was, but even so there seemed to be a new intimacy now. They ate in silence and Arthur waited until Merlin had replenished their ale before he spoke.

“At this moment we have a major advantage. We had one with your magic protecting me and Camelot, but now we have another.” He paused, perhaps to enjoy confounding him, Merlin didn’t know, but he refused to ask and after a few moments Arthur huffed out a breath and continued. “I know about your magic – which means we can use it.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” Merlin, thinking of all the times he’d saved Arthur’s life, was trying to work out just how insulted he should be feeling.

He’d expected a teasing or insulting rejoinder and he certainly hadn’t expected a serious response. He was almost startled when Arthur fixed him with a steady gaze and said, “You’re not a soldier – born and bred to fight and to strategise and to plan. Separately we’re strong, Merlin, but together….”

Together

It hung in the air for a moment, almost an acknowledgement of what they might become, but there was one thing bothering Merlin and as much as he’d tried to ignore it over the past few days, he had to know.

“What about Gwen?” he asked. He stared down at the table, unable to face Arthur, too afraid of the answer.

“Gwen’s a good friend, a valued counsellor and I love her for both of those qualities and many more,” Arthur spoke quietly but firmly. “I am aware of her fondness for me, but I think we both misunderstood the nature of that feeling for a time. And I’m sure we both know where she truly loved.” There was a moment’s silence while both men thought of Lancelot, before Arthur visibly pulled himself together. “Now, we need to discuss how we can use your magic to our advantage.”

It was all the reassurance he was going to get, realised Merlin, but he thought it was probably enough, and he put his residual feelings of guilt to one side to deal with later and concentrated on Arthur.

“You were right when you said we could use this to draw out Morgana, but it must be completely believable.”

“She has to believe I’d fight against you.”

Arthur tipped his head to one side and a wry smile touched his mouth, as if he knew the answer to the question he posed. “And what would it take to turn you against me?”

“And you may have kept one secret well enough, but you know you wouldn’t fool Morgana for a moment. She’s already too aware of what you’d do for me.” Arthur paused and raised his eyebrows as he obviously noticed the wince Merlin couldn’t quite hide. “Do I want to know?” he asked.

Merlin wondered how he could possibly feel so happy and so miserable all at the same time. Helpless, he stared at Arthur as he tried to find words and in the end, it was Arthur who broke the stalemate.

“No, Merlin, I don’t want to know.”

There was a long silence.

“What if… “ Merlin hesitated, grateful for Arthur’s forbearance and trust and almost frightened by the enormity of what he was about to suggest. “What if I really believed I wanted to destroy you?”

“What do you mean?”

“If I could find a spell – something that would wipe my memory of the past few days?”

Merlin watched as the idea worked through Arthur’s mind and wondered at the way the colour drained from his face.

“No, we’ll find another way.” Arthur was adamant.

“Arthur, why – it’s the only way it would work, you must know that?”

“Of course, I do. Merlin, you’ve no idea what you’re suggesting. Even if you believed I still didn’t know about your magic, tell me what it would take to make you turn against me? What would I have to do to you?”

Merlin stared at him, appalled at the open anguish on Arthur’s face. He’d never seen Arthur look quite so devastated, even when he’d just witnessed his father being mortally wounded. What was he asking of Arthur? Merlin considered how much he loved this man and how they were teetering on the brink of finally admitting what was between them. He knew he’d loved Arthur for a long time and while Arthur knowing about the magic eased things between them, it hadn’t been a factor in him falling in love. How could he ever turn against him? Sick awareness arrived with the acknowledgement of just how much Arthur would have to put him through to push him far enough to even contemplate such a thing.

He met Arthur’s eyes then, saw the knowledge and understood that, despite his avowal that they’d find another way, Arthur knew the plan would work. Even as his heart quailed, it gave Merlin strength and he slipped off his seat to kneel at Arthur’s feet.

Arthur started and reached down to urge Merlin up but Merlin captured his hands instead, bringing them to his lips and then holding their joined hands to his cheek as he sought the words he needed.

“It could work, Arthur, you know it could. If we do this then it could mean peace for Camelot. Don’t you understand it’s what I’m for? I was born to help you become the man who unites Albion. That’s my destiny and I’m proud of it, proud to serve you. It doesn’t matter what happens to me.”

Arthur pushed him away then, shoving the chair aside and leaving Merlin kneeling. He strode to the window and stared out though the night was dark and there was nothing to see.

“It matters to me, Merlin. In full knowledge of everything, I’ll have to abuse you, diminish you, hurt you, tear away everything that’s dear to you. It won’t be quick, either. I’ll have to alter slowly, to
treat you steadily worse and worse until I denounce you. It’ll be months, Merlin. Do you understand what you’re asking of me? Do you really understand what you’ll suffer at my hands and what this might cost us in the end?"

Merlin clambered to his feet and crossed to stand behind Arthur. Daringly, he slipped his arms around Arthur’s waist and leaned forward until his forehead was resting on the broad expanse of Arthur’s back. After a few moments warmth settled over Merlin’s fingers as Arthur covered them with his own hands.

They stood in silence for some time, Merlin unwilling to push Arthur into the decision he knew his king would make, and instead he waited and allowed Arthur to come to terms with what they knew. They were going to do this because whatever the cost to them personally, the potential benefits for the kingdom if they succeeded would be worth it for them both.

Eventually, Arthur sighed and tightened his grip over Merlin’s hands for a moment before he gently extricated himself and turned around. His eyes were dark and solemn as he regarded Merlin and then reached out to draw a finger across one of Merlin’s cheekbones. The breath caught in Merlin’s chest as the touch seared across his skin.

Then they were apart, and Arthur was moving with purpose towards his chair. Sitting, he drew in a deep breath. “Would you do this for Camelot, Merlin?”

“For Camelot. For Albion. For you, Arthur.”

“For your king?”

“Yes – but mostly for my friend.”

Arthur flinched and rubbed a hand across his brow before he sighed and spoke. “Then I need to know just how powerful you are.”

They talked for most of the night. Merlin felt an absurd sense of pride as Arthur questioned him about the extent of his power. He told him what he could, relieved when Arthur didn’t question some of his assertions and didn’t seem to require any evidence. Merlin could see the way Arthur considered everything he was told, thinking carefully round it before storing it away and asking the next question.

In the early dawn, Arthur watched with dark eyes as Merlin shaped the flames in the hearth and tiny red and orange figures danced around a maypole. Dragons cavorted among the logs, a unicorn galloped about them, flickering as it moved.

When Merlin reached into the fire, Arthur aborted a cry of alarm and stayed statue still as the unicorn trotted onto Merlin’s palm.

With a grin of pride and joy, Merlin said. “Hold out your hand.”

With a roll of his eyes, Arthur did as he was bidden, showing no further sign of concern as the fire unicorn leapt, graceful and neat, onto Arthur’s upturned hand. Merlin’s pleasure when Arthur smiled in wondering delight nearly spilled from him as tears.

The unicorn reared once as it faced Arthur, then dipped its head until the shimmering golden horn
touched skin before it leapt high into the air and was gone.

Merlin blinked, surprised and then shocked as Arthur shoved his chair back and stood, staring into the corner of the room. Merlin twisted and then shot to his feet, too. There was a moment’s undignified scramble as each man tried to move in front of the other. Arthur put a stop to the squabble by gripping Merlin’s arm and manhandling him until they stood side by side, facing the cloaked and hooded figure standing silent and still.

“Anhora,” Merlin found his voice first. “What do you want?”

Anhora bowed then, first to Merlin and then to Arthur.

“The Once and Future King and Emrys are united. This is good for the land. The unicorns felt the power of Emrys touch them tonight and bid me come and thank you for your gift.”

The unicorn in the fire.

“It was just a little spell – it wasn’t real,” Merlin said.

“Ah, Merlin.” And Anhora smiled at them then. “All unicorns come under my care – even those born from fire.”

“Born –? You mean it’s out there somewhere?”

Merlin gaped at them both as Arthur put into words what he was only just grasping. Somehow, Merlin had created an actual unicorn. The raised eyebrow Arthur treated him to then rivalled any he had ever received from Gaius.

Anhora actually chuckled. “Like the dragons, unicorns are magical creatures. How else would they come into being? It is a long time since a unicorn was born, Emrys. It is a good omen.”

And he was gone, leaving two nonplussed men behind him.

“That’s a lesson learned, Merlin, I hope.” Arthur sounded at his most pompous, but there was delight in the smile he was trying and failing to hide. “Be careful what pictures you draw in the flames. We could be knee deep in unicorns before we knew it.”

That seemed to be enough for Arthur to deal with for the moment and he sent Merlin off then, ordering him to sleep for a few hours, almost shoving him to the door as all Merlin could do in response was yawn widely.

“When you wake, work on finding a way to remove your memory. I won’t need you today. We’ll eat here tonight and talk further. And remember – say nothing to Gaius.”

Merlin nodded sleepily in response and smiled, not noticing Arthur’s sharp indrawn breath. “Promise,” he said, and slipped away.

Arthur stared at the doorway for long minutes after Merlin left.
The sweetness of Merlin’s smile had robbed him of rational thought and he allowed himself to dwell on it; to think of Merlin and the journey they were on. Love between two men was not unknown in his life, but he couldn’t forget his position as king, and a king had responsibilities to his people, to his realm and to the future. For the moment, he pushed it aside. The plan of action they were planning was fraught with so many pitfalls he was finding it difficult to see how they could make it work. He drew his hands through his hair and tried to disperse the negative thoughts trying to intrude. They had to succeed. If they didn’t then all he could see in their future was battle after battle, war after war as they engaged in endless, fruitless fighting against Morgana and any allies she managed to find.

And there would always be allies willing to test Camelot’s strength, especially if they had a powerful sorceress like Morgana to lead them and lend them the strength of the magic at her command.

Despite having advised Merlin to get some sleep for what remained of the night, Arthur found it impossible to think he could sleep and he remained in his seat, staring at the fire and brooding as the sky lightened.

Arthur was startled awake as the door was treated to a characteristic tattoo signalling Gwaine’s arrival and Arthur called for him to enter, rather surprised he’d slept at all although he could tell it was still early. Sure enough, and also characteristically, Gwaine had arrived at the same time as the servant with his breakfast and Arthur smiled slightly as he realised Merlin must have made the arrangement before he returned to his room.

Gwaine raised his eyebrows as the servant placed the food, and Arthur guessed he was surprised it wasn’t Merlin, but he held his tongue until the two men were alone.

“Where’s your shadow, then?” Gwaine’s tone was as irreverent as ever but with a hint of concern under it.

It served to remind Arthur that Gwaine had been Merlin’s friend long before he had been Arthur’s knight and had proven himself loyal. During his long discussion with Merlin, he’d come to the conclusion that his initial plan of involving no one but the two of them was unworkable, but they still needed to keep the numbers involved to the barest minimum and there were some they could not tell.

“He has things to do,” Arthur replied but didn’t offer any further detail and ignored the sharp, assessing look Gwaine bestowed upon him.

Gwaine let the subject lie and began to discuss some business he’d been carrying out on Arthur’s behalf.

Arthur listened with half an ear, responding when response was required, but content with what Gwaine was suggesting and knowing any action would be carried out promptly and well. On the surface, Gwaine was unpredictable, but that was only because while he had a stricter ethical code than many, his morals were less well defined, which made him appear less trustworthy and reliable than he actually was.

Arthur smiled. Gwaine would be perfect.

There was silence and he turned his full attention to Gwaine, his smile widening at the unnerved expression. It wasn’t often he could discomfit Gwaine and he took full enjoyment in the moment. He sobered. If Merlin found the spell they needed and it worked, there would be few moments to enjoy in the months to come.

“Arthur?”
Arthur shook his head. “It must be time for council. Come.” He fussed a little as he donned sword belt and cape, refusing to meet Gwaine’s eye. Only when he was ready did he look up.

Gwaine’s head was tipped slightly on one side but he nodded sharply when their eyes met. “In your own time, Princess,” he said.

Arthur understood the double meaning and he inclined his own head in gratitude as Gwaine opened the door and ushered him out with a grandiloquent bow and laughing eyes.

As ordered, Merlin didn’t appear until the servants arrived with dinner and Arthur eyed his more than usually erratic fluttering with mixed feelings. Clearly, Merlin had something to tell him and he had to swallow down bile at the thought of it. He hardly needed Merlin’s excited eye rolls and grimaces to inform him a spell had been found. Once the servants had gone, Arthur gestured Merlin to a seat and pushed across some food and wine, not even considering the rights and wrongs of the king tending to his manservant.

“Eat first, talk after,” he said, and concentrated on swallowing down what he could of the roast meat and vegetables as he fought against the sick feeling in his gut. At the very least, they had to give any eavesdroppers time to get bored and move away, and the few moments reprieve provided him with enough time to gather his composure about him once more.

“You’ve found a spell, then,” he said at last, and felt a sliver of vicious humour as Merlin’s face fell when his grand announcement was pre-empted.

“How did you know?”

Arthur didn’t want to admit the fact that as time went on he recognised more and more just how oblivious he’d been since the day he’d met Merlin. “Now I know about the magic, Merlin, I discover you really are an open book.”

It wasn’t said with any malice and Merlin shrugged in a way that was almost sheepish but he didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, he became serious.

“We need to test whether it actually works – and that we can reverse it easily. My magic book,” Merlin said, ignoring Arthur’s groan, “says we should make up a phrase to banish the spell. It needs to be something you’ll say to me. I can cast it tonight before I go to bed and we can test it tomorrow.” His eyes were wide and guileless when he looked at Arthur, full of an awful optimism this would work.

The trouble was, Arthur believed in Merlin. Which meant he believed the spell would work, too. He just didn’t want to think of everything that would inevitably follow.

He met Merlin’s eyes, and beneath the optimism, he could see the trepidation and knew Merlin was beginning to understand the treacherous path they were planning to tread. Arthur reached out his hand then, meeting Merlin’s halfway across the table, and they held on tight.
Arthur watched as Merlin padded about his chambers, cataloguing the slight tenseness in his frame, the way he seemed to be on his guard. It was something Arthur had never noticed before he knew Merlin had magic – he supposed he’d seen it as part of Merlin’s innate posture and character. Now he recognised it for what it was – the weight of secrets kept wearing him down and the fear of discovery putting the halt in his step and the clumsiness in his actions. It was one of the things Arthur had noticed on discovering Merlin was a sorcerer. Naturally, Merlin moved with grace and a poise Arthur thought must come from the power within him – it was only now when Merlin had cast the memory spell and believed his secret unknown that Arthur understood. He frowned, deciding he didn’t like this version of Merlin at all, wondering at how quickly it had taken him to grow accustomed to treating Merlin as his equal – and how right it felt to do so.

Arthur was a king, but he was still a young man and sometimes gave into a mischievousness that might be called unkind by those who knew him best.

“I’ve been wondering about this Dragoon,” he said. “How did you come to know him?”

The slightest hitch in Merlin’s breathing presaged his answer, the only sign Arthur’s comment had caused him any grief. Carefully tending the fire and keeping his back to Arthur, Merlin’s response was a study in nonchalance. “Gaius knows him. I don’t really.”

“Hmm, there was something familiar about him. Something around the eyes. And the boots.” And how that had escaped Arthur was a puzzle. He decided Merlin must have cast some sort of glamour to stop people thinking about obvious things like how Merlin and Dragoon wore the same shoes, were the same height, the same build, had the same colour eyes, the same cheekbones, the same bloody face. Now it was anger rather than teasing as he accepted just how stupid he’d been.

“Anything you need to tell me?”

“You’ll be needing a new doublet if you keep eating those honey tarts the cook makes,” Merlin said, sidestepping the question entirely.

Interesting, thought Arthur, wondering how many times he must have done the same with awkward questions and conversations in the past.

Arthur couldn’t keep hold of the anger, not when faced with the tense line of Merlin’s shoulders, as if he was expecting a blow.

He sighed. “Merlin, you have my trust.” Then he held his breath. This was the last element of their plan. If this didn’t work then Arthur had a lot of explaining to do and they were right back at the start.

