The Eternal Silence of These Infinite Spaces
by aoigensou

Summary

After a spat with Arthur, Merlin retreats for some quiet in the Darkling Woods. What happens there takes away his voice, and forces Merlin to figure out how to exist in a world where communication doesn't come easily.

Notes

I want to say a huge thank you to VentiMocha for helping me brainstorm and keeping me motivated by drawing cute things for me and literally poking me in the arm when I wasn't writing. To ExcaliburStark for doing a great beta job for me. And to FervidAsAFlame for being the most enthusiastic cheerleader and hype reader anyone could ask for and without whom this probably wouldn't have been completed on time. You guys are the best!!

I hope I did your prompt justice, actuallyitscaptain. It ended up running away from me and growing to much longer than expected, haha. It's actually the longest (completed) fic I've ever written! I hope you enjoy!

Prompt:
Somehow (curse, magical backlash, injury, sickness, etc.) Merlin ends up temporarily mute. Arthur teases him, but quickly realizes he relies on Merlin's babbling, to know both that he's not alone and that Merlin is okay, and Merlin's ability to speak out of turn to help him in politics and conversations.

Cue Arthur ready to take drastic measures to get Merlin's voice back!

Author can decide if Merlin just can't talk, or if he can't make any noise, or something in
Merlin tapped the quill end against his lip, his brow furrowing in concentration. He glanced over at Arthur’s first draft of the speech he was currently writing for him, and rolled his eyes. Arthur was an inspiring public speaker, but if it was about something he had virtually no interest in then he could be counted on to come up with some of the most boring speeches known to mankind. Merlin told him, frequently, that he was lucky to have him to spice up those speeches, so that his audience wouldn’t fall asleep on him. Arthur told him, frequently, to shut up.

“If he says that, people are likely to laugh,” Merlin muttered, crossing out the two lines he had just written, eyebrows drawing together. He picked up the parchment, reading it over, murmuring the words softly aloud to check the pace and rhythm of each phrase, ignoring the blustery sighs that were coming from the king’s bed.

“Merlin,” Arthur finally said as Merlin bent back down to change a word that sounded awkward.

“What?” Merlin asked, not really listening in that distracted way he knew Arthur hated but much too busy to care.

“I have never known anyone to prattle on as much as you do,” Arthur said. Merlin didn’t even look up.

“Uh huh.” Figuring that was the end of Arthur’s complaint, and nothing new besides, Merlin scratched in another hasty paragraph at the end praising the merchant’s guild for their hard work in keeping the import and export of fine goods through Camelot one of the best trade networks in Albion, sounding out each word as he wrote it. He didn’t notice Arthur calling his name again until a pillow bounced off the top of his head and startled him enough that he scraped the quill nib messily over the bulk of the speech.

“Merlin!” Arthur said, bad temper immediately apparent. Merlin glared as he looked up, irritated that he was going to have to rewrite the whole thing if he wanted a chance of Arthur being able to read it.

“What?!’ he snipped, glaring at Arthur who had stood from his lounging position and had his hands in fists on his hips. Merlin found his glare reciprocated, and for a moment they were both silent as they waited for the other to flinch first.

“Is it necessary to read out loud to yourself? Or did you never learn to read quietly from whatever misguided soul taught you to read?” Arthur asked, glare intensifying. Merlin ground his teeth, the insult against his mother stinging even though he knew Arthur would never have meant a slight against Hunith like that, and scrunched the parchment with the speech up in one hand.
“Excuse me, sire, if I was trying to make you sound like you actually knew what you were talking about tomorrow. My apologies, it won’t happen again.”

“Make sure that it doesn’t.” Merlin opened his mouth to point out that Arthur had missed the completely obvious insult in his words, but wasn’t given a chance when the king continued to speak without pause. “Honestly, the way you go on and on is irritating to the point of almost being dull, Merlin. It’s a miracle that anyone listens to a word you say.” Arthur rolled his eyes, and Merlin closed his, wondering if Arthur was angling for a fight. Well, he wasn’t going to get one, not from Merlin. Not today. He took a deep breath.

“Is that so, my lord?” he asked through clenched teeth, attempting to smile but knowing it probably was more of a grimace or snarl.

“It is,” Arthur said, with a decisive sneer. Merlin’s grimace deepened to an unhappy frown. It had been a while since Arthur was so incisively cruel, and he knew it had to be the result of something that happened at council earlier that day. Whatever it was, he was definitely taking it out on Merlin and he was getting tired of being the one on the receiving end of Arthur’s ill humors. “I believe you would do the castle, nay, the entire city of Camelot a great service by remaining silent, just for an hour. Then perhaps people would be able to think.”

Oh, that was it. Merlin had enough of Arthur’s moods. He stood from the desk, the crumpled parchment scrunching further in his fist as he tried to temper his anger at bearing the brunt of whatever crawled up Arthur’s arse and put him in such a mood. “Listen, whatever problem you’re having, it’s poor form to just take it out on me,” he started, but before he could finish Arthur interrupted.

“And there you go yammering on again. Do me a favor, Merlin, and shut UP.”

Merlin took another deep breath and mentally counted his heartbeats to try and calm himself but it didn’t help. He was done with Arthur’s attitude, and needed to get out before he said something he’d regret later. He stomped over to Arthur, shoved the speech into his chest, stepped back and sketched the most sarcastic of bows. “I will leave this in your most capable hands, then. If there will be nothing further, your highness, I believe Gaius has some tasks for me to complete.” He didn’t wait for Arthur’s answer, just marched to the door, opened it and left, letting the door slam behind him. The guards at either end of the corridor didn’t even flinch at the racket, they were too used to the bickering and slamming of doors that accompanied it, that came from the king and his manservant.

Fuming, he made his way through the halls and back to Gaius’ chambers, muttering loud, treasonous curses about Arthur’s parentage and his sexual proclivities involving animals. Nobody he passed batted an eye, and as he crashed into Gaius’ workroom, he wasn’t feeling any better than he had several minutes before despite having let off some steam in the trek from one side of the castle to the other.

Looking around for just a second, he grabbed his leather satchel and ignored Gaius’ questioning eyebrow except to inform him, “Arthur is an ass, I’m going to gather herbs.” Behind him, he heard Gaius call out to him that he should be careful, but he didn’t stick around long enough to hear why. He would be fine, he always was. After all, the herbs in the forest weren’t exactly out to get him, unlike some spoiled, pratty, areshole kings.
Walking through the woods outside the city of Camelot was always a pleasure for Merlin, and even his foul mood was no match for the beauty of the sun filtering through the trees and the sound of birdsong carried on the breeze. Within half an hour of setting out away from the city, Merlin already felt himself calming down, feeling foolish for getting so worked up over Arthur being, well, Arthur.

“We’re both idiots,” Merlin murmured to himself as he kicked a pebble down the path ahead, shaking his head at his own temper. Usually he didn’t let Arthur get him too worked up, but between the insult to his mother and the king interrupting him when he was on a roll with writing that speech for the following day, Merlin let himself blow up in a way he normally wouldn’t and regretted it now that he had some space from the incident. “I’m definitely not apologizing to him unless he apologizes first, though.”

He clutched at the strap of his satchel as he realized that he hadn't checked what Gaius was out of, and sighed. Looking around to get his bearings, he headed off the path to his right toward where he knew a small clearing usually had a meadow’s worth of feverfew flowering. It was something Gaius was perpetually out of, so even if he didn’t need it just then, at least it was something useful that wouldn’t go to waste, and Merlin wouldn’t have wasted a trip out to the woods on his temper alone.

Once he’d harvested enough to last Gaius several weeks, he let his feet carry him deeper into the woods, parallel to the road, to see what else he could find flowering. He knelt down to examine a patch of valerian, when he heard a keening cry in the distance, from the direction of the road. He looked up, then straightened and brushed the dirt from his hands and breeches, following the sound of the sobbing.

Merlin found a woman curled up alongside the road, leaning against the trunk of a tree. Alarmed, he moved closer, taking care not to seem as though he was sneaking up on her.

“Hello, are you well?” he asked, trying to catch her attention. The woman startled with a gasp, looking up at Merlin with wild, red-rimmed eyes filled with tears. She looked frightful, her hair in disarray and her clothing wrinkled and torn as though she had been attacked. “Is there something I can do for you? Do you need help?”