The tension ebbed away from Merlin’s frame and he stood in silence for a few moments, face turned away from Arthur, but Arthur could see the straight back, the raised chin, everything he’d grown to expect from Merlin since he’d shared his secret; and so much more that Arthur valued.

“What was that about?”

“What?” Arthur feigned ignorance and instead threw himself onto the bed, dragging out a pillow and tossing it at Merlin.
Merlin caught it neatly and crossed to the bed. In the next moment his boots were off and he placed the pillow on the cover before joining Arthur on the bed. Sighing, Merlin lay on his back.

“You know what.”

“Perhaps I am angry at you.” Arthur had only just admitted it to himself.

“I’ll tell you everything.”

“No, Merlin, don’t. I don’t want to think about the past. Let’s concentrate on defeating Morgana and Agravaine. We’ve enough to do to secure our future so let’s leave the past where it belongs.”

Merlin sighed but said no more and they lay side by side on the bed as the sun dipped further down and dusk stole into the room, the flickering fire the only light as it threw fantastic shadows on the walls. For a moment, Arthur was almost convinced he saw the shadow of a unicorn.

The backs of their hands brushed, once, twice, before their fingers caught and their hands entwined. Arthur was having trouble breathing and the tremble in Merlin’s fingers suggested he, too, was aware of the moment and what it meant.

Eventually Merlin spoke, his words quiet and mindful of the peace between them. “What I’ve done I’ve done for Camelot, yes, but mostly I did it for you, Arthur.”

Perhaps the gathering gloom made it easy for the words to slip out, for truths and declarations to be aired and lost to the dark. Arthur tightened his grip on Merlin’s fingers and felt like an untried child as Merlin didn’t tell him about what he’d done but tried to explain why.

“I tried to make the right decisions, but they weren’t always the best ones in the end. There were times I wish I could have found another way but even now, I’m not sure what I could have done differently. Apart from one thing – if I’d my time again, then I’d tell Morgana about my magic, so she knew she wasn’t alone. She was afraid. I was afraid. At least I’d Gaius but she had no one, Arthur. I failed her. And if we go through with this then I will fail her again.”

Arthur, made brave by the darkness, brought Merlin’s hand up and kissed it gently. “And such has always been your lot, hasn’t it?” His anger had fled, washed away by a shame he barely understood, but he was bolstered by pride in Merlin’s strength. “You couldn’t act openly and you couldn’t, mustn’t trust anyone. You were hardly a man grown and yet you’d the weight of a kingdom on your shoulders. I understand that part, Merlin, but to face it almost entirely alone. I’m sorry.”

Merlin seemed beyond words, but he rolled onto his side and pressed his face to Arthur’s shoulder. Arthur wrapped an arm around him.

“One day, when all this is over and we’re at peace, you can tell me about all the wonderful things good magic can do, and we’ll make laws that are fair and just, and you’ll help me bring magic back to Camelot. I promise.”

He held Merlin’s shaking body close to him and buried his face in the dark hair and they lay close in the silence and the dark until a knock at the door called them back to the world.

There was no peace for them yet. Not yet.
“So, it works,” Merlin stared expectantly at Arthur.

Several days had passed since they’d experimented with the spell to make Merlin lose his memory and during each one, Merlin had expected them to have the conversation, to make their plans and then start their long, slow and difficult journey.

Arthur had evaded the subject, had avoided being alone with Merlin and seemed, in fact, to be trying to pretend nothing had happened.

Merlin quailed at the mere thought of what they were planning, he really did, and knew Arthur was unhappy about it. Merlin had wracked his brains, had tried to come up with different options that would end with Morgana beaten and Camelot at peace. Arthur had a much better strategic brain than Merlin, he accepted, and knew Arthur was probably going through the same process, except he’d clearly already realised what Merlin now knew.

This was their best chance. And it was a good plan.

“Arthur.”

“I know, Merlin. I know.”

Arthur seemed torn somewhere between anger and fear and Merlin hated seeing the uncertainty on his features. Taking a deep breath, Merlin found the words.

“It won’t be easy and we can’t know how bad it’ll get, Arthur, but we’d both die for Camelot, wouldn’t we? We’d both do everything in our power to bring peace. And it’s only us who can do it. I’m willing to risk everything. I am.”

Arthur put his head on one side and quirked his mouth upward. Then he nodded, reaching out to grip Merlin’s shoulder. Merlin gripped Arthur’s forearm in response and they stood for a few moments, surrounded by the quiet of the room and Merlin wondered if Arthur could feel the quickening thud of his heartbeat.

Merlin broke the hold at last, breathing in deeply.

“There’s something – someone –,” he paused, trying to find the words. “I know you don’t want me to tell you about the past, Arthur, but there’s someone I need you to meet, someone we need to talk to if this is to work.” Merlin wished he could find some easy way to make his confession, but anything other than the bald truth seemed pointless. “You didn’t kill the dragon.”

If Merlin had wanted to shock Arthur, he’d certainly managed it, as Arthur’s mouth dropped open. Merlin hurried on, trying to avert the gathering storm, and wanting to get the explanation out before his own grief or Arthur’s anger interrupted.

“When we … when we went looking for Balinor … for the Dragonlord, Gaius told me… told me that Balinor was my father.” He swallowed thickly before he could continue and did his best to ignore the dawning horror on Arthur’s expression. “The moment he … he died… his power came to me. I’m a Dragonlord; the last Dragonlord. Kilgarrah … the dragon … he’s the last as well and I’m
“Sorry, Arthur, I’m so sorry, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t kill him. I ordered him to leave and not to hurt anyone else. I couldn’t kill him.”

Arthur turned away and moved to the window, staring out at the bustle of a morning well underway.

Merlin waited, shifting from foot to foot and waiting for Arthur’s reaction. Time stretched along with Merlin’s nerves and by the time he turned round, Merlin was ready to shriek with anxiety.

“I was right,” Arthur said. “I really think I don’t want to know much more.”

Merlin nearly collapsed in relief. While he could see anger lurking in Arthur’s eyes, there was a rueful acceptance there, too, and understanding.

“That soft heart of yours, Merlin. It might be the death of us yet.”

It was an allusion to how difficult they both knew it would be to turn Merlin against Arthur, and the root of Arthur’s disinclination to start at all.

“I’m sorry about your father,” Arthur said.

Merlin nodded, unable to find his voice and thankfully, beyond a brief squeeze to his shoulder and a hand curving even more briefly around his face, Arthur made no attempt to delve deeper.

“Well,” Arthur continued. “I want to meet this dragon of yours. Just to make sure he understands he’s not to attempt to raze Camelot in the middle of all our plans.”

“I can make sure of it,” Merlin said. “Tonight?”

Arthur grimaced and then nodded. “Tonight, and first we need to talk to Gwaine. It might be useful if he meets the creature, too.”

Merlin winced. Despite his troubled past with Kilgarrah, since he’d become a Dragonlord he’d become aware of the difference in his magic, and had accepted the kinship his blood brought. It felt wrong to hear Kilgarrah described in such a way, although he could readily understand Arthur’s reaction.

Ignoring Arthur’s calculating look at his response, he said, “Just let me do the talking.”

“With Gwaine or the dragon?” Arthur asked, but didn’t wait for a response as he opened the door and despatched a passing servant to find Gwaine.

Good question, thought Merlin.

Gwaine’s reaction to the first of their admissions was not what either of them expected. Merlin and Arthur had waited in silence until Gwaine sauntered into the room, hauling off one leather glove with his teeth as he did so. He brought with him a scent of the forest.

“I’m just back from patrol,” he grumbled. “What’s so important it couldn’t wait until I got a drink?”

Merlin covered his mouth with his hand to stifle laughter as Arthur responded.

“Just about everything.” Arthur ignored Gwaine’s scowl but relented enough to pour ale into three
tankards, and Merlin added his smile to Gwaine’s, though Merlin pouted at Arthur when he realised his was only half-full.

Arthur caught his look. “You need to have your wits about you tonight.”

Merlin couldn’t really argue against that, and took a careful mouthful of the ale. He waited until Gwaine drank deep and had drawn a satisfied hand across his mouth, before speaking.

“Gwaine, I need to tell you something. I’m sorry I haven’t told you before but I had to keep it a secret.” Merlin realised he was on the point of babbling nonsense and seeing Arthur’s exasperation wasn’t really helping.

Gwaine glanced between the two of them, waiting until Arthur took a mouthful of ale.

“So, what, are you and the Princess here getting married, then?”

Merlin felt hot colour seep across his skin, but at least Gwaine was too busy laughing at Arthur’s indignity as he choked on his drink to notice Merlin’s embarrassment.

When some calm had been restored, Merlin made another attempt but was stopped by Gwaine.

“So if it’s not about the upcoming nuptials, I’d take a guess it’s about the magic.”

“No… I … what?”

Gwaine looked almost surprised. “What? Is it supposed to be a secret?”

“Yes!”

Merlin was spluttering, while Arthur had sunk into his seat and put his head in his hands. When he looked up again, Merlin was mortified, but also a little relieved, to see Arthur’s eyes sparkling with mirth.

“You really are an open book, Merlin, aren’t you?”

Merlin scowled but it was half-hearted at best, he was too pleased with the knowledge Gwaine seemed perfectly sanguine about his magic. “When did you know?

Gwaine smirked at him. “Well, it’d be no fun at all if I just came out and told you, now would it? I’ll let you work it out for yourself.” There was silence for a moment until Gwaine, who could never be silent and still for long, asked. “So what’s all this about?”

Merlin looked at Arthur, who made an ‘after you’ gesture. Merlin rolled his eyes and, taking a deep breath, launched into providing an outline of the plan he and Arthur had been busy hatching.

Merlin became increasingly nervous as he spoke, watching the way Gwaine’s brow furrowed and his mouth turned down. Arthur was no help. He’d retreated to the window and was leaning against the wall by it, his arms folded and eyes watchful.

It was to Arthur that Gwaine directed his response. “How can you even think about doing this to him?”

Before Arthur could retaliate, Merlin stepped forward and he stood tall and straight, meeting Gwaine’s startled eyes.

“This is our plan – mine and Arthur’s – he’s not doing anything to me. <i>We</i> will be working
together so we can be sure Camelot is safe in the future.”

His rebuttal silenced Gwaine, who nodded to Arthur in what might have been an apology, and they stood in silence - three points of a triangle. The sight stirred a memory in Merlin, but he was too tired to try and trace it.

Arthur stepped forward then, his shoulder pressing against Merlin’s and Merlin leaned into the warmth, ignoring Gwaine’s snort of amusement and let Arthur’s voice seep over him like warm honey. He shivered, and Arthur leaned closer.

“We can’t do this without your help, Gwaine. We’re well aware of the risks and the possible cost, but we’re agreed that it’s worth it.”

“Ah, what the hell, let’s do it,” Gwaine sounded bright enough, but his eyes were watchful and concerned.

Arthur nodded his thanks but was clearly deferring to Merlin. Merlin acknowledged the unspoken prompt and, trying not to trip over his words, he told the rest. Gwaine might have guessed about the magic, but Merlin was fairly certain he wouldn’t have any idea about his other ability.

“I’m not just a warlock. I’m a Dragonlord – the last one. There’s only one dragon left and we need to speak to him tonight. Will you come with us?”

Gwaine’s eyes were wide and he stared at Merlin with a new respect obvious enough to have Merlin again flushing in embarrassed pleasure and Arthur frowning slightly.

“Now, how could I possibly pass up on a chance to meet a dragon?”

Gwaine seemed less sure meeting a dragon was a good idea when he was eventually faced with the bulk of Kilgarrah. In the darkness, his size was both masked and enhanced by the fleeting moonlight and Kilgarrah’s own restlessness, and Merlin could see Gwaine attempting to get some sense of just how big and dangerous this new threat might be.

Merlin glanced quickly at Arthur, to see him standing still as a statue, his hand poised on the hilt of his sword, as he stared the dragon down.

The Once and Future King.

Kilgarrah dropped his head and turned away from Arthur, his attention shifting to Merlin.

“So, Merlin, why have you called me here?” His head swung round suddenly to peer at Gwaine, who’d become confident enough to move forward.

“Bad idea to poke a dragon, Gwaine,” said Arthur from his vantage point. He’d yet to relax his own stance and his eyes remained on the dragon, brooding and dark.

Merlin told Kilgarrah what they were planning. “If I don’t remember, then I’m afraid I might call you and tell you to attack Camelot. You mustn’t answer me.”

Kilgarrah sighed. “Merlin, you are my Dragonlord. I can never disobey you. If you call me I will come. If you order me to destroy Camelot, I will wreak havoc and destruction. If you order me to kill the Once and Future –“
“That’s enough, thank you. I think we understand.” Arthur stepped forward until he was standing by Merlin, cutting off Kilgarrah’s increasingly enthusiastic narrative.

Merlin appreciated the support, staring up rather helplessly at Kilgarrah.

Gwaine sauntered up. “You can’t call him if you don’t remember you’re a Dragonlord.”

Arthur looked up. “Would that work? Could he make himself forget what he is?”

Merlin watched them, almost awed by the sense of power emanating from both the King and the dragon.

“He is Emrys,” Kilgarrah replied, and it seemed to be enough.

“If I forget, what does it mean for you?” Merlin didn’t like the gleam in Kilgarrah’s eyes.

“Do you trust me, Merlin?” Kilgarrah asked in response.

Merlin stared up at him. “No.”

There was a rumble of what might have been approval, or laughter, Merlin wasn’t too sure.

“Then you have grown wise, indeed.”

The air stirred around them as, with a mighty upsweep of wings, Kilgarrah launched himself into the air and was gone, leaving the three men staring uncertainly at one another.

They walked back to the castle in silence, stepping quietly through the streets of the lower town. Once in the courtyard, Gwaine hesitated, and then left them with no more than a nod, though there was respect in it for both of them. Merlin and Arthur watched him for a moment before they turned as one and trudged up the steps towards Arthur’s chambers. Merlin followed Arthur in and they faced one another.

Merlin saw the downturn of Arthur’s mouth and hurried into speech. “Everything’s in place, Arthur. If we’re going to do this, then there’s no reason to delay.”

“I know, Merlin.” Arthur looked exhausted as he acknowledged Merlin’s words. “I know.”

Merlin stepped closer, placing his palm on the centre of Arthur’s chest, over his heart. “Whatever happens, whatever you have to do, Arthur, I promise I’ll forgive you. I promise.”

Arthur’s eyes closed, and his hand came up to cover Merlin’s, fingers hot and dry and strong as they captured Merlin’s hand and brought it to his lips. His eyes were clear and solemn when he opened them.

“I’ll cast the spell when I go back to my room tonight. In the morning, well…” Merlin said.

They stood close until, with a sigh, Arthur loosened his grip and stepped away and Merlin filled a suddenly awkward atmosphere with readying the king’s chamber for the night ahead. He fussed around as he banked the fire, extinguishing some of the candles and slipping a hot brick into the bed. It was only when he approached Arthur to help him change, that he paused and finally admitted.
“I’m scared.”

Arthur slipped his arms around him and Merlin wondered how this could feel so natural as he relaxed into the comfort Arthur offered him, hoping Arthur was receiving the same from him when he curled his arms around Arthur in response.

“Will you stay?” The words tumbled from Arthur as if they’d escaped against his will, and Merlin felt him tense in their embrace. “Until I’m asleep?”

“I’d like that,” Merlin said, and once Arthur slipped between the covers, Merlin settled beside him, linking their fingers together and letting the warmth of the room seep into his bones as he concentrated on the sound of Arthur’s breathing and the fact of his physical presence.

Once he was sure Arthur was asleep and the tight grip on his fingers slackened, he eased himself from the bed, standing by it for a few more moments before he could bear to pull himself away. In the morning, he wouldn’t remember any of this and his heart quailed at the very thought of it.

Taking a deep breath, he turned away.

For Albion.

For Camelot.