The woman’s eyes darted around looking, Merlin assumed, for anyone else that might have been with him. Brushing the back of her hand across her face, she slowly stood on her trembling legs, bracing herself against the tree trunk. “Are you from Camelot?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Merlin said, swinging his satchel around to rest at his back and offering his arm to the woman for support. “Were you trying to get there? I was just about to go back if you need someone to escort y—” Merlin’s words were cut off as he felt himself being choked, and he raised a hand to his throat in alarm as his eyes widened. The woman’s face was twisted cruelly in a smirk bordering on a grimace, and her hand was out in front of her, fingers curled in a claw. Her eyes shone gold. He pushed with his own magic, the force of it shoving the woman back and releasing her grasp on him. He gasped in several breaths, holding his own hand out defensively as he bent over double with a wary eye on the woman.
“Whoa, whoa, whoa, what did I do to you?” he said, frantic.

“You’re a sorcerer,” she said, a note of disbelief in her voice. “Then you understand how I feel.”

“Maybe,” Merlin said, taking a step back to try and get a bit of distance between them, though he knew it wouldn’t help much in a magical battle. “Why don’t you explain it to me?”

“Camelot and everyone in it are complicit in the murder of our kind!” the woman cried out, and Merlin shuddered at the pain he could hear in every word. “The king may be the one that passes judgment, but the people allow it!” She balled her hand into a fist, and Merlin brought his arm up defensively as he threw up a shielding spell without a thought. When nothing happened, he straightened up and held both arms up placatingly.

“King Arthur isn’t like King Uther. He’s no longer persecuting the druids, and I think that given some time he can be brought around to the idea that magic isn’t evil,” he said, trying to calm the woman down.

“How would you know?” she shrieked, and Merlin resisted the urge to throw up another shielding spell. Her eyes didn’t flash gold, so he took an experimental step forward, intent on trying to talk her down from her anger.

“I work for him,” he said softly. “I’m King Arthur’s manservant.” She scoffed.

“As if someone raised to hate magic would employ someone with magic like you,” she said dismissively.

“Well, he doesn’t exactly know that I have magic,” Merlin said, offering a half smile. The peace offering didn’t calm her as he had intended. Instead, she hurled a spell toward him. Merlin, not knowing what it would do, ducked. Behind him, the trunk of an oak tree shattered, and the tree fell with a deafening crash.

“You see! We have to hide like thieves and murderers! As if we are wrong for being what we are! As if being born with the aptitude for magic is something to be ashamed of!” She wrapped her arms around her torso as if to protect herself, and Merlin straightened up, holding a hand out to her.

“It won’t always be like that,” he pleaded. “Arthur is a good king, you’ll see.”

“You can’t know for sure,” the woman said, a tear slipping down her cheek. “It was he that led the raid through my village. It was he that took my husband and baby from me. He may have allowed me to keep my life as his father wouldn’t have done, but he still left me with nothing which is almost more cruel.”

The agony in her voice tugged at Merlin’s heart, and he reached out as if to touch her. “When he was a prince he had to obey his father. He had to, otherwise he would not be able to become king at all, and change things.”

“‘A fine explanation that is,’” the woman spat. “‘It doesn’t bring my husband and my little Jacob back to me!’” In a sweeping motion, the woman released her magic and Merlin felt himself being pushed back violently. He brought a hand up to shield his face, bracing against the invisible force of it.

“That’s right, it won’t,” Merlin said gently. “But there hasn’t been an execution of a sorcerer since Arthur has ascended the throne. And I know that he’s a good man. He wants what’s best for his people. Every one, regardless of the circumstances of their birth. I have faith that he will see that the persecution of magic is wrong. And in the future, we’ll be able to live free. You, me, and
everyone like us.” They’re the words that he wished he had the opportunity to say to Morgana, to convince her that her hatred was futile and misplaced. And like he had a horrible feeling Morgana would if he offered them to her now, when she was too far gone in her anger and desire for revenge, the woman rejected them.

“You’re a lapdog of the king, of course you would side with him!” she cried, before her eyes flashed gold with the words of another spell. Merlin didn’t have time for a shield or counterspell before he felt himself bound and shoved to the ground. “The people of Camelot must pay for their crimes against their fellow man!”

“Please! I know you’re hurt, but you don’t have to do this!” Merlin shouted, struggling against the magic that bound him.

“I really do,” she said, taking several steps toward him, murder in her eyes.

“You don’t!” he argued, feeling his magic loosening her spell and trying to buy himself time. Her magic was strong, much stronger than any hedge witch he had encountered before, and he wondered if she had been trained by a high priestess to have gained such control over her powers. He hadn’t felt anyone so powerful since Morgana and Morgause. “Please, trust me!” he pleaded.

“Shut up!” she screamed, the second time someone had told him to do so that day, and something about it stung.

“Just listen to me,” he pleaded. “I can help you, you don’t have to be alone in this! Killing everyone from Camelot isn’t a solution, it just makes you as bad as Uther was!”

“You talk too much,” the woman growled, setting her jaw stubbornly, reaching her hand out and beginning to chant a spell. Merlin didn’t recognize it, didn’t know what her intentions were, but he knew that she wasn’t going to show him any sort of mercy. She was powerful, and with that power was a danger Merlin was keenly aware of. And so as she flung her spell at him, he pushed out with his magic to shove her backwards. He didn’t have time to shield himself from her spell, so as he saw her fly against the trunk of a large tree behind her, he fell to his knees with the force of her curse, the combination of expending his own magic and absorbing her curse causing the world to waver before his eyes. The last thing he saw before he blacked out and thudded to the ground was the sorceress falling to the forest floor, her neck bent at an unnatural angle.

When Merlin came to, the forest around him was bathed in darkness and he was shivering from the chill and damp of nightfall. He tried to groan, only achieving an exhaled gust of air and rolled over, idly brushing away the leaves and detritus that had stuck to his face from being pressed against it for an extended period of time. He took stock of the state of his body, mentally checking himself for injury, and pushed himself to his knees when he didn’t feel anything off. Other than a bit of stiffness, he was able to get himself to his feet with little trouble. His entire left side was covered in road dirt, but he didn’t care about that. His eyes fell upon the sorceress, about ten paces away from where he had fallen, her face pale and her eyes open, unblinking toward the sky.

Merlin tentatively made his way to her side, knowing what he was going to find but needing to check anyway, just in case. He knelt by her side and pressed two fingers to her neck, feeling for the
pulse of her heartbeat as Gaius had shown him so many years before. It was no surprise when he felt nothing, and he didn’t need a mirror to confirm that she wasn’t breathing. He had killed her. Another body piled up in the war against magic, another death to be attributed to him. Another person with magic he had murdered, whether in self-defense or not. It didn’t matter that he hadn’t meant to kill her, just to get her away from him so she wouldn’t kill him. He had killed her all the same, and he felt a deep remorse that he hadn’t been able to get through to her.

He didn’t even know her name.

“I’m so sorry,” Merlin tried to say as he passed his hand over her eyelids to close them, but not a sound came out of him. His eyebrows furrowed as he coughed, hearing only the sharp exhale of air. He brought a hand to his throat and tried to clear it again, to the same effect. He tensed his abdomen, attempting to force a yell and only getting silence. Pursing his lips, he glared into the distance and tried to whisper, to not actually use his voice, but still no sound came from his mouth. The only sounds that greeted him were the regular noises of a nighttime forest.

Trying to quell the rising panic in his gut, Merlin checked for a pulse once more. He failed to find one, which made him bite his lip and wonder what the sorceress had done to him. If he had been cursed to silence, the spell should have broken with her death. Usually even the most complicated of spells was broken upon the caster’s death, unless the sorcerer was particularly skilled and powerful. Merlin thought that someone with the power to leave a lingering spell after death would have been known to magic-kind, and someone like this sorceress probably would have taken up Morgana’s cause in a heartbeat. The thought of another magic user approaching Morgana’s power on her side made him shudder.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair, dislodging more dirt and twigs, and desperately wondered what the hell he was going to do about the situation. Before he started to panic he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. When he felt a modicum of control over his emotions, he opened his eyes and looked around. The road they were on wasn’t as traveled as the main road out of Camelot, so he figured he would have a bit of privacy for a while, at least until the next morning unless something happened that required an urgent patrol to pass through. As far as he was aware, things were fairly quiet bandit-wise lately, so he felt no qualms about summoning a witch light to illuminate the area so he could work more easily.

Bending over the sorceress’ body, he grabbed her arm and heaved it up and over his shoulder, grunting silently as he straightened up and moved her corpse from the road. She might have been misguided and angry enough to hurt innocent people in her rage, but she still deserved some dignity in death. He moved about a hundred paces from the road into a thicket of underbrush, gently laying her on the ground before finding a suitable place to dig a grave. It was going to be difficult without tools or verbal spells to move the earth, but Merlin felt that a grave where she wouldn’t be left as a feast for carrion birds or to be stumbled over by travelers was the least of what he owed her after everything that happened.

It felt like hours before he deemed ready the relatively shallow hole he had dug out with his hands, and he took a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow before crawling out of the grave to gently roll her into it and cover her body with loose dirt. When Merlin was finally finished, he sat himself against a tree and breathed hard, trying to catch his breath as he stared up at the stars through the canopy of trees. The moon wasn’t visible, which meant it was well past midnight and he probably wouldn’t be making it back to Camelot until a lot closer to dawn than he was hoping for.

So much for getting any rest tonight, he thought, brushing his hands together ineffectually to rid them of the moist earth that clung to his palms and beneath his fingernails. He supposed he could count the time he spent unconscious as rest, but his body disagreed with him, especially after the
physical exertion of burying a body. It was tempting to allow himself to fall asleep against that tree, but before he could give into temptation he rose and retrieved his rucksack to begin the journey back to Camelot. Whatever else happened, he had to be back in time to rouse the king, and Gaius needed to be consulted about this curse of silence as soon as possible. Hunching his shoulders, he began the walk back home through the dark forest.

About an hour later he emerged, pausing to take stock of the situation. After some consideration, he turned away from the road to Camelot, heading instead toward the clearing where he usually met Kilgharrah.

O drakon! he cried out in his mind, Kilgharrah! He yelled soundlessly as loud as he could, the words echoing in his head, trying to project his magic the way he would his voice, and praying that it was enough to summon the great dragon. Flopping into the grass, he laid back to stare at the stars, hoping to see the shadow of a dragon pass overhead before landing in front of him. Every few minutes he cried out Kilgharrah’s name, with increasingly less hope, until the first dusky light of dawn had started to appear at the horizon and Merlin had to face facts that mindspeak with the dragon was something that was definitely constrained by proximity.

With a sigh he stood up and brushed off the bits of grass he had plucked idly as he had waited, and made his way back toward Camelot. If he was lucky, he would make it in time to fetch the king his breakfast.

Merlin returned to Gaius’ chambers before dawn had fully broken, dropping his satchel full of herbs by the door to be dealt with later, and moved toward the workbench to locate a blank piece of parchment. He hated using one like this, considering parchment was rather expensive and while Gaius made a relatively large amount as personal physician to the king compared to most others, it was still a precious commodity that had to be looked after. At last, he located a half-used piece that only had some yet-to-be-used labels for vials of potions and medicines, he grabbed a quill and pot of ink and bent over to explain to Gaius what happened.

“Merlin?” Gaius asked in a rough, just-woken-up sort of voice as Merlin was halfway through recounting his tale in a smaller-than-usual scrawl that had spilled over to the back side of the parchment. “My boy, I’ve been worried. There have been reports of attacks recently in the Darkling Woods, and you didn’t come home last night. What happened?”

Merlin lifted his head in acknowledgement for a moment before bending over and quickly scrawling ‘I’ve been cursed to silence’ at the bottom of the parchment and holding it up for Gaius to see. Gaius moved forward to be able to read the words clearly, and Merlin knew when he’d parsed it by the gentle laugh that escaped. He scowled at him, writing “It’s not funny!” above the first sentence and holding it up just long enough for Gaius to read before resuming writing as fast as he could. His wrist was cramping with how tightly he was gripping the shaft of the quill as he scratched hasty letters on the parchment. When he finally finished, he blew over the ink to try and quickly dry it before handing it over to Gaius. His mentor took it with a question in the way he quirked his eyebrow, before reading Merlin’s words. Each passing moment raised his eyebrow even higher, until he looked up at Merlin and met his gaze.
“So you’ve been cursed,” Gaius reiterated after a long moment. Merlin nodded. “And you can’t utter a sound at all?” Merlin nodded. Gaius shuffled over to sit heavily on the bench across from where Merlin was seated, where they usually ate their evening meal together. To demonstrate, Merlin opened his mouth and tried to say something, hoping that a different outcome than what happened in the forest would occur, but no such luck. The loudest thing that happened was a soft exhale, and Merlin made a face of annoyance. As curses went, it was hardly the most harmful, though it did limit him somewhat in both expression as well as his magic. Ever since Gaius had given him the spellbook to study, he had begun to rely on using magic with verbal spells, since it tended to be more precise in its outcome than his instinctive magic was.

“Well,” Gaius said after reading over the story once more and looking at Merlin with a discerning eye, “this is most inconvenient, my boy. And you say the sorceress is dead?” Merlin nodded again, and gave Gaius a troubled look, which Gaius interpreted correctly as his next words were, “That’s certainly unusual. Most curses and enchantments are lifted upon the death of the caster. Did you happen to hear what spell she used?”

Merlin shook his head before dropping it to grab fistfuls of hair in frustration. The entire walk back to Camelot he had attempted to remember what words the sorceress had used to silence him, but at the time he had been too worried about protecting himself from something more physical to have paid attention to her exact words.

“I guess the only thing to be done in that case is the usual,” Gaius said, gesturing to the pile of books that never really got put away as they were usually needed the next time a crisis happened in Camelot. Merlin let out a heavy sigh and leaned over to the stack, pulling the topmost one toward him and began flicking through it. He didn’t hold out much hope, though. He and Gaius had been through these books what felt like a hundred times before, and Merlin couldn’t recall seeing anything that would help in his situation. Gaius gave him a sympathetic smile and moved back toward the corner of the room where he kept his basin and a ewer of water to freshen up for the day before he joined Merlin.

Merlin had just settled in and was starting to droop with drowsiness when he heard the faint sound of a cock crowing, and he jerked his head up to glance at the window, finding dawn had fully broken and he was going to be late with Arthur’s breakfast. Scrambling up, he knocked over the bench he had been seated on as he rushed toward the door.

“Be careful, Merlin!” Gaius admonished, not looking up from the book he was reading from. Merlin, before he could remember himself, tried to say, ‘Sorry!’, and groaned soundlessly when he recalled the situation. Knocking twice on the door frame to catch Gaius’ attention, he waved with a crooked smile to his mentor as he left, breaking into a jog before the door could even shut behind him.

Merlin’s habitual tardiness was the only thing that saved him that morning in the kitchen. The cook and all of her assistants were used to him running in and breathlessly asking for the king’s breakfast, so they had taken to getting a tray set up on a table near the door for Merlin to rush in and take without having to wait as the rest of the castle servants did when bringing meals to the nobility. Were it not for being on good terms with practically every other servant in the castle, though, even his habits and the fact that he was personal servant to the king wouldn’t have saved him. Were it anyone else, they would have been made to wait behind the servants who showed up on time, allowing the angry noble to teach them a sense of punctuality.

But everyone liked Merlin, and as amusing as hearing the king’s annoyance at him was, they really didn’t want anything truly bad to happen to him. And so they made this one exception. As Merlin burst through the doors to a chorus of amused titters, he pantomimed his gratitude with a bow, his
palms pressed together over his chest for just long enough to garner a chorus of, “You’re welcome, Merlin!” from ten amused maids and matrons, before taking up the tray and heading toward Arthur’s chambers at a brisk pace.

When he reached the door, he balanced the tray full of food on one palm and pulled the door open, catching it with his foot so he could kick it further open while keeping hold of the tray with both hands. He did so as quietly as possible, so he could set breakfast up and allow Arthur to sleep those extra few minutes to try and mitigate any leftover grouchiness from the previous day. Of all things he already had going on, Merlin didn’t want to deal with an Arthur that had got up on the wrong side of the bed.

“Merlin, there you are,” Arthur said, looking up from his desk where he was awake and fully dressed. Merlin had so many things he wanted to say, so many scathing comments. Such as, “So you really can dress yourself?” or, “Will wonders never cease, you’re up before noontime and by yourself!” But instead, he bit his tongue and moved to the table to get the tray unloaded and pour Arthur a goblet of cool water, bracing himself to receive the abuse he knew was coming regarding him arriving after Arthur had woken. Maybe he would only throw a pillow? That was almost fun, when Arthur did that. He could throw it back and not be threatened with treason.