But most of all - for Arthur.
Chapter 3

Now

Arthur’s words washed over Emrys in an almost tangible wave and the hate sloughed off him like an old skin. Merlin blinked at Arthur for a second, confused beyond measure as memories tumbled into his mind, followed swiftly by alarm. In the next instant, Merlin spun around in desperation and sent the spell he’d been casting towards Morgana instead. There was no way he could be quick enough to forestall Morgana, and her bolt hit Arthur hard, throwing him off his feet to lie, still and broken, on the floor in front of Merlin.

The cry that escaped Merlin then was one of anguish.

“What are you doing?” Morgana was screaming at him and he placed himself between her and Arthur, desperate to discover if Arthur was still alive but too aware of the danger he was in, and not just from Morgana. Glancing through the barrier he’d created, Merlin could see the fury of the knights as they fought uselessly against the magical shield to get to Arthur.

“Traitor.” Morgana flung the accusation at him.

“No,” he corrected her. His head was still reeling but his mind was clearing by the second. “I was never a traitor. I never betrayed Arthur. My loyalty’s always been to him. Always.” He made sure his words could be heard beyond the barrier, amplifying the sound, and he saw the knights become still and watchful noticing Percival, Elyan, Leon and Gwaine holding steady and calming the rest.

“He knew of my magic and we planned this to draw you out; you and the traitor we knew was working within Camelot.” Except there was more than one traitor within their midst, Merlin realised, as he thought of the maidservant – Ruadan’s daughter.

It was no time to become distracted. Morgana was gathering her power and Merlin knew this could end in a magical duel with the potential to bring the castle down around their ears. He would win, he’d no doubt at all, but it wouldn’t be without damage and destruction.

“It didn’t help in the end though, did it? I still killed your precious King.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Cheers erupted from the other side of the barrier as the knights reacted to Arthur standing tall and strong. He stepped forward and Merlin felt a hand settle on his shoulder, Arthur’s thumb sliding tantalisingly across the skin of Merlin’s neck.

Emotion almost choked Merlin. “I told you this was a really stupid plan’” Merlin said, although he’d done no such thing, and his voice broke on the words. “I nearly killed you.”

“It’s an excellent plan, Merlin, because it’s mine and don’t you forget it.” It had been Merlin’s idea first, but they’d worked on it together. It didn’t matter. It was something they could argue about later when they had the luxury of time. For the moment, they weren’t out of the woods just yet. Arthur’s fingers seemed unable to loosen their hold on Merlin’s neck and Merlin’s riposte was silenced by the slight tremor in the touch, the anger born of fear melting away at this evidence of Arthur’s own concern.

He didn’t want Arthur unmanned in any way in front of Morgana, not when he most needed to demonstrate his strength as king. Searching for a way to steady him, Merlin found the answer by reverting to their habitual combative back and forth, “Only because I thought of the amulet, you
The amulet used to reverse the spell on Uther. At the last moment Merlin had suggested Arthur wore it as a defence against any random magical attack over the months.

“What an excellent team we make.” The insult had bolstered Arthur, and he squeezed Merlin’s neck slightly before he released him.

They’d only been distracted for a moment, but it was enough for Morgana and they were alerted by a warning cry from Gwaine as she propelled herself forward in a blur of movement, her speed increased by her magic. The gold flashed in her eyes as she reached for Arthur’s neck, seemingly too enraged to use a spell for the killing if there was the least chance she could rip Arthur’s throat out with her bare hands.

Arthur pushed her off, but not before she’d clawed at him and had come away with the amulet chain clutched between her fingers, the medallion catching the light as it spun.

She laughed then, backing away from the knights who were advancing now as Merlin dispelled the barrier he’d placed in the way. There was a sea of red and silver, Arthur’s favoured men at the front with their capes a slash of vibrant colour, showing off the glint of their weaponry to its best advantage; warm fire and cold unrelenting steel.

Morgana stared at them, suddenly hesitant and unsure. Her brow furrowing, she glanced around.

“You’re surrounded, Morgana,” said Arthur. “Your magic isn’t a match for Merlin’s and any of the knights will strike you down if you make an attempt to attack us. It’s time to surrender.”

Agravaine had moved to the front of the group of knights. His watchful gaze was flicking between Arthur and Merlin, as if he was weighing up his options now he knew Merlin had never actually lost Arthur’s favour. Merlin tried to move forward but Arthur’s hand closing around his elbow stilled him and they watched warily.

Agravaine stepped forward. “I’ll escort the Lady Morgana to the cells.”

“I don’t think so.” Arthur’s voice was as dry as the desert. “I wouldn’t want her to manage a convenient escape and be suddenly free again.”

“Sire, what are you suggesting?”

Agravaine had a nice line in aggrieved hurt, Merlin considered, but he could see this was one game Arthur had decided to draw to a close. There was no doubt Agravaine realised the ruse Merlin and Arthur had staged, and Agravaine’s treatment of Merlin was unlikely to be overlooked. Whether he thought himself under suspicion or not, it must have been obvious his standing in Camelot was irrevocably damaged.

“I suggest nothing, Agravaine. I merely indicate to you that I’m fully aware of your allegiance to Morgana and I know you’re the traitor we’ve been searching for.”

There were others, thought Merlin, remembering his earlier realisation, but he’d the distinct impression they’d be well away by morning and so he kept his silence.

“My lord, I thought we were all agreed Gaius was the traitor – you executed him.”

“Really?”
Agravaine followed Arthur’s gaze and so did Merlin, feeling relief and pride at the sight of Gaius walking steadily to join them. At the edge of the room, Gwen and Hunith were standing close and Hunith had her arm round Gwen. Gwen’s own gaze was fixed on Morgana, but Hunith’s eyes were on Merlin and even from across the room, Merlin could see her pride in him. From the gasps and shocked exclamations emanating from many of the knights, Merlin realised Arthur had played it as close to his chest as he’d initially suggested. By so doing, he ensured the reactions from them all were honest and true throughout. It was a high-risk game they had played and Arthur had told Merlin time and again when they were discussing the details that they could make no mistakes.

Merlin shivered a little as he thought of the knights who had mistreated him. Not only had this ruse smoked out the traitors within the walls, it would also have shown Arthur the true mettle of his knights. There would be further implications of this and he glanced up to find Merek’s eyes on him.

Merlin met the look, his own expression stern and direct, before he dismissed Merek from his mind. The man wasn’t worthy of any further consideration. Arthur would deal with him. Instead, he watched with pleasure as Gaius approached.

“Hello, my boy,” Gaius said, and he smiled at Merlin.

Merlin grinned in response.

Agravaine was as white as a sheet.

Arthur was speaking. “You’re a traitor to Camelot, Agravaine. I’ve amassed enough evidence over the past months to condemn you a hundred times over.

“Arthur, I’m your uncle. How could you think –“

“I’ve not had much luck with my family recently,” Arthur said. “It seems to be those closest to me by blood who’d soonest see me dead.”

The bleak unhappiness in Arthur’s expression made Merlin want to weep. A wave of nausea overtook him and he staggered slightly, pushing it aside and concentrating on the events unfolding before him.

Morgana laughed aloud and there was a terrifying madness in the sound. “I’ll destroy you all.” She stared at them, meeting their eyes with all the hauteur of the princess she was. “I’ll tear Camelot down stone by stone and grind your bones to dust with them. By the time I’m finished no-one will ever remember its existence.”

“No, no you won’t. I won’t let you hurt us again. I won’t let you hurt Camelot.” He won’t let you hurt Arthur. Merlin stepped forward.

“What can you do?” she taunted him. “Will you kill me again?”

Merlin saw her eyes widen in surprise as she looked past him. “Oh, your pet warlock hasn’t told you about that, has he, brother dear?”

Merlin wondered how Arthur had reacted and felt a fleeting pang of regret that he’d accepted Arthur’s wish not to know anything about how he’d used his magic in the past. He dismissed it as quickly. It didn’t matter. Nothing would matter if he couldn’t stop Morgana. Already, he could see her gathering her power around her, her eyes flickering with golden intent.

What could he do to guarantee Camelot’s – Arthur’s – safety? His eyes settled on the amulet clasped in her hand and he looked down for a moment to gather himself. What he was about to do was horrific but it was the only thing he could think of, short of killing Morgana, to hopefully give them
peace at last. Merlin glanced behind to Arthur and was bolstered by the trust in Arthur’s eyes. Arthur was silent and composed, waiting for the issue to be settled between the two magic-users. This would set the tone for how they could work in the future; two sides of a coin. Magic and courage.

Oh.

Merlin glanced across the room and saw Gwaine, supremely unsurprised by anything that had happened, and with his attention firmly on Agravaine, who’d been relieved of his sword and was flanked by guards. Courage, strength and magic. Merlin recalled the dwarf they’d met when he and Gwaine had followed Arthur into the Perilous Lands. Grettir had seen and understood how Camelot could become great long before they’d reached this point.

It was something to mull over later. For the moment he’d weightier matters to attend to. His stomach turned at the thought of what he was about to do but he forced the nausea away.

Morgana’s attention was still on Merlin. “You did nothing for years even though you knew I had magic – and then you betrayed me. I knew I should never have trusted you again.”

For a moment the expression of hate wavered, and she was the Morgana Merlin recognised and loved, a girl afraid, alone and abandoned. Someone he’d left to her fate because he was too concerned about his own life. Merlin wanted to find words to explain, or offer apology, but too much had happened since and this latest betrayal left him in no position to speak; there was no way he could ever make this right. Instead, he nodded sharply to acknowledge the merit of her accusation and swallowed to try to shift the lump in his throat. For the briefest of moments, it seemed like Morgana’s expression softened, as if she recognised for the first time how scared and alone he’d been, too.

Then any of those feelings were washed away by hate and malice and she raised her hand as if to strike. At the same moment, Merlin stepped in front of Arthur and, concentrating on the amulet still clutched in Morgana’s fingers, he reached out his hand, crafted the spell and had cast it before she’d a chance to speak. As the power left him, sudden dizziness washed over him and he staggered, having to wait a few moments for his vision to clear.

Morgana was doubled over and was having difficulty breathing. The rest of the room seemed to be having the same issue, or perhaps they were all just holding their breath to see what happened next.

Weeks later, Arthur would admit he’d experienced a moment of real terror when Morgana arched back and screamed as if she was being torn apart.

Merlin stared, appalled, as gold poured from her very skin, wrapped itself around her for a moment and then shot across the room to slam into him.

The force of it was enough to throw him off his feet and he ended up sprawled on the floor, covered by a beautiful golden haze, soft and warm and welcoming, and he thought he could lose himself in it forever. Merlin’s life faded into the background; everything he’d thought important was now so insignificant next to the power seeping into him as it called to the reserves of his own, bringing more to the surface than he’d ever realised he possessed. The new power was settling slowly within him and gradually joining the core of his own magic.

“Merlin! Merlin!”

That was his name, wasn’t it? He knew that voice. His mind latched onto it, let the sound of it pull him back from the brink and he staggered to his feet, sweating and panting as the new magic intermingled with his own and was finally subsumed within it until it all felt like his.
Morgana looked smaller. She was still standing but was swaying and her naturally pale skin was completely colourless. Her eyes were huge and frightened.

“What did you do?” she whispered.

“I offered you a tenth of my magic. You were holding the amulet. It reversed and amplified the spell tenfold. I’ve taken all your power, Morgana. All of it.” He felt the weight of what he’d done then, the horror of it.

Merlin thought maybe he should have been surprised when it was Gwen, who’d been steadily edging her way closer to the front, who caught Morgana when she fell. Morgana’s weight took them both down, but Gwen’s grip around Morgana meant it was a more controlled descent. Nobody else moved and they remained huddled together on the floor.

Merlin swayed and fought another bout of sickness at the thought of his actions and what they meant. He settled when Arthur stepped up to his side and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Arthur and Merlin. Side by side. As it should be. As it would always be.

The hiatus, the moment’s peace was shattered as Agravaine took the opportunity to push aside the knights guarding him. In the next second he’d grabbed a sword and was heading not for Arthur as they might have expected – but for the two women in the centre of the floor.

“Look to the Princess and Guinevere!” Arthur’s voice rang out as true as the steel he drew from his scabbard.

Merlin staggered as Arthur’s touch left him, staring in horror at the hate-filled rictus of Agravaine’s face.

“I gave you my loyalty and you gave me nothing! I did everything you asked of me, witch, and now I’ve lost Camelot.”

With Gwen’s help, Morgana had struggled to her feet and raised her chin to face Agravaine’s disappointed rage.

“Camelot would have been mine, Agravaine – you’d already outlived your usefulness. I would have had little need for you once I took the citadel. Your time was over.”

Merlin thought she was taunting him deliberately, goading him to make an attack. He wanted to move forward, to use his magic and disarm Agravaine, but he seemed rooted to the spot, his head spinning.

Agravaine brought his sword up but it stopped as metal clashed against metal, the sound ringing out around the hall as Arthur’s sword intercepted it, putting himself between Agravaine and Morgana.

Leon and Gwaine were there quickly, drawing the women aside amidst the scurry of movement as people sought the edges of the room to get out of the reach of the swinging steel blades.

“I should have killed you while I’d the chance,” Agravaine’s voice resounded through the space as he lunged.

Arthur responded with actions, not words, but even through his own increasing weakness Merlin could see the hurt Arthur was trying to hide.
The blades came together as both attacked, the steel locking and bringing them into close quarters. Merlin saw Arthur speak and watched his features close into cold composure as Agravaine replied. Merlin knew it wouldn’t be long now. There was no swordsman in the kingdom who could come close to Arthur in battle, other than Gwaine, and everyone present knew it – including Agravaine if his increasingly desperate parries were any guide.

Merlin stumbled, colliding with Gaius and an arm encircled him.

“Are you all right, my boy?”

Merlin wondered why Gaius sounded so worried about him, when all their attention should be on the conflict before them.

“I’m fine, Gaius,” he said, but he couldn’t deny he was grateful for the support and he sagged a little against Gaius’ body, shaking his head to try and shift the dizziness.

Arthur had clearly decided to bring the fight to a conclusion. He feinted left and Agravaine fell for it, shifting to protect his right flank and leaving the other completely exposed. Merlin was ashamed at the pleasure he felt when Arthur’s sword slid through vulnerable flesh swiftly, before withdrawing to leave Agravaine swaying, his face shocked and disbelieving. With a low, strangled cry, Agravaine dropped his sword and Merlin heard it ring as it hit the stone floor, before Agravaine followed it, slumping to his knees, his eyes wide with pain, before he toppled forward and lay still.

Merlin’s eyes were drawn to Morgana to find her staring back at him with a curious mix of regret and triumph. She seemed to have no further thought for Agravaine at all and it struck Merlin then that her own innate character, with its honour and fairness, hadn’t liked the ease with which Agravaine had betrayed Camelot. Merlin looked at Arthur, and there he saw the regret he expected, even through the steely resolve. Agravaine and Morgana – all of the family Arthur had left and both had allied to fight against him. Despite the cool bearing of a king triumphant, Merlin could see the man beneath hurting and he ached in sympathy, wanting to move forward to offer some kind of comfort but unable to make his trembling limbs obey.

The view in front of him receded for a moment before coming into a sharp focus. The suddenness of it had him staggering again, seeing spots before his eyes now and a blurring at the edges of his vision. He was half aware of someone shouting and then he was falling…

The sight of Agravaine dead transfixed Arthur and while Morgana was still on her feet she was swaying as if she was about to collapse once more. Grief was his over-riding emotion, stalled by the thought of what might have been, if only his sister and his uncle had been willing to work with him for the good of their people.

“Arthur!”

The sound of Gaius shouting his name with such urgency had him spinning around just in time to see Merlin crumple to the floor. Before he could move, Morgana spoke. “This is the price of Merlin’s treachery.” She appeared detached from what she was saying, if not for the twist of her mouth suggesting satisfaction. “I didn’t trust him, so he offered to bind his life to my will. If he betrayed me then the spell etched on his skin would flay him and he would burn from within. You may have
beaten me, Arthur Pendragon, but his slow and painful death will be my reward. You’ll rule without him by your side. Even if I still had my magic and was willing, I couldn’t stop this. It was his own magic that bound him to me.”