“Merlin, I wanted to talk to you about yesterday,” Arthur said, and the sound of his chair scraping back as he stood made Merlin glance over at him from the corner of his eye as he continued to work. “I wanted to say that, well, I know sometimes I can be a little harsh towards you.”

Merlin rolled his eyes, scoffing to himself with a shake of his head as he shoved a plate of food roughly toward Arthur’s preferred seat.

“Not that you don’t deserve it most of the time. Because you do, let’s get that straight.” Merlin didn’t even bother looking up at Arthur, mouthing, prat, to himself as he finished setting things out.

“But, well, thinking back I can see how I may have gone somewhat overboard in my overall tone and attitude toward you yesterday afternoon…”

An understatement, Merlin mouthed, giving the smallest of head shakes as he began tidying up Arthur’s discarded sleep clothing. Arthur cleared his throat, frowning at Merlin as he continued. “And though it usually isn’t warranted, I thought that I would speak to you about it and make sure that no overt offense was taken…did you know you have a leaf in your hair? Actually, there’s quite a bit of debris in there. Honestly, a bath wouldn’t have gone amiss this morning, Merlin.”

Wow, Merlin mouthed, you are really bad at apologising. He dropped the used sleep clothing in a pile near the door and took a moment to swiftly scrub both hands through his hair to jar loose any remains of his night on the forest floor before he moved to the bed to start making it up, deciding halfway through that it was time to change the sheets and tugged them off instead.

“Anyway. For some reason your good regard of me is something that is marginally important to me.” Arthur cleared his throat again, very obviously uncomfortable by the whole situation. “And by that I mean…” he said, before stopping and slamming his fist petulantly on the corner of his desk. “Merlin, I am trying to apologize here. You don’t have to give me the silent treatment. That’s just petty.”

Rolling his eyes very obviously in Arthur’s direction, he abandoned the bed to walk over to the desk instead, grabbing the first bit of blank parchment he saw and the quill sticking out of the inkwell, scribbling two lines quickly and handing it over to Arthur before sitting at the desk with
another sheet of parchment to begin writing his tale of the situation for the second time that day.

_Wish I’d thought to bring the one I wrote for Gaius_, he thought as he tried to condense the story as much as possible while minimizing any mention of anything magical that could be attributed to him. _Though it’s probably for the best to rewrite, considering the magic._

“‘Firstly, your apologies leave much to be desired’?” Arthur said, a question in his voice as he read what Merlin had written. “Merlin, that’s just rude. I was working on it since I woke, and frankly you didn’t deserve even that much thought.” Merlin glared up at him, and Arthur at least had the grace to look ashamed of himself. “Sorry. I, uh, didn’t actually mean that.”

Huffing a sigh, Merlin bent back over the parchment to start writing again.

“‘Secondly, something has happened and I need you to be patient while I explain.’ Well I don’t hear you explaining anything. You’re just hunched over the desk like Geoffrey mid-genealogy binge.”

Merlin ignored him, continuing to write as Arthur demanded answers he couldn’t give vocally. He finally held up a hand to try and stem the flow of the king’s unending questions, but it didn’t work.

“Is this about yesterday? Are you ever going to speak to me? You can’t keep this up indefinitely, Merlin. I order you to explain what on earth is going on.” Merlin pushed himself back from the desk and let his head loll to the side in exasperation, before giving Arthur a look he hoped conveyed, ‘what do you think I’m trying to do, you clotpole?’

It was at least enough to shut Arthur up for the few minutes it took to finish writing and for Merlin to offer the parchment to him. Arthur took it, giving Merlin a suspicious look before he began reading, silently to himself this time. As he read, Merlin twirled the feather quill between his fingers, then set it back into the inkwell and drummed his fingers on the desk. Periodically he stole glances at the king’s face as he read, laughing silently at the expressions he was pulling. He saw Arthur’s eyes get to the end, then start over, and he wondered what he was thinking at that moment.

When Arthur finally lowered the parchment, he leveled a stare at Merlin that made him feel pinned in place.

“So you can’t talk.” It wasn’t a question. Merlin shook his head. “And you cannot make any sound at all, even if you wanted to?”

Merlin mouthed, _Nope_. They stared at each other for a few seconds, the tension between them thrumming like a plucked lute string, until Arthur finally broke it by bending over and laughing as if he hadn’t heard anything more funny in his entire life.

“This is priceless!” Arthur gasped, and Merlin wanted desperately to yell, ‘It’s not funny!’ at him. “This definitely sounds more like a blessing than a curse!”

Arthur’s laughter continued long after what Merlin considered to be proper even for the most amusing of jokes, and he angrily took the quill up again to use another sheet of the king’s fresh parchment and scribble _YOU ARE THE WORST_ in the biggest block letters he could manage. In a fit of pique, he threw a bundle of tied-up correspondence from a neighboring kingdom at Arthur, hitting the top of his head. It didn’t stop him, it only egged his laughter on further.

For the second time in as many days, Merlin stormed out of the king’s chambers.

“Another lover’s spat, huh?” one of the guards said in passing, which would have made Merlin
splutter and argue that they were not lovers, thank you very much if it were a normal day. But it wasn’t a normal day at all, so Merlin tried to ignore him as he marched down the hallway, his face heating until he was sure he was going to die from embarrassment. It wasn’t the first time he’d heard a rumor that he and Arthur were sleeping together. No, that had happened his first month of working for him when he was still the prince and an insufferable prat.

Well, more of an insufferable prat anyway.

But Merlin had been fending off rumors that he and the king were lovers for almost as long as he’d lived in Camelot, and he thought it had stopped bothering him. It wasn’t something that was going to happen, no matter how many kitchen maids and knights had put money on it. No matter how many chambermaids burst in “accidentally” at what they thought was just the right time to catch them doing whatever it is the entire castle thought they did when they were closed in Arthur’s chambers together. The disappointment on those faces whenever it turned out that they were arguing over this speech or that missed chore was always funny to Merlin, and he had to laugh. He had to laugh, otherwise he might do something stupid, like cry. Because the truth of the matter was that he really did want to be Arthur’s lover. He had fought against his feelings for a long time, denying them and refusing to name them, but after Morgana’s failed takeover of Camelot, after fighting to regain Arthur’s crown, after everything the two of them had been through together, it would have been stupid to deny that Merlin was anything but desperately in love with Arthur Pendragon. And as freeing as finally admitting that to himself was, Merlin knew that nothing could come of it, because while he was in love with Arthur Pendragon the man, he was also in love with Arthur Pendragon the king. The monarch of a prosperous kingdom. The man who was expected to marry and produce an heir.

And the thing was, Merlin was ridiculously proud of both the man and the king, prattishness and all. He wanted him to be the best he could be, and if that required him settling down with a woman and having children, then Merlin would stand behind him with a smile, and change as many diapers as was required of him. He knew that some kings in other kingdoms kept lovers, that being a queen wasn’t a promise of fidelity from her husband, but Merlin also knew that Arthur’s absolute sense of morality would not allow him to do such, even if he wanted to.

Besides, there wasn’t even any indication as far as Merlin could tell that Arthur would even want him like that. He knew he was the king’s best friend, but he didn’t know if he wanted to be more than friends, and Merlin knew better than to push something like that. It would lose him any scrap of Arthur’s affection. So he kept on as normal, waiting for Arthur to either decide to marry for political reasons, or to rekindle his cooled relationship with Gwen.

“Merlin wait!” Arthur called, just as Merlin was reaching the corner of the hall. He paused, glancing over his shoulder to see Arthur jogging toward him. He was still grinning, but at least it wasn’t the shortlived laughter from a few moments before. Merlin put a hand on the stone wall and turned halfway toward Arthur, giving him a look that he knew would be misconstrued as a pout, but he couldn’t help himself. It had been a long day, and it wasn’t yet midmorning.

What? he mouthed as Arthur approached.

“Come back, I’m sorry for laughing,” Arthur said, clapping a hand on Merlin’s shoulder. Merlin scoffed, and gave Arthur a pointed look.

No you aren’t.