Arthur wasn’t sure what tale his face told at her words, but Morgana’s pale skin leached further and she shied away from him.

“Will you kill me now?” she asked and she sounded so very young.

Arthur gathered his dignity around him and shook his head. “Merlin knew what the price might be, and whatever happens, I know he wouldn’t want me to hurt you further in his name.” He bowed his head for a moment, fighting for composure. “Gaden, Leon, please escort Princess Morgana to her rooms and place her under guard.” He turned his attention back to Morgana. “I’ll decide what’s to be done with you later.” He glanced at Gwen and received a slight nod in response, ever grateful for her ability to understand him. She would have been a great queen.

With that thought, but without any regret, he turned his back on the women and strode across the hall, ignoring anyone who tried to delay him. There was a moment on first sight of Merlin when Arthur had to swallow firmly to hold onto his last meal.

The symbols etched onto Merlin’s body and face, in what he’d believed was ink, were slowly writhing and twisting around, shaping into patterns and then splitting apart to chase one another into previously unblemished skin. And every point they passed over left red raw flesh behind. Gwaine was there, holding Merlin’s head still to stop him hitting it against the stone of the floor as Merlin tossed and turned to try and escape the agony, and Gwaine looked every bit as sickened as Arthur felt.

Gaius lifted horrified, helpless eyes to Arthur.

“I can’t stop this, Arthur, there’s nothing I can do. The lesions are deepening every time they pass, and I believe it’s happening inside his body as well as on the skin. He’s going to bleed to death.”

Arthur swallowed and stared down at Merlin, surprised to see he was conscious.

“Merlin,” he whispered.

What might have been a smile was a brief interruption in agony as Merlin whispered in response.

“You’re safe. Worth it.”

Rage and fury surged through Arthur and he wanted to tear Camelot down stone by accursed stone. “No, Merlin, I’m not worth one moment of your pain. I’m not.”

Merlin managed to smile and shake his head slightly before another paroxysm took him. When it passed, he was unconscious.

“Merlin.” In panic, Arthur reached out and grabbed Merlin’s hand, letting despair rule him for once. How could he go on without this man by his side? How could he ever live with the guilt of this sacrifice?

“Sire, look.”

Gaius’ voice wavered and when Arthur looked down there was gold twining around their joined hands and seeping up one of Merlin’s arms. And where the gold travelled the writing stilled and became ink once more.
Carefully, Arthur pulled away and the words began to writhe again although it seemed with less power. And throughout it all the words elsewhere had continued in their macabre dance across Merlin’s body.

Arthur cupped his hand around the side of Merlin’s face, watching the gold spill out once again and seeing some of the agony ease. When he looked up Gaius appeared relieved and there was something close to glee in Gwaine’s eyes.

“What’s happening?”

“It seems as if Merlin’s magic responds to you, Arthur.” Gaius’ eyebrows were raised.

“Skin to skin, eh, Princess?”

Now Arthur understood the source of Gwaine’s amusement, slightly peeved Gwaine had reached the correct conclusion before Arthur had even considered what was happening.

Drawing his dignity around him, he ignored Gwaine and turned to Gaius instead. “I can hardly spend the rest of my life like this,” and he nodded at where his palm was still held close and tender against Merlin’s cheek. As he shifted slightly, Merlin whined and pressed against him.

Gwaine hardly tried to hide his amusement, though the hands holding Merlin’s head steady were gentle. All his amusement was for the predicament of the king, Arthur thought, and all his gentleness and care for his friend. There was a surprising pang of jealousy about the friendship the two of them shared, and a little hurt, too, but he pushed it away, angry with himself for indulging it even for a moment at such a time.

He glanced up and met Gwaine’s eyes then and the amusement had faded to be replaced by concern. The jealousy dispersed and he flushed in shame instead, faced with the knowledge Gwaine was just as concerned about Arthur.

Arthur rubbed his free hand through his hair and tried to concentrate on the here and now. He reached down so he could hold Merlin’s hand, ignoring the blood from oozing knuckles and the words stopped moving.

“That’s good, Sire. When you touch him with both hands it seems to weaken the enchantment.” Gaius studied them as if they were some kind of fascinating science experiment.

“How do we break this spell? If it’s one Merlin cast himself would he be able to break or reverse it?” Arthur tried not to be too pointed in his attempt to remind Gaius this was Merlin they were talking about

Gaius continued peering at the words, but he spared the time to quirk a slightly apologetic smile at Arthur. “This isn’t in a script I know well – it’s an old language of the elves and they’re secretive and not given to sharing.” A long silence stretched unbearably while Gaius obviously considered options. “The spell didn’t seem to return to the area you touched him as strongly.” He paused as if considering his next words and when he spoke again, Arthur could understand his hesitance.” Sire, there are many things you need to know, many things that have been hidden from you. There are legends speaking of the Once and Future King and the most powerful sorcerer the world has ever known. It’s said this king and sorcerer are two sides of a coin, that they’re bound together by destiny. It may be this alone may have the strength to stop what’s happening to Merlin. I need to do some research.”

None of them had noticed Geoffrey approach and all started as he spoke. “I’ve a number of texts
which may be of help, Gaius."

Gaius’ eyebrows rose again. “Geoffrey? You have magic books?”

“I’m a librarian, Gaius, I don’t destroy books of knowledge. Such an act is abhorrent. When Uther passed his decree banning magic, I handed over some minor texts and some we were lucky enough to have in duplicate. The magical library of Camelot has been hidden for twenty years.”

For the first time, Arthur saw Geoffrey as a man in his own right, instead of a rather dusty and dry court official. Standing straight and tall, Geoffrey faced Arthur now and bowed, respectful but not obsequious. “I’ll face any punishment you deem fit, Sire, when the boy has been saved, but in the meantime I’ll take Gaius to where I’ve kept the books.”

Arthur hesitated before he found words he thought would do. “Geoffrey, I believe my father had his reasons when he banned sorcery, but it’s become clear magic is an integral and intrinsic part of our lives and has never, in fact, been banished from Camelot. We need to learn to live with it again and in doing so, your actions will help us. Thank you.”

“I hate to break into your little party here, but what happens to Merlin while you’re off doing all this research?”

Gwaine had a point, Arthur thought. He’d yet to remove his hands from Merlin’s skin and while Merlin seemed calmer, there were still spasms wracking his body from time to time and Arthur could feel the rising heat of fever.

Gaius pondered for a moment. “It would be best if you stayed in contact with him as much as possible. I’d suggest you take him to your chamber as your bed is big enough for two –“

Arthur flushed. “I can hardly rule Camelot from my bed.”

“Naked in your bed,” Gwaine added with relish.

Arthur felt his jaw drop open as what this would entail finally caught up with him. He refused to give in to Gwaine’s baiting, though, and decided to give him something else to think about.

“Well, it’s not like we haven’t shared a bed in the past.” He felt rather smug when he saw the reaction on the faces of all three men, but returned quickly to the subject of their discussion. “Gwaine, it’s already late, let’s clear the hall and get rid of Agravaine’s body. Talk to Leon and ask him to take charge of guarding Morgana – he can have whatever men he needs. Set double guards around the castle tonight. Tomorrow, you and Leon will have to act as go-betweens until we’ve cured Merlin.” He didn’t entertain the thought it might take more than a day or so – how could he? “For now, let’s get Merlin back to my chamber as Gaius suggests. Gaius, Geoffrey, you’re to have whatever you need – Gwaine will ask Elyan and Percival to help you.”

Arthur had to relinquish his contact with Merlin while he clambered to his feet and he saw the immediate change as the words moved again, and even though they moved more sluggishly than before, they were causing Merlin to shift and writhe in pain. Without thought, Arthur hauled his mail off and ripped open the shirt he wore. With Gwaine’s help, they removed Merlin’s shirt, too. Arthur opted not to look, especially when he heard Gwaine’s shocked, bitten off curse. Instead, he hoisted Merlin into his arms and Merlin instinctively sought out the comfort and relief offered by Arthur’s skin, nuzzling the ruined side of his face against Arthur’s neck.

Gwaine moved ahead, clearing the corridors as best he could but Arthur had no doubt the castle would be aflame with gossip before the night ended.
Arthur was right. In the morning the cook was accosted by one of the servants and treated to a tale of Arthur striding naked as the day he was born through the corridors with Merlin – yes, him that was condemned to burn and then escaped – also naked in the king’s arms and glowing like the embers of a Beltane fire.

The cook, who’d always had a soft spot for both Merlin and Arthur, beat the offending servant soundly with a ladle and set them to work on scrubbing the worst of the previous day’s pots and pans.

For the moment, all Arthur cared about was getting Merlin to his chambers and getting him comfortable. Merlin remained unconscious as the heat in his skin increased. With the fever, Merlin became ever more restless, twisting in Arthur’s arms so much Arthur feared he would drop him.

“Merlin, for pity’s sake, keep still. You’re heavier than you look.”

At the sound of Arthur’s voice, Merlin settled, and so Arthur, out of breath and arms aching with his burden, continued to speak, falling back on the minutiae of the latest round of public hearings; anything to keep Merlin at peace.

Gwaine refrained from any teasing when Arthur finally stumbled into his rooms to see the bed already turned down. Gwaine took Merlin and placed him on the bed, beginning to strip the rest of his garments from him. Arthur felt a surge of possessiveness, hating the thought of anyone else touching Merlin, but pushed it from him, dragging off his own clothes and dropping them onto the floor, climbing into the bed and pulling Merlin to him keeping as much of the marked skin against Arthur’s as he could manage.

A deep, thankful sigh was dredged from Merlin and he relaxed further into unconsciousness. Despite his worry, Arthur was glad he could rest without pain.

Gwaine placed the back of his hand against Merlin’s forehead and frowned at the heat there. He covered them both with a sheet and then tended to the fire.

“I’ll tell Gaius to leave you for a few hours. Looks like you could both use some sleep. I’ll stand guard.”

Arthur could feel the tension ease out of him but fought against the waves of exhaustion pulling him under. Finally, they were nearing the end of this horrible period and even though it appeared to have worked, there was still so much to be done. He opened his mouth to protest.

“Sire, the attack’s been repulsed. Morgana has no power and she’s under guard. Your place is with Merlin now. Everything else will keep until the morning.”

Arthur wasn’t one for outbreaks of emotion, but he was more grateful than he could say for Gwaine’s support and it weakened some of his usual barriers.

“Thank you, Gwaine. Your father would be proud of you, Sir knight.”

Gwaine’s eyes opened wide and colour washed across his skin, before his mouth quirked upward.

By the time Gwaine reached the door and glanced back, Arthur slept, wrapped around Merlin as if he’d never let him go.
“Your Highness?”

Morgana turned from the window to face her former maid. Guinevere stood just inside the door, her hands twisting in her apron and she bit her lip in a way that stirred Morgana’s memory. Gwen wasn’t sure of her ground and her nervousness showed. Morgana mourned a little at the loss of their easy friendship.

Startled by the emotion, she castigated herself, struggling to remember how much she hated them all. She turned back to the window, staring out at the darkness and she continued to ignore Gwen.

“I thought you might like a bath, Your Highness.”

It wasn’t really couched as a question and Morgana, recalling days in the forest when she’d longed to be warm and clean, wondered for the first time in many months, what sort of picture she must be presenting.

It didn’t matter.

In the background she became aware of bustle and murmuring – frightened voices behind her and then Gwen’s voice, brisk and no-nonsense as she chivvied the servants. The waft of warm, scented air had Morgana turning at last.

Only Gwen had stayed. Morgana could kill her; she might not have her magic, but she was still capable of killing Gwen with her bare hands. Surely Gwen knew it?

She met Gwen’s eyes then and saw the knowledge in the directness of the look and the upward tilt of Gwen’s chin. It almost seemed to dare her. Morgana wondered what Gwen had expected, but the emptiness inside her where her magic used to rage and twist had left her numbed. She wondered if it explained why she felt so calm, whether anger and fury would sweep over her when the enormity of the loss finally hit. For the moment, all she could feel was an unutterable relief that when she slept tonight, she wouldn’t dream.

“Morgana?” Gwen’s voice held a softness Morgana hadn’t heard from anyone for such a long time.

Instead of responding with speech, Morgana moved to the screen, throwing the tattered dress and her other garments over the top. Faint amusement slipped in as they were just as swiftly twitched away and she’d the distinct impression she’d never see them again.

She stepped round the screen, not troubling to hide her nakedness and smiled slyly at Gwen’s sudden blush. It didn’t last long and soon Gwen was reacting much as she always had, fluttering around, helping Morgana into the blissful heat of the water.

The touch of Gwen’s hands had always settled her but Morgana hated herself now as the achingly familiar calm began to seep through the numbness and the anger and resentment she felt she should be experiencing failed to materialise.

Only half-aware of Gwen’s ministrations, Morgana tried to puzzle her way through the memory of her encounter with Arthur. Her specific intention when they fought their way through to the throne
room had been to kill Arthur and take Camelot. Now she wondered, even if Merlin hadn’t betrayed her and she’d succeeded, whether it would’ve been so easy. Her thoughts drifted to that earlier time when, with Morgause at her side, she’d ruled Camelot for a brief week. During it, all of Camelot’s subjects had remained fiercely loyal to their king and prince. It didn’t seem to matter what methods had been used against the population, resistance and silent distaste were all Morgana and Morgause had received. No, not Morgana – just Morgause. Her eyes narrowed and then closed as she responded to Gwen’s gentle touch as she always had, slipping her head beneath the water to thoroughly wet her hair.

In all her machinations, she thought, why had she never noticed that while the people looked on her with a sorrow and pity she’d steadfastly ignored, Morgause they’d hated. As if they blamed Morgause alone. It had been hardly fair, Morgana acknowledged, knowing she had been as much to blame, and perhaps more so because she’d used Camelot’s weaknesses against it.

Without the magic fuelling her anger, and without a Morgause or an Agravaine stirring her to action, she felt rudderless, without direction or purpose. So very, very alone.

For the first time, she felt afraid of what would happen to her.

Silent and tense, she let Gwen wash her and then help her out of the bath. A spark of anger at her own weakness swept over her as, out of nowhere, tears began to slide down her cheeks and she clutched at Gwen’s hand.

She heard a startled, bitten off exclamation, and then kind arms that didn’t withdraw wrapped a warmed bath sheet around her. She found herself held close, and given the few moments of silence to regain her composure. As she straightened and raised her chin, Gwen released her without comment.

A sudden burst of gratitude suffused Morgana and for the first time in many months, she felt warmth.

Merlin woke gradually and it wasn’t until he tried to turn in the bed that pain shot through him. It was enough to still any further attempt at movement and he breathed shallowly, carefully, as he rode out the pain. Once it subsided, he began to take note of his surroundings, flushing as he realised not only was he in Arthur’s bed again, but this time he was naked.

Mortified heat flushed his skin, and he almost screeched in alarm as the heat at his back shifted and a sleep-sodden voice breathed a quiet admonition.

“Be as still as you can, you’re healing quickly but Gaius said there’ll be pain for a few days yet.”

Merlin was amazed his own voice sounded almost calm and composed. “What happened?” He coughed slightly, hearing the huskiness in his tone.

Arthur ran a familiar hand down Merlin’s tattooed arm. “I’m going to get you some water. The pain will be worse for a moment.”

Tensing at his words, Merlin appreciated the warning and managed not to cry out as pain slammed into him. It wasn’t unbearable but he was sweating and biting his lip by the time Arthur returned.
The moment Arthur touched him, the agony receded and once he was propped up and leaning one shoulder against the pillows, Arthur slipped into the bed behind him. Reaching over, Arthur helped him to drink and the blessedly cool water slipped down his throat.

“Only a little at a time.” Arthur withdrew the cup long before Merlin’s thirst was quenched, but he was already being pulled under into sleep once more.

“What happened?” he managed to ask.

Arthur pulled away the pillows until they were lying flat again. “Later. Sleep now.”

Weak tears gathered at the corners of Merlin’s eyes and he couldn’t stop himself begging. “Stay?”

As he slipped away, he was sure he felt a caress on his shoulder and Arthur’s mouth moving against his skin.

“Sleep, Merlin. I’m not going anywhere.”

The next time Merlin woke, there was considerably less pain. He stretched cautiously and heat seared through him as his skin slid sinuously against Arthur’s.

A sudden gasp and the tightening of the arm Arthur had slung around him had Merlin smiling and he shifted again.

“Merlin,” There was a stern warning note in Arthur’s voice and it was only then that two other things intruded.

One was the very welcome hardness pressing against him, nestling in where he most wanted it. The other was the not so welcome sense they weren’t alone. There was a buzz of quiet conversation in the background and as Merlin tried to work out exactly what was going on the door creaked and he heard Gaius’ voice.

“Any sign of Merlin waking yet?”

“I’m fairly sure he’s awake – aren’t you, Merlin?”

There was no help for it, he was forced into opening his eyes, and from his position supine on the bed, he looked up into Gaius’ amused eyes. Struggling a little, he tried to move away from Arthur’s hold, acutely aware of their nakedness, only to be halted by Gaius’ hand on his shoulder.

“Stay where you are, my boy. You’re out of the woods now but it’ll be another day or so until the spell has finally dissipated.”

“What happened?”

Gaius handed him a drink, something laced with honey, which didn’t quite mask the bitterness of the herbs under it. He took it gratefully, though, drinking it down and letting it quench his thirst as well as take the edge off the lingering pain. Merlin felt his muscles relax and he sighed in gratitude. Arthur’s arm around him tightened before he moved away a little though he still kept a hold on Merlin.
“What happened?” he asked again.

“You cursed yourself, remember. It was quite effective.”

Merlin thought back to the ritual in the wood, blanching at the memory. “I really shouldn’t have survived.”

Gaius leaned over and patted his shoulder. “Fortunately the bond between you and Arthur is strong; strong enough to counteract the curse.”

“How can that be?” Merlin was conscious of Arthur at his back, the reassuring band of his arm across his chest and he couldn’t help but relax into the embrace. The arm tightened further for a moment and Merlin brought his hand up so he could curl his fingers around Arthur’s forearm.

“I don’t pretend to understand it, Merlin, but the prophecy of the Once and Future King and Emrys has been spoken of by the Druids for generations. Who knows what it means?”

“It was enough to save Merlin, that’s all I need to know.”

There was something in Arthur’s voice that sent the heat surging across Merlin’s skin and he blinked hard. Gaius favoured him with a fond smile and a pat on the arm.

“Let’s see if we can get you sitting up and get some food in you.”

“How long was I unconscious?”

“Three days,” Arthur answered him.

Merlin heard the way Arthur’s voice caught in his throat as he helped Merlin to manoeuvre on the bed, until he was propped up against an obscene amount of pillows. Arthur made sure he retained some contact with him, but Merlin was relieved to see that the signs of the curse on his skin had faded almost to nothing. The pain was mostly gone, too, apart from a residual ache deep in his bones and a tautness in his skin, as if new skin had formed over scarring, though there was no visible evidence of any marks.

Mortified, Merlin looked around the room and discovered it was a hive of activity and apparently full of people. All of them appeared supremely unconcerned by the presence of their king and a sorcerer naked and entwined. The bed was shaking slightly and he turned to glower at Arthur, who was having little success in hiding his amusement at Merlin’s horror. Merlin favoured him with a wounded glance and then shifted until his back was towards him, taking a closer look at the activity.

Geoffrey was sitting at the table, with the scribe beside him and a pile of books at hand and they were embroiled in a quiet but fierce argument. Even weakened as he was, Merlin could feel the power in the books and he glanced uneasily at them. He needed to take a closer look at Geoffrey’s library, he decided.

By the fire, Hunith and Gwen were talking quietly; Gwen appeared to be weeping gently while his mother comforted her. Leon stood awkwardly beside them.

A number of other knights and nobles were coming and going, stopping to talk to Arthur or each other; all of them busy and preoccupied.

It was the court, Merlin realised. It made sense when he considered it, because the attack on Camelot had to have a response, and Arthur couldn’t suddenly disappear. There were decisions to be made only the King could make.
His mother came towards the bed with two bowls of soup. She handed one to Arthur and then sat on the bed, preparing to feed Merlin herself.

“Mother!” He wanted to snap that he could feed himself, until he saw the slight tremor in her hand and the tightness of her smile. Sighing, he settled back against the pillows and let her fuss over him. By the time he’d managed half the bowl, his eyes were drifting shut and he was hardly aware of being gently manhandled until he lay flat. Drifting off to sleep, he reached behind him, mumbling in pleasure as his hand was squeezed and Arthur entwined their fingers as he settled close by.

The candles were lit and the room quiet but for the occasional sound of a page turning. Merlin could feel a bar of heat where Arthur’s leg was pressed against him. He shifted and a hand touched his head.

“You’re awake?”

The low burr of Arthur’s voice sent heat to curl deep in Merlin’s gut.

“Gaius says I should get you to eat and drink. Then we need to get you on your feet and start you moving around.”

Merlin groaned, and he rasped out. “I could just stay here forever.”

Arthur’s laugh was fond. “You’ve got too much work to do.”

With another groan, Merlin attempted to pull the covers over his head, fighting a losing battle with Arthur who steadily hauled them away.

Part way through the tussle, Arthur lifted his hand to swat Merlin.

Merlin shot backwards off the bed, every sense alert and he stumbled away, desperate to get as much space between them as he could.

“Merlin.”

Arthur sounded as shocked as Merlin at the visceral reaction.

Sheepish, Merlin said, “Sorry, I’m sorry.”

Stepping away, Arthur shook his head, obviously troubled.

Merlin watched him, hating the wariness that had overcome him. While he’d been injured much of his reaction to Arthur had been prompted by his magic, the sense of oneness it provided when Arthur was near. Now his memories of the many occurrences of violence against him which had occurred as part of their subterfuge had returned to plague him, and even though he understood Arthur would never cause him harm, a part of him still insisted on acting on instincts formed during a terrible time.

Arthur moved away to give Merlin some space and busied himself with changing into more formal wear. Only then did Merlin note they were both wearing sleepwear and he flushed, wondering who had changed him.

Arthur paused and frowned down at the belt in his hands, twisting the leather restlessly. He looked up to meet Merlin’s eyes, his mouth turned down.
“Are we broken, Merlin?”

Merlin swallowed against the grief rising to swamp him, knowing it stemmed from the memories of mistreatment and callous disregard. Despite the fact he now remembered he’d agreed to it, how Arthur had seen what the extent of the damage might be and had tried to warn him, it couldn’t take away the fact it had actually happened and at the time Merlin had believed it to be real. Yet why should Arthur bear the brunt of this, when he was already taking blame on himself that wasn’t his to take? They’d both agreed and whatever had occurred along the way, their mad, desperate gamble seemed to have paid off. What could he possibly say?

“We are where we are, Arthur. I know in my heart everything’s well but sometimes I might react badly. I told you at the start that whatever happened, I’d forgive you.” He paused, trying to marshal the words. “But there’s nothing to forgive you for. Don’t you see? You made a king’s decision and I was happy to support you. You made the right decision and I’m proud of you because I know it wasn’t easy.”

Something like wonder coloured Arthur’s expression. “Merlin.” His voice turned a name into a caress. “I always think of you as that gangly boy from the country, but you’re not. You’re a grown man and a wise one. I’m proud to call you my friend and —“ And there he ran out of words.

Merlin took two long strides forward until he could collide with Arthur’s chest, almost overbalancing as he met the solid muscle. Arthur caught him, laughing gently and Merlin turned his face into the hand moving up to cup his cheek, kissing the palm.

He grinned at Arthur and leaned forward to kiss him, gently at first and then with more assurance as he met the solid muscle. Arthur caught him, laughing gently and Merlin turned his face into the hand moving up to cup his cheek, kissing the palm.

He grinned at Arthur and leaned forward to kiss him, gently at first and then with more assurance as Arthur gathered him close and held him tight. Merlin tipped his head slightly so he could press his face to the spot where he could feel Arthur’s pulse thundering rapid and strong under his skin. Merlin could have stayed there forever but his stomach took that moment to remind him of its emptiness, destroying the romantic intimacy with a prosaic demand of need.

Arthur threw his head back and laughed, kissing Merlin lightly before leading him firmly to the table.

“Time to eat, Merlin. Then we have work to do.”

The next time Merlin awoke, he knew immediately Arthur wasn’t by his side. His magic reached out sleepily, wending its way through the castle until it reached the council chamber and twined around Arthur’s presence there. Merlin felt amusement and something he almost hesitated to put a name to as Arthur reacted. With something close to wonder, Merlin realised just how comfortable Arthur was with Merlin’s magic, and he swallowed. He called the magic back to him, not wanting to distract Arthur any further although he realised a little had remained behind; enough to alert Merlin immediately should Arthur have need of him.

From the nature of the light in the room and the sounds seeping in from around the castle, he was aware it was late in the afternoon. He believed himself alone and he stretched luxuriously under the covers, groaning in relief as, apart from a residual stiffness from sleeping so long, he experienced no other pain.

“Making noises like that, Merlin, you’re likely to give a man some interesting ideas.”

Gwaine laughed at Merlin’s shock, but appeared by his side immediately, seeking to help him up.
Merlin batted him away, crossly. “I’m fine, Gwaine. What are you doing here?”

“You don’t think the Princess would leave you without someone he trusted around, do you?” Gwaine hurried on before Merlin could offer any comment. “Are you hungry? I’m starving.”

Once he’d grabbed someone and sent them for food, Gwaine threw some clothes at Merlin.

“Arthur said he’d have a bath sent up later.” He waited until Merlin had scrambled into the garments and joined him at the table before he said anything further. “He also said I should fill you in on what’s been happening.” Gwaine spoke generally about the condition of the castle following the attack until the food arrived. Without asking, he loaded up a plate and shoved it across the table, waiting until Merlin had slowly eaten what he could.

“Merek, Ulric and Tybalt are gone. So are some of the others.”

Merlin was glad he’d already eaten as even the mention of their names proved enough to sour his stomach. He scowled a little at Gwaine, who’d begun to chuckle, and he wondered what there was to laugh at. Gwaine finally calmed enough to tell him.

“Arthur’s certainly taken to the magic. He talked Gaius into casting a little spell on them. Let’s just say they won’t be bothering anyone for a while, not with the case of boils they’ve got.”

Merlin felt part appalled and part pleased. “He shouldn’t be using magic in such a way, and Gaius should know better.” It might have had more weight if he’d been able to stop grinning.

“Ah, Merlin, where you’re concerned, I can see the likeness between Arthur and Uther.” Gwaine was serious now. “And if anything happened to you, I’m pretty sure Arthur would surpass him.”

“I wouldn’t want that.” Merlin felt the warmth in his skin and he pressed his palms to his cheeks. “If anything ever does happen to me, you’ve not to let him.”

Gwaine raised an eyebrow at him, as if to ask how he’d ever be able to stop Arthur, and Merlin had no suitable answer to offer.

Wisely, Gwaine changed the subject, talking about who’d been sent where, how Gaius had reacted when he and Gwen had been spirited out of Camelot, how Gwaine had been sent to take Hunith to the same hideaway, how Arthur had talked to Gaden because they knew eventually Merlin would have to end up in the dungeons and Arthur wanted to be sure he’d be protected.

Merlin listened and questioned, and felt grateful for Gwaine taking on this task as he kept it to fact devoid of the emotional undertow present in every conversation he had with Arthur. There was so much implied and unsaid between them, and for a few moments he contemplated the change in their relationship and what it would mean for them – and for Camelot.

Gwaine seemed to realise he’d lost Merlin’s attention and took the opportunity to bully him into taking a walk in the castle gardens. The corridors were quiet but every servant they met acknowledged Merlin with a nod or a smile and the nobles they passed did the same. Merlin tried not to think about what it meant. The conversation became their usual light back and forth teasing and Merlin felt grateful Gwaine had reverted to his usual irreverent attitude to life.

When Gwaine delivered him back to Arthur’s chambers, the light had faded and the torches were being lit. Gwaine left him at the door with a deep bow and a murmured ‘My Lord,’ which sent colour searing across Merlin’s face. The twinkle in the hazel eyes left Merlin wondering if the obeisance had been for his benefit or for the gaggle of court ladies who were passing at the time.
Merlin managed to garble out some version of a thank you and ignored the whispering, giggling women as he slipped through and into the room beyond.

The chamber was bathed in candlelight, and with the fire glowing and flickering in the grate it felt warm and welcoming. Arthur, dressed in breeches and his white shirt, sat at his desk where he pored over some documents. The large bath in the middle of the floor gently steamed.

Arthur looked up. “I didn’t worry too much about the water getting cold. I assume you can warm it should you need to.”

Only then did Merlin really become conscious of the fact he hadn’t washed properly in several days and he stared longingly at the water.

“Well, on you go then,” Arthur said.

He didn’t need any further urging, stripping off unselfconsciously, even though he could feel Arthur’s eyes on him, and with a heartfelt groan, he settled into the water. With a muttered word it was blissfully hot again, and Merlin shut his eyes and settled in for a long soak.

Merlin could hear Arthur moving around, and he didn’t feel particularly surprised when there was a touch to his shoulder. He slid forward and smiled but didn’t open his eyes as Arthur slipped into the tub behind him. He settled back against Arthur’s chest, wondering how right and easy it felt to be held in his embrace.

Other than the occasional crackle from the fire and the sound of their breathing the room was silent. Merlin thought he’d never felt so content.

When they’d been lying there for some time, Arthur finally spoke, poking Merlin in the side. “Merlin, the water’s getting cold.”

With a sleepy grunt, Merlin gestured at the water and joined his satisfied sigh to Arthur’s as the steam rose once more.

“This is how it’s going to be from now on, isn’t it?” Merlin tried to sound stern or annoyed, but all he could manage was indulgent and fond.

Arthur blew cold air across Merlin’s ear and Merlin shivered, but not because of the cold. “It’s what you’ve done all along,” he said. “All that’s changed is now I know it.”

Bringing his hand up, Merlin interlinked their fingers. “You know I hated lying to you, don’t you?”

“I do – just don’t ever do it again.”

“You have my oath on it, Arthur.”

Arthur neatly sidestepped the whole issue of Merlin’s previous experience in Camelot. It seemed he really had meant what he said when he averred he didn’t need to know what Merlin had done. “We’re working on laws to govern the use of magic. Geoffrey’s got some good ideas but you’ll have to look over everything he comes up with.”

“Me?”

“Well, you will be my Court Sorcerer.”

Suddenly, Merlin no longer felt the least bit tired. “What?”
“You heard. Did you think you’d be getting out of the work?” Arthur mitigated the words with a tightening of his embrace.

“You’ve repealed the ban on magic?”

“Not yet. I want the laws ready to be put in place – and I want you there when I announce it.”

Emotion clogged Merlin’s throat and he couldn’t manage to find words, but he gripped Arthur’s hand and brought it to his lips, pressing his mouth against Arthur’s fingers again and again.

Eventually, they pulled themselves out of the still steaming water. Arthur’s mouth twitched a little as he looked at it, shaking his head at Merlin, and his eyes were twinkling with mirth.

When they were dried and dressed again, Arthur organised dinner and they sat and talked about magic and Camelot and their hopes for the future. They only paused when the sounds of the guard changing disturbed them.

Merlin stood up awkwardly. “It’s late. I should let you sleep.”

“Stay.”

The word seemed to slip out before Arthur could catch it if the abashed expression on his face was anything to go by.

Merlin hesitated. He wanted to curl up in Arthur’s arms, and more. He could see the desire in Arthur’s eyes and Merlin thrilled at the knowledge his own feelings were returned.

“To sleep?” Merlin asked, keeping his tone light with effort.

“That depends,” Arthur replied.

He let his exasperation show at the deflection and glowered for good measure when Arthur grinned; just for effect, as he could see Arthur knew he wasn’t really annoyed.