“Fine, I’m not sorry for laughing. But I am sorry for letting it get out of hand.” Merlin shook his head, but the apology such that it was went a long way toward soothing his ruffled feathers. “Come
back, have breakfast with me to make it up to you. I’ll even let you steal my sausages without complaining.”

“It’s not stealing if you let me do it,” Merlin mouthed, and Arthur shook his head.

“I have no idea what you’re trying to say. Come back to my chambers where you can write every insult that comes into that pretty head of yours down for me to see properly.”

Pretty? Merlin mouthed, eyebrows raising as he allowed Arthur to steer him back toward his chambers, but Arthur pretended not to notice. Merlin noticed, though. He noticed Arthur’s large, warm hand resting on the small of Merlin’s back in a proprietary way he usually saw between spouses and courting couples. He noticed the fact that the king would probably not have gone running after just anyone the way he had Merlin. He noticed a hundred other tiny things every day that gave his traitorous heart enough hope to be unable to extinguish the ember of love. Hope that maybe his feelings weren’t one-sided after all.

When they were safe behind closed doors once more, Merlin plopped himself into the chair directly to the right of Arthur’s favorite chair and began tucking into the food without waiting for further permission. Arthur laughed, and joined him a moment later after he collected the inkwell, quill, and several sheets of parchment from the desk to lay them next to the food in the middle of the table. Merlin gave Arthur a long, pointed look as he reached over and took several sausages, shoving one into his mouth whole.

“Attractive, Merlin,” Arthur said with a roll of his eyes as he took the remaining sausages and a sweet bun. Merlin shrugged with a crooked grin. For a few minutes, the only thing to be heard was the soft sounds of eating, until Arthur finally pushed his plate away and placed his hands flat on the table.

“Do we know if there’s anything to be done?” Arthur asked, and Merlin shrugged before licking his fingers clean of the crumbs and grease from his breakfast. He pulled the writing tools toward himself, and dipped the quill a few times in the ink, bending over to write.

Gaius is doing some research in his books right now, but I don’t know if he’ll find anything. I’ve been through those books with him many times, and I don’t remember seeing anything that would help.

“Hm. That’s not to say there isn’t something there, though,” Arthur said, pulling apart the remaining sweet without eating it. Merlin shrugged. “After all, you’re not the expert on these things, who’s to say that Gaius won’t figure things out without you in there to get underfoot.”

Arse. What I’m worried about is the fact that the sorceress that did this to me is dead and the curse is still active. That’s not usual.

Arthur’s eyes skimmed Merlin’s words, and he laughed. “Well, there are worse curses that could have been cast on you, I suppose. At least this way I’ll be getting some peace and quiet.” He grinned and Merlin rolled his eyes, still feeling a little touchy about the events of the day prior that had started the whole thing.

Saying stuff like that is what got us into this mess in the first place, sire. So you can kindly shut your gob about it.

Arthur glanced at the words, and seemed to shrink slightly. He didn’t say anything, and Merlin figured his point was made, so he bent over to continue writing.
Anyway. While Gaius is looking for a way to fix things for me, I figured that I could just go about my duties like usual. It’s not like most of them require me to talk.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather help Gaius?” Arthur asked. “I can make do with a different servant for a day or two.”

No, after everything that’s happened I need a little normalcy. I trust Gaius to let me know if he needs help. Until then, I have your disgusting laundry to take care of.

Merlin handed Arthur the parchment and stood from the table, flashing the king a grin as he began to gather the dishes to place back on the tray to be returned to the kitchen.

“Whatever suits you, Merlin. If you or Gaius need anything from me to get this… situation… corrected, don’t hesitate to let me know. I’ll do whatever I can.” Arthur stood from the table, and Merlin glanced up through his eyelashes in surprise as his hands continued to stack dishes. He nodded, glad for the excuse of not having a voice, because he honestly didn’t know what he could have said at that moment.

Can I ask what set you off yesterday? He pushed the parchment gently over to Arthur, trying to look as nonthreatening as he could at the subject change away from him and onto the king. Arthur wasn’t good at talking about his feelings at the best of times, as shown by his shoddy apology attempt that morning. Merlin didn’t want to put him on the defensive any more than he would already be at such a question.

“It was nothing, just the usual push to get me married off. I’m surprised Gaius didn’t tell you yesterday, he was there after all. Anyway, I’m headed to meet with them now. Make sure to air out my chambers, it’s getting stuffy in here.” Arthur swiftly made his way to the door before Merlin could nod again and was gone, leaving a rather confused manservant in his wake. Merlin blinked as the door fell shut, before he set about getting his chores completed, his mind wandering to Arthur and the idea of him getting married. Every unbidden thought that strayed that direction made his heart clench, and he tried to push it out of his mind completely.

Later that night, Merlin returned to Gaius’ chambers more exhausted than he could remember being in a long time. He didn’t do anything out of the ordinary from his usual routine, but the extra burden of communication not coming easily any more definitely put a strain on him mentally and emotionally. After the council meeting, when Merlin had been in the middle of airing out Arthur’s chambers and beating dust out of the heavy drapes, Arthur had rushed in and asked about the speech he was to give. After a load of silent curses on Merlin’s part, he hurried to finish what he had abandoned the day prior, re-copying it onto a clean sheet of parchment for Arthur to take with him. Between that and needing to write to communicate with anyone, Merlin’s wrist and fingers felt stiff and cramped from more use than he was used to in a single day. Not to mention the fact that the only sleep he had gotten had been a couple hours of enchanted fainting on the forest floor.

Merlin rubbed a hand over his face, not noticing a smudge of ink transfer from his fingers to his cheek, and stretched with a yawn before trying to shake off the bone-weariness he felt so he could make an attempt to help Gaius. Perhaps later he’d have the energy to magic himself a bath before
There you are, Merlin,” Gaius said, looking up from the pot he was stirring, containing what smelled to Merlin like a simple stew for supper. “Did you have an eventful day?”

Merlin shrugged, sitting heavily onto the same spot on the bench where he had that morning. He saw the page he had written for Gaius and picked it up, reading over the words he had written. With a wince, he put it down. Yes, it was definitely better he hadn’t taken this version with him to Arthur, it said everything, including about his magic.

“Well once we’ve eaten, we can get started on looking through a few books. I didn’t have a lot of time to research today since it’s the day I usually do the week’s stock of remedies,” Gaius said as he ladled stew into two bowls, setting them on the worktop before grabbing a loaf of crusty bread and a knife to cut it. Merlin hunched over in disappointment at Gaius’ words. He had been hoping, as much as he knew it was a very long shot, that Gaius had found something to fix the problem. He had somehow forgotten that Gaius’ physician duties had to come first. If he had a voice, he would be groaning, and somehow in that moment the absence of sound, no matter how insignificant, stabbed his heart and made him more frustrated than anything else had that day. He had always taken both communication and the ability to do so for granted, and now he felt the way an infant must feel. So many things to say, and no way to say them. No wonder babies cried so much.

To try and get a head start on things, Merlin picked the book he had begun to look through that morning back up, setting it off to the side of the bowl of stew he pulled toward him.

“Merlin, that can wait,” Gaius scolded. “You’ll drip on the pages.”

Merlin rolled his eyes but did as he was told, resisting the urge to mouth, Yes, mother, to Gaius, nudging the book aside with his elbow before beginning to shovel hot stew into his mouth and chasing it with chunks of bread dipped in the thick broth. They ate in silence, since Merlin couldn’t carry the bulk of the conversation the way he normally did and Gaius was preoccupied with his own thoughts. When Merlin finally set his empty bowl aside and wiped his hands on the thighs of his trousers, he raised his eyebrows and gestured with his chin toward the book, asking Gaius if he was allowed to start reading now.

“Go ahead,” Gaius said, fondly exasperated, still working on his own supper. Merlin had always eaten like a man starving, and his sense of urgency had only increased since the day before. He took up the book and angled it toward the candle, flipping pages until he found where he left off that morning and began to read. He heard Gaius get up several minutes later, taking the dirty dishes to be rinsed in a washing up tub at the corner of the room, then joining him once more with a groan as he sat. Merlin flicked his eyes up at Gaius as he shuffled through the books, more discerning about where he began than Merlin had been. Eventually, they settled into silence, the only thing interrupting the crackle of the fire in the fireplace the occasional shuffle of a page turning.