Merlin wasn’t annoyed at all.

He attempted to draw in a deep breath, but it felt as if every bit of air had congealed somehow, making it difficult to fill his lungs. He stared at Arthur and tried to let everything he was feeling show in his eyes, too afraid to try and speak when he wasn’t sure he’d be able to find the words.

Everything was still and all the noises characteristic of a castle heading for sleep faded away. Merlin wondered if his magic had done something and yet he knew it hadn’t. It was just that nothing else in the world mattered other than Arthur.

Colour touched Arthur’s cheeks and he looked down for a moment, as if he was shy, but he raised his head again when Merlin stepped closer, and Arthur reached out his hand to him. Merlin took it gently in both of his, turning it to press a kiss to the knuckles, revelling in the strength of tendon and muscle, before he brought it to his face. Arthur curved his hand around Merlin’s cheek, bringing his other hand up to cup Merlin’s face, and Merlin trembled as Arthur leaned in to kiss him, gentle and sweet. Drawing back, Arthur smiled at him and drew him in until there was no air separating them.

He breathed in Merlin’s ear, “Dearest.”

The quietest of endearments, and yet it sent the blood pounding through Merlin’s veins like a clarion call. Such tenderness wasn’t something he’d expected from his warrior king, but he didn’t even think of mocking Arthur, although he wondered if Arthur was waiting for Merlin to tease him.
Such a laying bare of Arthur’s deepest feelings could never be treated lightly, and Merlin rested his forehead against Arthur’s and closed his eyes to help him find his courage.

“I love you,” he said. “With all my heart. Everything I am is yours.”

It turned to all fire and heat after his declaration, as Arthur crushed strong arms around Merlin and claimed his mouth as if conquering new land for Camelot. And perhaps he was, Merlin managed to think, before the surge of lust and desire swept him away, because Merlin was Arthur’s man, body, soul and magic, and nothing now could ever tear them apart.

Not even death had such power now.

Arthur’s hands slid up under his loose tunic and Merlin shivered at the touch of calloused hands stroking across his skin. Merlin returned the caress, desperate to feel flesh on flesh and they tussled, and pulled and dragged until their clothes were abandoned on the floor and they were naked. Staggering to the bed, clumsy with the unwillingness to be apart even for a moment, they fell onto the mattress, rolling together.

There was too much urgency for finesse. Too many long days and nights had separated them. Too many fears had been faced and obstacles overcome. They rutted together, moving and rubbing roughly until the blossoming sweat eased the way and their bodies slid into a rocking rhythm that built towards release.

After, Merlin gathered Arthur to him and let him hide his face against his chest as he shook in Merlin’s arms. It was so unusual for Arthur to give way to his emotion, still less to let anyone else see it and Merlin felt honoured by the trust as Arthur let him see his weakness. He didn’t attempt to speak, only held Arthur close, running a gentle hand up and down his back, until sleep took them both.

Merlin was woken by the sounds of the chamber doors opening and movements he recognised as belonging to the King’s manservant. He racked his brains for the name. George. That was it. Arthur had muttered something about the man’s love for brass and protocol. Merlin, conscious he still had tight hold of Camelot’s king and there was little doubt what the previous night’s activities had included, cleared his throat as softly as he could manage.

George spun round and bowed so low, Merlin was convinced he was about to overbalance. “Good morning, my Lord. I’ve brought breakfast, my Lord. The King requested he be woken early, my Lord, or I wouldn’t have presumed – “

“Yes, thank you, George, but I don’t have a title, I’m just Merlin.”

“Of course, my Lord Merlin.”

There was a suspicious tremor running through Arthur’s body and Merlin narrowed his eyes.

“You really shouldn’t bring so much food in the morning, George, the King’s getting a little chubby round the middle.”
There was a sound of absolute outrage from Arthur and he shot up in the bed. “You little –“ Merlin couldn’t do much for laughing as Arthur tackled him and they rolled around on the bed for a few moments until a gentle but pointed cough reminded them they weren’t alone.

Merlin blushed and hauled the covers over both of them, while George politely averted his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Sire, but you did request to be woken early. The trial of Princess Morgana is scheduled today.”

Beside him, Arthur went still and all his laughter and smiles vanished. Abruptly, Merlin wanted to turn George into a toad until he saw the apologetic expression the other man was wearing.

“Thank you, George. That’ll be all. I’ll help the King dress.”

Duty, propriety and affront all made a brief appearance on George’s face before it was smoothed out and he became once more the picture of a perfect servant.

“Well, my Lord, Sire.”

When they were alone, Merlin reached out, wanting to offer some comfort, but Arthur evaded his touch and slid out of the bed. Merlin couldn’t help but admire Arthur’s naked form as he stalked unselfconsciously to the ewer and basin. Biting his lip, Merlin whispered a spell and was rewarded with a low burst of laughter as Arthur dipped his hands into the now steaming water.

When Arthur was done, Merlin cleaned and reheated the water so he could wash the evidence of the night’s activities from his skin, aware of Arthur watching every move. Glancing round the room, he frowned when he realised he couldn’t see his clothes.

Arthur was already partway dressed, and handed Merlin new small clothes, raising his eyebrows as if daring him to comment. Merlin bit his lip and slipped them on, becoming more confused by the moment as Arthur handed him deep, midnight blue breeches. They were the softest leather and Merlin knew the cost of them was more than he’d ever manage on his small stipend.

“Arthur?”

Arthur seemed unsure for a moment, before he reached out and placed his hands on Merlin’s shoulders.

“You’re no longer a servant, Merlin. You’ll be Camelot’s Court Sorcerer and an important part of my inner council.”

Merlin swallowed hard, wanting to ask the question and not sure how. He was hardly aware of the way his eyes slid to the bed. What did last night mean for them? He knew Arthur loved him, but he was a king, and kings were seldom allowed to choose where their affections might lie.

Arthur’s hands slid along his shoulders until they were cupping his neck.

“I’ll have you or no-one, Merlin. That’s the way it is and they’ll all just have to get used to it. There’s nothing in Camelot’s laws to say my consort has to be a woman.” He hesitated, displaying that sudden insecurity that made him so human and so reachable. “As long as you want me.”

There was so much Merlin wanted to say, but he knew they were short of time. Already he could hear the bell calling them to the council chamber. He leaned forward and kissed Arthur gently.

“There’s nothing I want more.”
The memory of Arthur’s unbridled grin would help to get him through a difficult day.

Merlin was shocked at his first sight of Morgana, blissfully unaware of the ripple of surprise he was generating with his fine breeches and doublet, and because he was still thin and pale. Morgana looked younger, her hair tamed once again into the smooth curls of her days as Uther’s ward and the beloved of Camelot’s people. Merlin took time to catalogue the expressions of the council members and the knights. There were not many present, Arthur unwilling to open either himself or Morgana to the gossip that would likely ensue from such a meeting.

A trial.

These were the people closest to Arthur in terms of counsel, good men and women he’d drawn around him, people who’d support him even if they wouldn’t always agree – and who wouldn’t hesitate to argue a different case if they thought it right.

Despite what Morgana had done, the overwhelming expressions were of pity, concern or sadness. Many had known her since she’d arrived in Camelot as a grief-stricken girl and had grown to love her as she blossomed into a strong, lovely woman who had cared for Camelot and for her people.

Arthur was a still, stoic and beautiful figure seated on the throne, crowned and in mail and cloak. A mighty King.

My King. Merlin felt his heart swell with pride. Arthur’s gaze travelled the hall and caught on Merlin, twitching and then flushing slightly. Merlin, standing next to Percival, was treated to a not too discreet elbow in the ribs.

“You look like a love-sick maiden,” Percival said. He was trying to be severe and failing. “Arthur wants you.”

Merlin returned his attention to Arthur, who was engaged in a series of complicated hand movements. Completely bamboozled, Merlin stared at him with something like panic until Arthur pointed directly at him and then at the space by his side. Flushing with embarrassment, but no small amount of pleasure, Merlin scuttled along the side of the hall and into the place indicated. He ignored Arthur’s muttered insult and drew in a deep breath as the scene before him unfolded and he recalled why they were here today.

Morgana, wearing one of her old gowns and with a shawl around her shoulders, walked slowly between Leon and Gwaine. They stopped, and with all full ceremony bowed to Arthur and pulled away to stand at either side of the dais. Gwen was hovering behind Morgana and eventually Morgana nodded briefly to her and Gwen moved off to the side, standing by Elyan and wringing her hands together in her distress.

Arthur and Morgana regarded one another for long moments before Arthur finally stirred.

“A seat for the Princess Morgana.”

There was a rustle of movement in the room and from his vantage point behind Arthur’s throne, Merlin saw Morgana blink and her expression shift slightly as if she was shocked by the courtesy as much as being given the title. When the chair was brought forward she sat almost gingerly and her features settled into more uncertain lines.
Arthur continued as if he hadn’t noticed anything amiss.

“Princess Morgana, you’ve been brought before us today to answer certain serious charges. You have attacked our Kingdom, brought despair and ruin to our people –“

“The crown should be mine –“

“Be silent.” There was steel under Arthur’s quiet rejoinder. “You’ll be allowed your chance to speak, Your Highness, but first you’ll hear the charges levied against you.” He went on to list the specific crimes, including the murder of Camelot’s citizens and Merlin watched the way she bit her lip and cast her eyes down when the names of the dead were read by the town’s record keeper.

The morning wore on as Arthur asked various people present to provide their evidence relating to the sequence of events while Arthur himself wasn’t in Camelot. It was interesting, Merlin thought, how many of them attested to the deeds of Morgause, rather than Morgana.

The midday bell rang out and Merlin noticed Arthur glance sharply at Morgana, who was sitting pale and huddled on her chair, before he said. “We’ll reconvene in two candlemarks.”

Gwen moved forward and set a hand under Morgana’s elbow to urge her to her feet, while Gwaine and Leon stepped into their place ready to accompany them from the room. Only when they had left, did the air seem to return to the hall.

If Arthur was honest, he felt the hearing – he couldn’t bring himself to call it a trial – was going better than he’d thought it could. He’d certainly expected more fire from Morgana, and knew there were secrets about Merlin likely to emerge he’d rather not hear, but it seemed as if much of the fight had gone when Merlin had stripped her magic from her. Still, he thought, as he walked steadily back to the throne room with Merlin at his side, she would now have her chance to speak and that could be damaging. He’d spent the morning making sure everyone was aware of what she’d done to Camelot, to ensure it remained fresh in their minds when they considered Morgana’s words during the afternoon. Whatever happened, he’d have to make a decision about Morgana by the end of the day. He couldn’t afford to let this drag on.

As he reached the throne he cast a considering eye over the man by his side. Merlin had stood like stone during the morning, a steady presence at Arthur’s side and Arthur had appreciated the effort it’d taken for someone like Merlin – who was invariably moving or fidgeting – to stay still for so long. It was obvious Merlin was far from well, too, and he sought out Gaius’ eyes across the room. Gaius was scowling fiercely at him, as well he might. Glancing round, Arthur gestured to George, who listened without comment, and moments later a sturdy chair was set just off to the side of Arthur’s throne. A cushion appeared out of nowhere and was carefully plumped, and then Arthur had the delight – well-hidden – of watching Merlin try to resist, while George insisted, going to far as to grab Merlin’s sleeve and pull him towards the seat.

Merlin shrugged him off and stalked to the chair, offering Arthur a disgruntled glance while doing so.

“Peace,” Arthur said, his voice an intimate warm burr. “If you want to stay then you’ll sit. Otherwise I think Gaius might be dragging you out and sending you to bed.”
There was a moment’s silence and out of the corner of his eye Arthur witnessed Merlin’s flinch.

“Can’t you outlaw those eyebrows?” Merlin asked.

Arthur was saved from trying to find an answer as the great doors opened and Morgana entered. She appeared to have benefitted from the rest as her head was high as she moved gracefully through the room and took her seat without being invited.

For some reason, the small rebellion pleased Arthur, preferring it to the picture of Morgana defeated from the morning. Grief arrived fast on the heels of his amusement as he had a flash of what might have been. Morgana met his eyes then and he wondered if she’d recognised his regret as she broke the contact and shifted a little in her seat. The acute sense of loss was something he’d have to deal with later, but the eerie vision of her sitting here by his side, with Merlin on the other, was difficult to dispel. Not when the vision was of them laughing and happy.

He drew in a deep breath and spoke. “This morning, witnesses have asserted your crimes and those of Morgause against Camelot. This is now your opportunity to counter those accusations and to explain to this court and to your King, why you undertook these actions.”

Morgana’s eyes had narrowed at the overt declaration of his rank.

“The throne of Camelot should be mine.”

People around the room shifted and a voice from the body of the hall shouted. “Never!”

Morgana looked as if she’d been struck but her expression hardened.

“State your claim to the throne, Your Highness.”

It was a direct question and one Arthur really, really wanted the answer to.

“Uther Pendragon was my father. Why is it that you rule? I would have brought magic back to Camelot.”

“Uther Pendragon was my father, too, and his Queen was my mother.” It was the lightest possible allusion to Morgana’s illegitimacy. “The law of the land supports my right to the throne.”

“Uther gave up all rights when he banished magic from Camelot.”

“Magic has never left Camelot – and you of all people should know it.” Arthur decided to deal with the issue of the magic before they went any further. He looked around the room, cataloguing the many expressions of the courtiers and knights, and even the guards standing by the doors, who always listened. And he looked at Merlin.

Merlin was sitting and his hands were gripping the armrests so hard the skin of his knuckles was drawn taut and white. While he was still pale and too thin, at least his skin was unblemished, wiped clear of the curse that had threatened to take him from Arthur. He swallowed at the way Merlin’s eyes were fixed on him and were filled with so much pride. His heart quailed for a moment, wondering how he could ever live up to such faith.

“Uther killed my kin, and you stood by and watched, Arthur Pendragon. And you,” her venom was turned on Merlin then. “The fabled Emrys, who did nothing, who watched people die or live in fear. I accuse you, Merlin, of trying to murder the daughter of a king.”

This was it, then, Arthur thought, this was one of the things Merlin had wanted to tell him, things
Arthur had hoped he’d never have to hear or deal with. He mocked himself for his naivety.

“Merlin of Ealdor. Stand forward.”

He heard Merlin move and watched, working hard to keep his face impartial as Merlin stood by Morgana, who fixed eyes full of hate and betrayal on him.

“Princess Morgana has brought a serious charge against you, Merlin. What do you say in response?”

“It’s true.” Merlin lifted his chin at the shocked murmurs rippling round the room. In a steady voice, Merlin recounted the events around the invasion by the Knights of Medhir. Arthur had thought he’d known what had happened, but now he heard the facts behind the story Merlin had spun. Merlin was careful in his telling, citing the fact Morgana seemed unaware of her role as the focus of the spell Morgause had cast, how she’d tried to help them save Uther’s life, how the dragon had insisted the only way to save Camelot, to save Uther and Arthur, was to kill Morgana. “This wasn’t my only crime against Morgana, though.”

Arthur, coping with every new revelation as best he could, knew his tone was waspish. “By all means, Merlin, do bring to our attention the many ways you broke Camelot’s laws during my father’s reign.” He ignored Merlin’s apologetic glance. It wasn’t fair, Arthur knew, because it was Arthur who’d put Merlin in this position. Too late now.

Merlin had turned his attention to Morgana now.

“I knew you had magic, Morgana. I knew and I didn’t help you. I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry.”

In the silence following, Gaius stepped forward to stand at Merlin’s side. “Sire, Merlin takes too much upon himself. It was I who cautioned him against telling Princess Morgana of her power. He wanted to help her very much. The blame is mine.

“No, Gaius, no – I’d ignored your advice in the past. It’s not your fault.”

Arthur stared at them as they bartered blame between them. He couldn’t quite grasp how something so serious, so horrendous, could suddenly develop into farce. But then, when Merlin was involved, one could only really expect the unexpected. Familiarity had him glancing towards Morgana and he raised his eyebrows in amusement. There was an answering glint in her own eyes before she turned her head away.