What must have been hours later, Merlin set aside his third book with a thump and a cloud of dust and stretched his arms over his head. He didn’t want to say it— write it, rather— and jinx himself, but he felt like it was a lost cause. Gaius let out a long sigh as he closed his own book much more gently than Merlin had.

“We’re still starting to look into this,” Gaius said, resting his fingers on the edge of the table, and Merlin already knew what he was going to say before he even said it, “but I’m not sure we are going to find a solution to your problem so easily just by looking in a book. Everything I’ve found, now and in the past, speak of non-lethal curses dissipating once the caster has died. And those that don’t have complicated counterspells that require exact knowledge of the original spell.”
Merlin groaned, feeling the vibration in his throat like the faintest of cat’s purrs but hearing nothing, which was an odd sensation. It wasn’t the news he was hoping for, but it was what he was expecting. He wished that he had paid more attention to what the sorceress had been saying as she cast her spell, and less on self-preservation. Perhaps then there would be something to be done. He put his elbows on the table and rested his face in his palms, rubbing at his tired eyes with his fingertips. After a moment, he reached for quill and parchment, already tired of communicating like that.

It’s disappointing but I’m not surprised. I’m going to have a bath and go to bed and I suppose we can start again tomorrow, he wrote, offering the parchment to Gaius and not waiting for a response before he dragged their shared bathtub up the stairs to his room and shut the door behind him.

Merlin rolled his head back, staring at the ceiling for several long moments before shoving the bathtub into the middle of the room by his bed and filling it with water with the thought of a spell. Conjuring water was something easy, he had done it since he was a child and hadn’t wanted to lug water back home from the stream that ran through the woods behind Ealdor. Before he knew any spells, so the words of the old religion didn’t matter. He ran his hand through the clear, clean water, shivering at how cold it was. It wasn’t water from nowhere, it was always water taken from a physical place and put into a new physical place, and the water from Camelot’s cistern was always glacier-cold, even at the height of summer.

Heat the water, he thought. Onhête þá wæter.

At first, nothing happened. It was the same spell he used for Arthur’s baths, to make them just the right temperature, not too hot and not too cool.

Heat, heat, heat, heat, heat.

It was something he always used a verbal spell for. Before, when he bathed in Ealdor, bathing was always in the stream, or a quick wash from an unheated ewer no matter how cold it was. But living in Camelot for so many years had accustomed him to certain luxuries, and having a hot bath was one of them. How Will would laugh if he could see Merlin now.

Please, he thought, please heat.

Desperately, wanting to prove to himself that he could do it with or without his words, Merlin held his hand out and at last felt the familiar sensation of his magic responding to his will; though without the words to guide it, the water immediately began to boil the way it had the first time he had used it on Arthur’s bathwater. Before he had learned to temper the power of it.

Well that’s something, he thought with a wry twist of his lips as he sat heavily on the edge of his bed. Guess I can just wait for it to cool down. Laying back, he closed his eyes to rest them while the water steamed next to him, and before he could help it he felt himself relax back into sleep, all thoughts of a bath abandoned in the face of how tired he was.

Merlin woke with a start the next morning, feeling grimy and confused. He had managed to get himself wrapped in his blankets overnight, and struggled to get free of them as he blinked sleep
from his eyes. The unused bath with cold water took up most of the free space in his room, and he was annoyed at himself for not staying awake long enough to use it. Glancing at the window above his bed and seeing that dawn had only just broken, he figured that there was enough time to try again. If it didn’t work, then he’d try again later that night until it did work.

*Onhête þá wæter*, he thought. *Heat the water.*

Unlike the night before, it worked immediately, and was much more tempered. Pleased with the results, Merlin shed his clothing and stepped into the water, relaxing at the touch of heat that was almost too hot.

*Just the way Arthur likes it,* he thought with a mental laugh. He himself preferred water just a touch cooler, but his magic always had a mind of its own when it came to Arthur’s preferences. He rolled his shoulders to release the tension in them, and reached for a clean—well, clean-ish—cloth to scrub at his skin, then ducked under the water to rinse it out. He didn’t have time for a leisurely bath, so he didn’t involve soap at all, promising himself that he’d do it properly later when he had more time.

Once he was dried and dressed in something clean, Merlin went down the steps to the main area of the chambers, taking them two at a time in his haste. He grabbed a slightly-stale crust of bread from his and Gaius’ dinner the night before, figuring he would just pick off Arthur’s breakfast tray as usual but wanting something to tide him over until then.

“There you are, Merlin,” Gaius said, looking up from the herbs he was sorting in preparation for brewing something or other. Merlin raised a hand in greeting. “Did you sleep well?”

Merlin nodded, then reached for the parchment to tell Gaius that he was planning on rushing through his chores that day so he could come back and help Gaius search again for a fix. Gaius’ hand on his wrist stalled him, though.

“I hate to say, but parchment is rather expensive, my boy, as you know. And I have to make what I have last until the next time the king pays us.”

Feeling his frustration rising at the sensation of not being able to communicate with any effectiveness, Merlin let his arm drop to his side and shrugged in what he hoped was more careless and less petulant. He hated not being able to say what he wanted or needed to, hated not being able to convey what was on his mind. Everything was a hundred times more difficult without his voice, including his magic, and that was the part that got to him the most. He hadn’t realized how much he had begun to rely on verbal spells until they were taken away from him. His instinctive magic was no longer the second nature it used to be, and before his voice had been taken from him Merlin would have thought that a good thing, since it meant he was less likely to let his magic act out without his permission. But now…

Blowing a sigh through his nose, Merlin grimaced at Gaius.

“I am sorry, my boy,” Gaius said, and Merlin shook his head. He’d just take parchment from Arthur whenever he wasn’t looking, it would be fine. Raising his hand once more to wave his goodbye to Gaius, Merlin left to go to the kitchen for Arthur’s breakfast.

In the kitchen, Merlin had been hoping that Arthur’s tray would be ready for him to take, but as he was actually on time for once the cook and her assistants were still preparing everything. Merlin groaned, he had been hoping to be able to avoid any attempts at conversation. He considered leaving and taking a stroll around the halls for twenty minutes and coming back, but he had already been spotted by a scullery maid.
“Merlin, you’re early!” she exclaimed, drawing the attention of the others. All at once Merlin found himself at the center of a sea of women, young and old, smiling and giggling at him in a way he had thought he’d got used to.

“Are you well, Merlin?”

“What has you here so early, Merlin?”

“Don’t tell me you rushed someone out of your bed!”

“Madeline!”

“What? I wouldn’t say no if he asked me to his bed.”

“Madeline!!”

Merlin felt himself coloring at the attention, and the questions, especially from the buxom and flirty kitchen assistant named Madeline. She was pretty enough, if one liked petite brunettes whose hair refused to stay in the loose bun it was knotted into and instead flying away in a charming frizz that she sometimes swiped out of her eyes absently while kneading the dough for the breads that were baked fresh every morning. Her cheeks were pleasantly round, her eyes were a sparkling green, and sometimes Merlin wished he could muster an attraction to her instead of his hopeless love for the king.

Not knowing what else to do, Merlin raised a hand to his throat, patting it while shaking his head. The sea of eyes staring at him looked confused for a moment, before comprehension dawned.

“Are you ill?”

“You’ve lost your voice?”

“You should ask the king to allow you to return to bed if you aren’t well, Merlin.”

A hand, he couldn’t tell whose, touched his forehead and the back of his neck.

“Well, you don’t have a fever.”

“He could check that himself, Hannah, he’s the physician’s apprentice.”

“I know that, I was just making sure.”

“Girls, get back to work,” a booming voice ordered, and Merlin heaved a relieved sigh as the women obeyed the cook and left him alone by the door. A tray was thrust into his hands, piled high with steaming sausages and boiled eggs, fresh fruit with cream, and warmed cider. It was more than was usually allocated to Arthur. Merlin looked at the cook, confused. The cook gave him a stern look before winking.

“Wouldn’t want the king to start wastin’ away now would we?” she said, and Merlin grinned.

“Now get out of my kitchen.”

“Goodbye, Merlin!” a chorus of voices followed as he left.
Arthur was still asleep when Merlin entered his chambers. He set the food on the table and moved to open the curtains, flooding Arthur’s shadowy bed with light. It didn’t have much of an effect, other than causing the king to roll over with a groan away from the brightness of the sun. Merlin rolled his eyes, wishing he didn’t have to play this game, but without his voice to annoy Arthur into wakefulness, he’d have to play tug o’ war with the king’s blankets.