“Enough.” Arthur brought the conversation to an abrupt halt. “Has anyone else got anything to confess?” he asked in a fit of sudden whimsy, though he forestalled the predictable. “Aside from Sir Gwaine, that is. I really don’t think we have enough time.”

He let the uneasy laughter go for a moment before he glanced around the room and silence fell. “Merlin, Gaius, whatever the decision was, in the end the choice to turn against Camelot was Morgana’s alone.” Merlin shook his head and looked to speak but Arthur quelled him with a glance. “There are things we all wish we’d done differently and there can be no mistaking it was my father’s hatred of magic that brought us all to this pass.”

Criticising his father in open court was not something he’d ever have believed he’d do, but the evidence placed before him was irrefutable. Uther’s campaign against magic – and Arthur’s belief in his father’s assessment of the threat – was what had triggered all that followed. Arthur looked at Gaius and realised he knew why Uther had turned against magic. Somehow, and with the memory of the shade of his mother in his mind, Arthur thought he might know, too.

“Whatever has happened up until now, it’s time to bring this sorry time in our history to an end. I
want a golden future for Camelot and her people. I want us to live in peace. To that end I will repeal the laws against magic and instead will put in place laws governing its use. Within the court will be those who are magic users and who’ll help us learn how to live with magic in open use once more.”

The only surprise expressed was from Morgana and was swiftly hidden. Arthur had ensured his preparation was done. He’d said nothing that people in the room didn’t already know. This was the difficult part.

“Princess Morgana Pendragon, you made a choice that brought war to Camelot and misery and death to those whom you should have served. Whatever the reasons you had, or the mitigating factors existing, I can’t overlook the effects of your actions.”

Morgana’s chin was raised and he honoured her courage in the face of what she obviously believed would be her fate.

“It’s my decision to banish you. Without your magic you’re no longer a threat to Camelot. However, to ensure you won’t make a further misguided attempt to gather an army, you’ll remain under guard for the rest of your life. A castle is being prepared for you and you’ll be taken there. Should you leave without permission at any time, I’ll have no option but to accept it as a further declaration of war and act accordingly in the best interests of Camelot. Do you understand?”

Morgana stood. “I understand. But you must understand, too. I’ll never forgive you or those who allowed this travesty to happen.”

“So be it.”

Arthur’s response was bleak. There seemed to be little more to be said and if he’d secretly hoped for some form of reconciliation, he’d been realistic enough to know it was unlikely.

He was conscious of Merlin returning to his side, trying to provide some comfort and he worked hard not to show any of the emotions surging through him, grateful for the support that enabled him to sit still and regal and watch his sister escorted from the throne room.

The end of the hearing seemed to signal an end to the business of the day and though there was still plenty to discuss, no one appeared to have much appetite for it. They drifted from the room in twos and threes, discussing what had happened, until only Merlin, Gaius and Arthur were left.

“Why did my father turn against magic, Gaius?” For a moment Arthur thought Gaius was about to disavow any knowledge or to dissemble. He wasn’t sure what was in the look he bestowed on Gaius at the notion, but it had the desired effect.

“I’m sorry, Sire. I’ve had to hide for many years. The idea the truth is what’s wanted is a little difficult to adjust to.” Gaius paused for a moment, and when he began to speak again, he wore every one of his many years heavily. “You mother was barren, Sire. In those days magic was a part of our lives in Camelot and Uther asked for help from a powerful sorceress, Nimueh. The Old Religion is strict in such matters. You can’t bring a life into being without a price – and the price is always someone else’s life. We all knew it. I told Uther as did Nimueh, but he was determined. When I spoke to Ygraine and pointed out the risks, she smiled at me and told me even if it cost her life, giving Uther a son would be worth it. The only person who didn’t appear to acknowledge it might be Ygraine who paid this price was Uther himself.”

“So I killed my mother. And my father let it happen.” Whatever shade Morgause had conjured, it had
spoken true. He couldn’t bear to look at Merlin.

“No, Arthur,” Merlin spoke, his tone subdued, as if he was aware of the resentment.

“So magic killed my mother?” Arthur didn’t want to feel the roiling anger settling in his gut. Surely one or other of those statements must be true.

Gaius sighed, “Misuse or misunderstanding where magic was concerned, perhaps. Desire for you, and hope all might be well on the part of both your parents. Arthur, your mother saw you and held you before she died. She knew what was happening and yet I’d never seen her happier. Let her have her sacrifice and honour it. It was what your father couldn’t do and he extracted a terrible revenge.”

“All for want of a babe,” Arthur whispered. “All for love.” He looked straight at Merlin and what he saw caught the breath in his throat. It was all too much. Shaking his head, he pushed himself upright and strode away from them. He heard Merlin’s quick footsteps behind him and paused. Without turning, he said. “Help Gaius and Geoffrey for the rest of the day and tomorrow. I’ll call for you when I’m ready.”

“Arthur,” Merlin’s voice broke on his name.

“When I’m ready,” Arthur repeated, and this time there were no following footsteps.

Arthur lay awake for most of the night, missing Merlin’s body beside him with a fierce longing, at the same time as he tried to work through the anger and anguish at having been lied to for his entire life. In the end, his own words to Merlin came back to him. If he didn’t find a way to move forward then, like Uther, he risked being trapped in bitterness and anguish that would rot everything he touched. He needed to accept and trust that Merlin and Gaius had done everything with the best of intentions, and even if he didn’t necessarily agree, and even if some of those decisions had been disastrous, Arthur had to find a way to let it go.

Not an easy thing to do, but when he thought of the alternatives there was none that would suit if it meant Merlin wasn’t at his side. He experienced a sudden shame at his abrupt dismissal earlier and hoped Merlin would understand and forgive him. He smiled, listening as the watch outside his door changed and felt his eyelids droop. Of course Merlin would forgive him, just as he’d forgive Merlin.

He slept.

It was late in the morning when he woke again, listening to George as he carried out his chores. When Arthur moved, George slid into Arthur’s view as if on a set of oiled wheels.

“Sire, Lord Merlin suggested we let you sleep this morning. I hope that was correct?” His demeanour suggested doubt.

“Thank you. I appreciate your thoughtfulness.” Arthur tried not to grin as George almost visibly preened. Although he didn’t say anything, Arthur also appreciated the silence with which George attended him as it gave him time to plan his day.
George answered a knock at the door and returned with Leon in tow: so much for Arthur’s plans.

“Sir Leon, what can I do for you?” Arthur indicated the seat opposite him and gestured to the ridiculous amount of food George had delivered for his breakfast. Leon nodded his thanks but didn’t eat and waited until Arthur had dismissed George before he began to speak.

“Sire, I’d like to request the position of garrison commander at the castle and to accompany Princess Morgana into exile.”

That was unexpected. “Leon, you’re my first knight. I’m not sure I can spare you -”

“I shouldn’t be your first knight, though.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows at the interruption and Leon, steady, law-abiding, sensible Leon looked aghast at his own temerity.

“Sire, I –“

“Tell me why, Leon?” Arthur urged him to continue, brushing aside the attempt at contrition.

Leon sat quietly for a moment as if gathering his thoughts. “In your plan to draw Morgana to Camelot, you asked Gwaine to help you. I understand why he’s the choice you made and I know, too, it was no reflection on me or my position.” He hesitated. “I was knighted under your father and led your men gladly when you became king, but it was a different world. Gwaine has an ability to think independently, to read a situation and not to rely on tried and tested tradition. He’s the man you need to lead your knights.”

He’d obviously thought long and hard about this. Arthur understood Leon wasn’t only making it easy for Arthur, but had found a way to save his own pride, too.

“You’re the best of men, Leon, and as your friend, I’d be more sorry than I can say to lose you from Camelot. As your king, I agree with your assessment and I’m grateful for your offer of a solution. I just have two riders. One, if I ever have need of you, you’ll come and two, you’ll accept the baronetcy of the castle and the estate around it.”

Leon looked both flattered and appalled. “I’ll always be your servant, Sire, you know it. I’ve got two older brothers – I never thought I’d ever hold land of my own.” He smiled suddenly.

“It’s the best solution of all,” Arthur said. “I’ll know the castle is garrisoned and the land held by the noblest of men and the best of friends. I know, too, you’ll look after Morgana and be a friend to her if she’ll let you.” It was a sly allusion as Arthur had long known Leon harboured a preference for Morgana and her defection had hit him harder than he’d ever admitted.

Leon flushed and coughed to cover up his obvious confusion and Arthur decided to be merciful. He stood and waited until Leon was facing him before he held out his hand. The two men clasped one another’s forearms in a brothers’ greeting.

“There’ll be a feast tonight to confirm your new rank, Lord Leon, as well as some other court appointments, and I’ll make the announcement at council this morning – so make sure you’re dressed in your best.”

With mixed feelings, Arthur sent him off and finished getting ready for the day, mapping out what else he had to do and what needed to be put in place before he spoke to Merlin later. Only one of the things on his list was something he really didn’t want to do and so he decided to deal with it first and get it out of the way.
There was a sense of organised chaos about Morgana’s apartments, as servants worked under Gwen’s direction, dismantling furniture and packing the huge trunks that would follow them to the castle where Morgana would make her home.

Morgana was standing at the window, apparently oblivious to the commotion around her as she stared out at the courtyard. She only turned when all activity had ceased at Arthur’s entrance.

“Gwen, could you give us a few moments, please?” Arthur waited until she curtseyed and shepherded the rest out until Arthur and Morgana were alone.

“Do you have everything you need?” Arthur asked, seeking a non-confrontational way to open their conversation.

“Other than my liberty and a kingdom, you mean?”

Arthur sighed. “Don’t you ever get tired of fighting, Morgana?”

“Why are you here, Arthur? We’ve nothing to talk about.”

“Leon will be accompanying you as the new Baron, Morgana. If there’s ever anything you need, please let him know. You’ll have freedom within the castle and in the land round about, but all visitors will be vetted and will be accompanied by Leon.

You’re my sister, Morgana, and a Princess of House Pendragon. I’d not see you uncomfortable or in want. I’d wish you contentment and happiness, but I don’t believe you’d accept my good wishes if I offered them. I hope, one day, you’ll find peace.”

“Peace enough when you’re dead – you and your pet warlock.”

It seemed malicious, but to Arthur’s hopeful ear there was little real conviction in it.

“Peace enough for us all then, Morgana. I hope your journey goes smoothly.” He didn’t bow and she didn’t acknowledge his good wishes and he took his leave, reflecting the meeting had probably gone as well as he could’ve expected.

When he left the room, Gwen was waiting.

“Sire.” She bobbed him a curtsey and he smiled at her.

“What can I do for you, Guinevere?”

“I’d like to go with Morgana.”

It was hardly a surprise to Arthur. Even after everything that had happened there was still a closeness between the women Arthur thought he recognised.

“Camelot will be the poorer for your loss, Gwen, but I’m glad you’ll be with her. Of everyone in the world, I think you’re the only one who might have a chance to help her.”
He reached out and took her hands in his, raising them to his lips and kissing them gently. “If either of you ever have need of anything, let Leon know.” He smiled at her surprise.

“That’s good,” she said. “Morgana will have two friends, then. And you’ll have Merlin.”

There, it was said, the one thing unresolved between them.

“Yes, Merlin will be with me always.”

“I’m glad. This feels right. Not that we ever felt wrong, exactly, it’s just – I’d better go and see how Morgana is.” And she was gone in a swirl of sweet rose and lavender.

Arthur laughed softly. He’d miss her good sense, he thought, and wondered who he’d find to run the domestic side of the castle once she’d gone. With that on his mind, he headed off to find the person he wanted to talk to next.

Morgana turned as Gwen entered, annoyed at the gladness sweeping over her when she saw who it was.

Gwen’s tone was ever practical. “I told Arthur I’m going with you.”

Morgana hadn’t expected Gwen to leave with her and was surprised into speech, even more shocked by the warmth and pleasure she experienced at the thought. “I assumed you’d be staying as Camelot’s Queen.”

“No,” Gwen laughed a little. “For a time it felt as if Arthur and I could share something more than friendship, but I’ve long known where his true affections lie.”

She blushed though she said no more and Morgana was flustered enough to let the subject go.

“Shall I call the servants back to finish the packing?” Gwen asked.

“Yes, thank you.” And for the first time in many long months, Morgana smiled a true, sweet smile.

“Get your arse off the ground, Geraint, you’re worse than a maiden at her first Beltane fire. Up and face Lamorak and at least try to pretend you’re actually a knight of Camelot.”

Arthur managed to maintain a suitably stern expression as Gwaine dragged the young knight up by the collar of his mail shirt, ignoring the resultant choking and shoved him towards a laughing Lamorak. He stopped by a chuckling Percival. “I see Gwaine is in charge of training today.”

Percival cast an assessing eye over Arthur, as if checking for any censure, and relaxed at Arthur’s quick grin. “Gwaine gets more out of the young ones than any of us,” and he nodded at the scene in
Gwaine had taken Geraint to one side and was talking quietly to him, explaining something about his stance if the actions were anything to go by.

Arthur nodded and walked over to the men. Geraint saw him first, bowing deeply and Gwaine turned. He opened his mouth, possibly to greet Arthur with his usual irreverence, when he suddenly glanced sideways at Geraint.

“Sire, good to see you here. What can I do for you?”

“A word, Sir Gwaine, if you please.”

Geraint bowed again and made himself scarce, while Gwaine walked towards him. Arthur picked up a nearby pitcher, sniffing it suspiciously before handing the water over to Gwaine. Gwaine grinned as he accepted it before he drank deep and drew his hand across his mouth.

“There’ll be a feast this evening to celebrate several announcements, Merlin as court sorcerer, Leon as a Baron – and you as Camelot’s First Knight.”

A long silence followed.

“Leon’s a hard act to follow. Why me?”

“You know why, Gwaine. Are you really going to make me say it?”

A little of the old Gwaine surfaced then, something Arthur was glad to see, though he’d never admit it. “Oh, I think I definitely am.”

“You understand the men, not just in terms of their strengths and weakness in battle, but in the day to day. You know how to get the best from them and they trust you. And I trust you. The last months were difficult, I know, especially for you as Merlin’s friend, but you put everything aside for the good of Camelot. I know of no better man to lead my knights.”

“Well,” Gwaine rubbed his hand across his face. “That’s me told.”

“With you as my First Knight and Merlin as my Court Sorcerer, I know I’ve people around me I can trust and who’ll be open if they disagree with me. Will you accept? Will you be my First Knight?”

On the field everyone stopped and turned to stare as Sir Gwaine bent his knee and bowed his head to his King.
Arthur was rewarded when Merlin looked up at him and placed his hands on his hips, as if annoyed. Even from this distance Arthur could see the relief.

“Can you make it all the way up here or do I need to send someone to help you?”

“I’ll be there in a minute, you prat.”

A passing noble looked scandalised and turned as if to remonstrate with Merlin.

Arthur frowned. “Now, Merlin,” he called and watched in satisfaction as Merlin took no more notice of the man, instead setting off at speed towards the stairs to Arthur’s chamber.

Despite the exchange, Arthur was suddenly nervous, and he closed the window gently, standing by it as he waited. Merlin seemed similarly affected as there was a quiet knock before he entered and once the door was shut behind him, Merlin leaned against it and left the width of the room between them.

“There’s a feast tonight,” Arthur told him quickly of all he’d done during the day, seeing Merlin’s real pleasure at the news of Gwaine’s promotion. “I needed some time, Merlin, to make sense of it all.”

“I understood, Arthur, I promise.”

Arthur stared at Merlin, at the simple peasant boy who’d always held such power and yet had managed at heart to remain true and good. Not a boy now, but a man grown and come into his power in ways Arthur could barely hope to understand. It was there in his bearing and his expression, in a visible confidence and a new stature.

Pure want suffused Arthur, a desire so strong and deep he almost staggered with the strength of it. He was hunting for words, for a way to bring Merlin to him. All the things a King wouldn’t, couldn’t, shouldn’t say.