He gave Arthur a swift poke in the arm, drawing a sleepy, “Hey!” before he tugged at his covers. Arthur wasn’t going to give up without a fight, though, and used the arm he was laying on to grab ferociously at the blankets and drag them back over him, up to his chin. Merlin set his jaw, stubborn, as he pulled again, harder. Arthur rolled onto his back to give Merlin a lidded glare, and before Merlin could gain the upper hand, Arthur jerked hard at the blankets, pulling them, and Merlin, up and on top of him.

Merlin flailed, trying to push himself off Arthur while also trying his best not to knock the wind out of him. When he gained some semblance of balance, his hands flat on the mattress on either side of Arthur’s neck, his knees planted at the edge by Arthur’s hip, he stared down at the sun-kissed face of the man he would lay his life down to protect. Arthur was staring back up at him, and a long, silent moment passed between them as Merlin searched Arthur’s expression for any hint of what was going on. They were no longer fighting over Arthur getting up. This was something else completely, and Merlin felt his heart speed up as the urge to lean in and learn what kissing Arthur felt like overtook him.

An eternity packaged in a series of heartbeats passed, neither moving, until finally Arthur raised a hand to Merlin’s shoulder and broke the spell. Merlin felt himself being nudged, much more gently than he would have expected from Arthur at a time like this.

“Fine, I’m up,” he said, and Merlin dutifully forced himself to move. He didn’t look back at Arthur as he swiftly moved to the wardrobe to pick out a tunic and pair of breeches for the king to wear that day, throwing them to drape over the top of the changing screen then moving to busy himself with breakfast as Arthur dressed. Arthur had the sense not to ask Merlin’s assistance in that task, which Merlin was simultaneously grateful for and annoyed with. To cover his emotions, he shoved an entire egg into his mouth, chewing it as loudly as he could manage, until Arthur emerged from behind the changing screen.

“Charming, Merlin,” Arthur said, and Merlin almost choked on the combination of boiled egg and laughter. Arthur rushed over to slap Merlin’s back, and when Merlin swallowed and was able to breathe again Arthur gave his arm a punch. “You’re not supposed to breathe your food, idiot.”

Merlin shoved Arthur back playfully, and the atmosphere between them went back to normal.

“Please, help yourself to my breakfast,” Arthur said sarcastically as Merlin shoved a sausage into his mouth whole, heedless of just almost choking on an egg. He grinned around it, and Arthur sighed as he took the rest of the sausages to save them from him. Merlin, still chewing on the sausage, stole a piece of cheese and bread. “You know that you joining me yesterday for breakfast wasn’t a blanket invitation for every morning now and into the future, right?”
Merlin shrugged, taking a big bite out of the bread and cheese before moving to kick Arthur’s discarded clothing from the day before across the room in the direction of the door.

“Oi! Have a bit of respect for my clothing!” Arthur said, throwing a balled-up piece of bread at Merlin’s head and missing. Merlin laughed silently, and finished his bread and cheese to free his hands up to gather the laundry properly. “I honestly don’t know why I haven’t sacked you yet,” Arthur said, and Merlin gave him a cheeky grin.

You’d miss me, Merlin mouthed. Arthur pretended not to notice. He poured himself a goblet of the steaming cider and took a long draught, raising his eyebrows as he set it down.

“What on earth did you do to make the cook like you enough to give you hot mulled cider in May?” Arthur asked. Merlin shrugged, and moved to the desk to scratch out a quick explanation.

The girls in the kitchens think I have laryngitis. Arthur laughed, and Merlin shrugged again as he moved back to his task.

“Only you, Merlin. I thought that woman hated everyone.” Arthur took another long drink of cider, then made a noise as if he remembered something. “Oh, while you’re doing laundry, one of my formal tunics has a stain in it. See that it’s removed, I plan on wearing it later this week for the banquet we’re holding for Lord Lothard and his daughter. He’s the cousin of King Æthelberht of Northumbria, and I want things to go well. Relations between our two kingdoms have always been strained.” He gestured toward the wardrobe with the hand holding the cider. Merlin saw the tunic in question crumpled at the bottom, next to the boxes containing Arthur’s formal crown, the more casual smaller crowns, and the circlet he had worn as crown prince.

It would be lovely if you wouldn’t just drop things where you’re standing at that moment, he mouthed, adding the tunic to his pile.

“What’s that, Merlin? You’d be delighted to get that done? Wonderful.” Arthur stood, brushing the grease and crumbs of his breakfast off on the pile of dirty clothing and making Merlin glare. He didn’t want to have to deal with grease stains in addition to everything else. “I’m off to meet with the council and then to train the knights.”

Merlin nodded a goodbye as Arthur swept out of the room, then dropped the pile of laundry and groaned. Most of the laundry would be easy; the magic he used to get it done was something he used for as long as his mother had allowed him to help with the household chores and didn’t need a spell for, just a thought. For the formal tunic, though, the spell he used to get rid of stains was something he had learned in the book of magic that Gaius had given him, and he didn’t know if he would be able to make it work without saying the words. The spell was far easier than trying to scrub it out himself, and he tried not to bother the laundresses with Arthur’s nitpicky requests if he could help it just in case he actually had to request something of him.

Which it was starting to look like he was. He looked down at the pile of clothing, formal tunic at the top, and was tempted to kick the entire lot of it down every corridor and staircase to the laundry. And maybe take a detour or two for good measure. But it would just give him more work to do in the end. So he sighed, took a gulp of the warm cider straight from the pitcher, and set to work.
Merlin had no idea how it had come to this. He was in the laundry, with four confused laundresses staring at him as he tried a combination of miming and drawing what he was trying to say. Idly, he wished there were secret druids working in the castle, so he would be able to communicate with someone, even if druid mindspeech creeped him out on a fundamental level. There was something about the voice of another person echoing in his head made him deeply uncomfortable, but he would be willing to put up with it just for the ease of talking to someone.

*How hard can it be to understand ‘the king wants this stain removed as soon as possible’??* he thought as he ineffectually flapped his arms at the giggling women and begged for the sweet release of death to save him. He was about to give up and tell Arthur to just wear one of his other fifteen formal tunics— why had he decided on this one particularly, anyway? Probably just to torture Merlin— when an amused voice boomed behind him.

“What do we have here?” Merlin turned, seeing Gwaine leaning against the doorframe smirking and shining the skin of an apple on his shirt.

Thank god, Merlin thought, with only a small sense of irony at the fact that Gwaine was going to save his backside instead of the other way around for once. He rushed over to the wall where he stashed the inkwell he’d borrowed from the castellan, whose office was closer than Arthur’s chambers, and dipped his quill to hastily write, *I’ve been trying to tell them that I need this stain removed out of the king’s tunic, but they don’t understand my drawings or my pantomimes. How would YOU say that?* He shoved the parchment at Gwaine, who took a bite of the apple and chewed with his mouth open as he read.

“Charades, is it? With modified rules?” Gwaine took another bite of his apple, leaving the entire thing hanging out of his mouth as he did a pantomime of what he thought Arthur acted like, all haughtiness and swagger and a touch of swishiness that would offend Merlin on Arthur’s behalf if it wasn’t so funny.

“The king!” one of the laundresses exclaimed, and Gwaine pointed at her with a wink. He then started tugging at his own tunic, only to be met with blank stares. Merlin started tugging at his own to try and clarify, but it didn’t seem to help. He finally bent down to pick up the tunic he had dropped in frustration, and held it up.

“Oh, the king’s tunic!” one of the women said, and Merlin nodded, glad to finally be getting somewhere. He spread it out over one of the tables where clean laundry was folded, and pointed at the minuscule stain that honestly nobody would ever notice, but Arthur was going to be Arthur about it.

“What’s wrong with it?” one of the women asked, and the four of them crowded around to peer down at it. He looked back at Gwaine helplessly, who had gone back to eating his apple. He gestured at him to come back and help him, and wondered how on earth Gwaine was going to pantomime a stain, when it struck him.