“Touch me,” he whispered, shocking himself as the words slipped out.

Merlin moved and then stilled as Arthur shook his head before speaking again. “Touch me with your magic. Merlin. Let me feel it.”

There was a bitten off exclamation as it dawned on Merlin what Arthur was asking of him and he swallowed hard, before his eyes sparkled with gold.

A groan was all Arthur could manage as, shyly at first, an invisible caress touched his face, tracing its contours before slipping down to brush against the pulse in his neck. Both men were breathing heavily and Arthur knew his own arousal was easy enough to see. Merlin was inching forward, just as magic’s touch slipped down his body, until Arthur could reach out and copy it, using the very tips of his fingers to run them across Merlin’s cheekbones and mouth, gasping when Merlin’s lips opened and he drew Arthur’s fingers into the wet heat beyond, suckling gently. Arthur slid his free hand to the back of Merlin’s neck, and leaned forward to press a kiss to Merlin’s cheek, closing the gap between them when urged by the arm slipping around his waist and drawing him close.

Merlin released his fingers, and the touch of magic faded. Arthur smiled at Merlin, happy to know all of him, recalling how the magic had thrummed in contentment as it passed over his skin. He watched the way Merlin swallowed, his smile wobbling a little as he stared at Arthur. Arthur brushed a gentle finger under Merlin’s eye.

“What’s this about?” he asked.
“I’m happy, that’s all.”

Arthur thought he should probably be responding with some teasing remark as he’d have done in the past, but he tightened his grip in reassurance instead.

“Me too, Merlin. Me too.”

They stood wrapped in their embrace for some time, the urgency settling for the moment and neither stirred until the bell sounded.

“There’s the feast later,” Arthur spoke into Merlin’s ear and smiled at the incomprehensible mutter, though it was obviously a complaint.

“I ordered some new clothes for you - after tonight you’ll be my Court Sorcerer after all.”

Merlin leaned back to stare suspiciously at him. “More new clothes?” After recovering from the curse, Merlin had discovered he was somehow the owner of an entire wardrobe. He’d never owned so much property in his entire life.

“Something special.” Arthur tried to keep his face straight.

“I’m not wearing a hat. I don’t care what you say –“

Arthur hid his face against Merlin’s neck for a moment to hide his amusement before he relented. “I promise. No hat.” He wondered what Merlin would make of the doublet, breeches and cloak he’d had made. Well, he’d soon see and for the moment, he’d other things on his mind.

His hand slipped down Merlin’s back until it cupped around a buttock, drawing Merlin even closer.

“Do we have time?” Merlin asked, though his hands were already in action, nimble and swift as they undid clasps and ties.

“I always have time for you, Merlin. Always.”

Despite the heat of the passion between them, their lovemaking was tender and slow, making the most of every moment of contact, every slide of flesh on flesh. When Arthur finally entered Merlin’s body the sheer enormity of the love he felt for this man nearly overwhelmed him. The physical act of joining dismantled barriers and removed years of Uther’s conditioning and he found it so easy to say all the many things he’d wanted to say to Merlin for so long. How he loved him. How he wanted him. How much he valued him and would never let him go.

Merlin, in corollary, was beyond speech, reacting with sound and touch, but it was enough for Arthur when every one of those told him everything he wanted to know and more.

In the end, his release surprised him, and with his breath still heaving in his chest, he reached between them and helped Merlin to finish, rolling off him and gathering Merlin into his arms when he was done.

“Tell me we’re doing that again soon.” Merlin sounded as if he was on the edge of sleep.

Arthur squeezed him and laughed, close to sleep himself. “Every day for the rest of our lives.”

Merlin drew in a breath, and burrowed closer to Arthur. Arthur thought he was about to speak, but instead he felt the press of lips against his shoulder. Merlin would say what he needed to say when he was ready. Arthur was astute enough to recognise the months of perceived coolness between
them would have repercussions for some time, even if Merlin now had his memory back. At least they had time now.

Yes, one thing they had plenty of was time.

Merlin’s reaction when he saw the clothes Arthur had ordered for him was priceless and Arthur enjoyed every second of it. Merlin didn’t refuse to wear it, though he muttered long about being put on show.

Everything was black: soft black leather breeches, a black shirt with black leather doublet on top, which was lined with Pendragon red silk. The collar of the doublet had twin silver dragons, to match the silver clasps on the boots and fastenings on the cloak.

Arthur had been amused until the moment Merlin was fully dressed and standing before him, suddenly dignified and radiating power. Arthur would have liked nothing more than to take him back to bed, but instead he smiled proudly.

“Now everyone can see you, Merlin. Emrys, Dragonlord and Court Sorcerer to Camelot.” He hesitated and met Merlin’s eyes as he finished, “And consort to the King.”

Merlin flushed and reached out to take Arthur’s hands, kneeling before him and kissing them. “I’m yours, Arthur. I always was.”

They shared a smile before a thought obviously occurred to Merlin and he groaned. “You’re not going to make me wear a hat – you’re going to make me wear a crown.” His look of utter dismay was too much.

Arthur threw back his head and laughed, and he was still laughing when he dragged Merlin to his feet, captured his hand and walked with him through the castle: their castle.

“Gods.”

Arthur looked up at Merlin’s exclamation, wondering what had caused the sudden alarm.

A month had passed since Arthur had removed the ban on magic and appointed Merlin as his Court Sorcerer. They’d stood together on the steps to watch Morgana, Gwen and Leon leave, and then had drawn their closest friends and advisers around them as they began to build a new Camelot with magic at its core. Merlin had refused to be named as consort until the people were more at ease with him and though Arthur had complained bitterly, he’d given way as long as Merlin moved into the apartment next to the king’s room. It was used more as a place for Merlin to work, as invariably he could be found in Arthur’s room, and spent the nights in Arthur’s bed. Our bed, Arthur had taken to calling it, always meaning it but sometimes saying it specially to see Merlin’s blush of pleasure. Every day had been busy and they hadn’t had a lot of time to themselves, but this was an occasional quiet evening when they didn’t have to entertain some baron who’d turned up convinced Camelot
was about to fall.

Merlin was staring at a book. Arthur wandered over and looked at the page. He couldn’t understand a word of what was written but whatever it was, Merlin looked stricken.

“Is something wrong?”

“Not exactly,” Merlin replied. “It’s just… well, with everything that’s happened… I’d forgotten.”

“Forget what?”

“You remember the Tomb of Ashkanar?” Merlin winced and looked as if he wanted to recall the words as soon as he’d said them. It’d been a difficult period.

Arthur shrugged it away. It was past. Then it dawned on him. “You found the dragon’s egg, didn’t you?”

Merlin grinned. “I did.”

“Where is it? What will you do with it?”

“I need to take it to Kilgarrah. I should have summoned him before now anyway. Arthur, he believes he’s the last of his kind. Think what this will mean to him.”

Arthur saw, and as a king he saw other possibilities. “Merlin, if there was one dragon’s egg, there may be others.” He wasn’t entirely sure it was a welcome thought. “And even if he’s not the last, how likely is it they’ll be enough. In the end it may not lead to the survival of the dragons.”

Merlin sobered. “I know,” he looked down at the thick tome he’d been reading. “This is a book about dragons and dragon lore. It’s going to take me a while to get through it, but it might tell me more.” He looked at Arthur and bit his lip, as if he could read Arthur’s concerns. And he probably could, Arthur admitted to himself. “I need to take the egg to Kilgarrah.”

Arthur nodded. Of course he did. “Can I come with you?” he asked, pleased when Merlin smiled and agreed.

In the end, Gwaine accompanied them, having caught the two of them sneaking out of the castle. Arthur grumbled about him taking his duties of First Knight too seriously, but Gwaine just grinned and retorted that he didn’t care too much about Arthur and Merlin, but he’d never pass up a chance to talk to a dragon.

Kilgarrah was already in the meadow when they arrived.

“I didn’t call you,” Merlin said, surprised. “How did you know to come?”

“Magic is strong in the air tonight, young Warlock. It seemed to call me here.”

“In other words he’d a feeling. My mother used to get those,” Gwaine said.

Kilgarrah swung his great head in Gwaine’s direction and Arthur saw the flash of teeth as he grinned. “I can singe your beard for you, little man.”
Merlin shook his head at them, knowing quite well Kilgarrah wasn’t serious, although it was enough to make Gwaine cover his chin and back away ever so slightly.

“I’ve something for you, Kilgarrah.” He uncovered his precious burden and held it out.

Arthur thought he’d never seen any being quite so surprised or so overcome as the moment it dawned on Kilgarrah what was before him. It didn’t take him long to regain his dignity, however.

“This is great indeed, Merlin. I thank you.”

“Is it still alive? When will it hatch?”

“Dragons were called into life by the Dragonlords, Merlin. You must name the dragon and it will be born.”

Arthur watched, exchanging a slightly bemused look with Gwaine as his First Knight moved to stand by him. Merlin put the egg down carefully and stared at it for a few moments before, his voice deep and commanding, he said a name.

“Aithusa.”

The power of Merlin’s voice exerted a pull on Arthur, too, and he wondered if his name had more of magic in it than he’d ever thought.

The air around them stilled and it was as if the whole world was watching and waiting and holding its breath.

The sound of the first crack of the egg cut through the silence and suddenly, miraculously, the shell was falling away and a small body, pure white and so fragile looking, was pushing itself out and then wobbling unsteadily on the tree stump. It stretched paper-thin wings wide and chirped in enquiry, looking up at Kilgarrah.

Merlin was laughing and crying all at once and Arthur moved to stand by him and take his hand.

“Light of the Sun, Aithusa. It was well done, Merlin. With Aithusa, you and the Once and Future King will bring about a united Albion and a golden age. Thank you.”

Gwaine left them with a nod at the gate, stopping to talk to the guardsmen.

Merlin walked at Arthur’s side, their hands brushing from time to time, and a small fountain of pure joy bubbled into life within him. Arthur jostled him and Merlin pushed back. Every touch was a caress. Arthur teased him and Merlin retaliated.

Idiot. I love you.

Prat. I love you, too.
In the town below a woman lit a candle with magic.

At a nearby farm a man murmured a healing spell over a sick cow.

On the borders, Iseldir smiled and told his small band they would travel to Camelot Castle to pledge their loyalty in the morning following.

Deep in the forest, in their cave, the Dsir judged Arthur worthy.

Magic was coming home to Camelot.
Chapter 4

Epilogue

Arthur and Merlin paused at the bottom of the castle steps, mainly to give Merlin a little time. Once every year, Arthur had travelled to the castle housing his sister, to enquire after her well being and to spend an awkward time in her presence, but Merlin hadn’t seen her since the day she left Camelot. He wouldn’t be here now if she hadn’t specifically requested his presence.

For the first time since Merlin had taken her magic, Morgana had dreamed.

When they were led into her chambers, Arthur heard Merlin stifle a cry of shock. Even though he’d been a witness to her gradual aging through time, Arthur was horrified by the change less than a year had brought. There was a sweet smell in the air, almost covering the cloying scent of sickness. Morgana was frail and her once raven hair was white. Gwen, her own hair streaked with grey, sat with her hands folded, still and quiet, but her haunted gaze was fixed on Morgana.

Morgana stared at Merlin, and it seemed her hatred of him was undimmed by the years. Arthur was proud of Merlin’s reaction, as he met Morgana’s eyes and raised his chin. He’d long ago come to terms with his actions and the years of peace in Camelot and then Albion, were enough to let Arthur convince him that in the end he’d been right.

Morgana looked away first, turning her attention to Arthur.

“Brother, dear.”

She mocked him as she always did and he ignored it.

“How are you, Morgana?”

“Dying, it seems. Oh hush, Gwen, hush. The only regret I have is the leaving of you.” She turned her attention back to Arthur. “There’s a battle coming. I don’t know when but it’s coming.” She looked at Merlin for the first time. “You won’t be able to save him.” Her eyes glittered with malice. “You’ll have to watch and you won’t be able to stop it.”

Arthur stepped to Merlin’s side and in a rare gesture of public affection, he slipped his hand into Merlin’s, holding tight. Merlin’s expression didn’t change, but he gripped Arthur’s fingers and Arthur could feel the slight tremor.

Morgana was staring at their joined hands and she sighed, her voice now stripped of any malevolence. “Did you ever wonder at the once and future? This is the once – and there must be an end to it if there’s to be a future. I thought my revenge would be sweet – to know Merlin will live on through the years without you. But now I only feel pity. And he’s still lying to you, Arthur, even now.”

“No,” Merlin, said, and the years sloughed off him until he stood as the young man he’d been when he first came to Camelot. “I’ve no secrets from Arthur.”

Arthur’s eyes were calm as they regarded Merlin before he turned back to Morgana. “Secrets poisoned all our lives in the past, Morgana. It was a promise Merlin and I made many years ago – no secrets.”
Merlin’s eyes flashed gold and Arthur, too, now stood looking exactly the same as he’d done when they’d had their final confrontation in Camelot many years before.”

“Arthur was wearing the medallion when you tried to kill him, remember?” Merlin said. “He may sleep for a while, but he won’t age and he won’t die.” There was a fierce certainty in his words, a surety that wouldn’t be gainsaid.

There seemed little point in staying for much longer and they could see Morgana was tiring. Merlin reinstated the illusion of age and they took their leave of Gwen. Arthur watched as Merlin held her tight and whispered into his old friend’s ear. Gwen looked as if she might cry for a few moments, but then she nodded and released him, her face calm once more.

As they passed through the door, Morgana said. “Arthur, I sent you my son, didn’t I?”

“You did. Galahad’s a fine man and the best of knights. You should be proud of him.” In a twist of fate Leon had sired sons with both Morgana and Guinevere. Arthur had never raised the issue of what arrangements the three had come to, he’d just accepted Galahad and Gareth when they’d arrived, glad to see they had Leon’s steadfastness. Galahad had Morgana’s pride without her ambition, and Gareth had a care for all those around him that spoke of his parentage.

“I am. Will he be king after you?”

Arthur turned back and smiled at her. “He will. My word on it.”

“Goodbye, Arthur.”

Somehow, Arthur knew he’d never see her again.

Merlin paused on the steps and stared out over the landscape, waiting until Arthur stopped beside him.

So it’ll be Camlann,” Arthur said.

“Yes.” Grief clogged Merlin’s throat and the response rasped out.

“We knew it had to happen, Merlin.” Arthur seemed remarkably sanguine in the face of Morgana’s information, but Merlin saw the raw, aching sympathy in his eyes.

Shaking himself free of the fear and melancholy, he smiled at Arthur. “But not today.”

“No.” Arthur smiled at him, soft and fond. “Not today.” And he slipped a hand round the back of Merlin’s neck, in a move that always made Merlin shiver and Arthur grin in triumph. He tugged slightly until their foreheads touched, and they drew comfort from one another.

They were unaware of the two women watching. Gwen was supporting Morgana, trying to hold back her tears at the frailty of the woman in her arms.

“It was always Merlin and Arthur, wasn’t it,” Morgana said.

“Yes,” Gwen agreed. “And I suppose it always will be.”

“They’ll never really be apart. It shouldn’t please me – but it does.”
“I’m glad – they’re both good men, you know.”

“Albion has prospered and magic was returned to Camelot. I used to think I was the only one who lost,” Morgana turned slightly so she could press dry lips to the side of Gwen’s forehead. “But I won the most precious thing of all in the end.”

They watched as the two men made their way down the steps and onto the green sward of grass. Merlin and Arthur spoke briefly with Leon, before climbing onto the back of a pure white dragon. It took off and they watched as the men and women working in the fields looked up and waved. A gaggle of young children were shouting in glee and scampering along trying to stay in the dragon’s shadow. After a moment the dragon wheeled around and flew a low pass over them, Arthur and Merlin waving, before they gained height and set off towards Camelot.

Gwen looked out at the white dragon disappearing gradually from view and as sensible as ever, she said, “In the end, everyone won.”

Fin

Works inspired by this one

[Art for "Falls the Shadow" by altocello, no one ever said (a Falls the Shadow remix) by sweetiejelly]

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