Gwaine could read, he was raised as nobility. There was literally no reason for them to be playing around like this while he was there.
Smacking his palm against his forehead, Merlin quickly dashed off another note on one of the remaining clean spots on the parchment. *This isn’t a fun game, this is a frustration. Can you please ask them, using your voice that you have and that I currently don’t, to fix the minuscule stain Arthur found on his favorite tunic and that he needs it as soon as possible for an upcoming banquet?*

Gwaine raised an eyebrow but did as he was asked, winking and flirting and generally being both helpful and a hindrance at the same time since his charm made the women want to help him, but also made them want to keep him around as a distraction. When the stain was pointed out, Merlin shot the laundresses a grateful smile and grabbed Gwaine’s chainmail-clad upper arm to drag him out of the room to leave them to it.

“Hey, I was there to see Annabeth,” Gwaine protested, looking back over his shoulder as Merlin gathered up the ink and parchment on their way out. “I promised her a quick snog before training.” Merlin rolled his eyes.

*Thanks for the help, he wrote. You should probably get to training before you’re late. You know Arthur gets moody when people aren’t punctual.*

“What’s with the whole,” Gwaine started to ask, ignoring Merlin’s note completely as he gestured to Merlin and his mobile scribe setup. Merlin sighed.

*Ask Arthur. He was sick to death of explaining, and raised a hand to say goodbye to Gwaine as he walked back to the castellan’s office to replace the ink. Perhaps if he hurried, he’d be able to peek in on the end of the council meeting before getting on with the rest of his tasks for the day. He may not have been able to whisper advice to Arthur at the moment, but at least he could save any comments for later in the evening when it was just the two of them.*

When Merlin had departed Arthur’s chambers for the night, instead of heading straight to Gaius’ chambers he turned to make his way to the library. It was late, and while Geoffrey could usually be found reading late into the night, Merlin turned the corner to find him shutting the large double doors behind him, locking them with a yawn. Merlin slipped back behind the corner, peeking to make sure Geoffrey had departed before moving to stand in front of the doors. He celebrated, happy that he didn’t have to figure out a way to distract him while he ransacked the stacks, and casually unlocked the doors with his magic.

*Good thing that’s something I’m pretty good at,* he thought with a smirk as he slipped inside and lit the candles with a thought. Years of sneaking around had given him all the practice he needed to be confident in his breaking and entering skills without needing spoken spells. He cast a glance around to double check that he was alone for certain— it wouldn’t have been the first time he was wrong in that assumption, nor the last— and finding the library deserted but for himself, Merlin started walking up and down the shelves, running a finger along the spines of the books at shoulder-level.

The chances of finding a random book of magic that would hold just the solution to his problem were slim to none, he knew that Geoffrey had been ordered to collect and burn every book in the
Camelot library that held any reference to magic back in the days of the Purge. Sometimes Merlin wondered at Gaius having been able to save so many books for his own research. Considering how even though none of the books—other than the book of spells Gaius gave him in his first days in Camelot—contained in Gaius’ chambers held actual spells of magic, they still contained enough magical knowledge to be of use in combating magical creatures and people more often than not.

Thinking about the sheer number of books, the sheer amount of knowledge that was lost in the Purge made Merlin desperately sad and angry at turns, and it was this thought that made him pause at a familiar shelf. At first he wasn’t sure what had caught his attention, until he looked up and saw a familiar spine. The Bestiary of Gwilym of Cambria stared back at him, bringing to mind the week when Camelot had dealt with a goblin problem.

*How did I open that secret room, again?* Merlin thought, tugging on the spines of different books to try and trigger the secret door’s mechanism. When none of it worked, Merlin turned around and leaned against the bookshelf, bringing a hand up to his forehead to rub at it as he closed his eyes.

*I was going after the Bestiary. I climbed the shelf.* He dropped his hand and turned back around, pressing firmly on the shelves starting at the bottom. When he reached the correct one and felt it depress with the pressure of his body weight, the entire panel swinging around to bring him into the room, he mouthed a triumphant, *Yes!*

The room itself looked exactly the same as the last time he had been there, minus the vessel the goblin had been imprisoned in. That was safely locked away in Camelot’s vaults, hopefully for the rest of eternity. Merlin had once felt sorry for the creature, but after the havoc it had caused, he no longer felt anything but annoyance and relief that it wasn’t a problem any more.

*I should go down there sometime and write a note telling anyone who might free it in the future what to expect,* Merlin thought idly as he brushed away at the cobwebs that littered the shelves and corners of the room. The candles kept there had lit with the rest of the library’s candles, with Merlin’s magic, and were burning brightly as he blew dust off from the many tomes that were hidden away. He took his time, looking over each, pulling them out to read the intricately-calligraphed covers before replacing them. Not all of them were magic, in fact in a swift look around the room Merlin only found a few books out of the hundred or so that had anything to do with magic. But the artistry of the books led him to believe that they were all very valuable regardless of the subject matter.

He set the books of magic he had found on an empty shelf, and went around once more to see if there was anything he had missed in his first pass through. He didn’t know how much time had passed, and in the back of his mind knew that Gaius was waiting for his return and he shouldn’t linger much longer, but he couldn’t tear himself away. It was as he was finishing his second look that he saw the edge of a book peeking from underneath a moth-eaten cloth tossed into a shadowy corner of the room, the gilt-edged pages glinting dully in the flickering candlelight. Bending over, he slipped the dusty cloth from the book and picked it up, opening it slowly to find pages of illustrations of hands and arms and people making gestures. Paragraphs describing movements, so precise in their explanations. Merlin’s heart picked up, and he read further.

*To accomplish this magick, you must hold your arm straight out in front of you with all fingers pointing forward and the palm facing the ground. Push your innate magick to your fingertips, feel it tingle and vibrate there as you quickly curl your fingers in to form a fist and swing your arm out to your side. The timing is imperative, the fist must be curled completely when your arm is halfway finished swinging to the side. No more, not less, otherwise the magick will not work. The smoothness of your swing must be absolute, no hesitation is allowed, or else the magick will not work. The level of your arm must remain utterly even, or the magick will not work.*
Merlin bit his lip. It looked as though it was a book that contained spells—if you could call such a thing a spell without words—that only required a movement or gesture to work. He flipped back a page, seeing that the spell’s instructions were for a low-level physical magic to lift a heavy object, and Merlin let out a breath he hadn’t even realized he was holding. He shut the book carefully, not wanting to damage it as it was his only link to being able to practice his magic, and looked over the cover. The gilt letters were faded, but he edged it toward the light until he could make them out.


Merlin’s eyes widened, and something inside him clenched violently at the sight of the name. He fought the urge to throw the book away from himself, instead gripping it tight enough to turn his knuckles white. His hands shook with the effort, and as he forced himself to take a deep breath and calm himself, he slowly flipped the book open, paging through the different spells. He saw combat spells, fertility spells, simple weather manipulation, kinesis. Nothing overtly evil.

*Magic isn’t evil,* he reminded himself in a way he hadn’t had to in a while. Things had been so peaceful recently. Morgana hadn’t been heard from in over a year, and the execution of people suspected of sorcery had all but stopped. *Magic is a tool. Cornelius Sigan was not a good person, but his magic did not make him that way. He made himself that way. I am not evil. I am not a monster. Using this book to learn a different form of magic would not make me like him any more than picking up an enemy’s sword makes me part of the enemy.*

After a long moment, Merlin shut the book and ran his fingers over the faded embossing of the title. It felt wrong to consider destroying what little written knowledge was left of magic, regardless of the source. Knowledge was a sort of power in itself, and when Merlin straightened up, he carried the book and set it decisively on the stack of the others he had chosen to take with him. Tucking them under his arm, he pressed the door release mechanism again to let himself back out into the library proper, and made his way back to the entrance. As he passed Geoffrey’s desk, he looked thoughtfully over at the stack of parchment neatly laid at the edge of one side, and paused only a second before grabbing a bunch of it and tucking it under his arm with the books and moving to the door. He pushed it open with one shoulder, and as he left the candles extinguished themselves, and the door locked itself with hardly a thought on Merlin’s part.

Squaring his shoulders, Merlin made his way briskly back to Gaius’ chambers.

“There you are, Merlin. I was wondering if Arthur had waylaid you for something,” Gaius said as Merlin entered. He shook his head, holding up his stack of books and parchment for Gaius to look at, grinning when he saw his mentor’s eyebrows raise. “Geoffrey allowed you to take so many books from the library without my request?”

Merlin shook his head, and moved to the workbench. *Of course not. Do you remember the goblin?*

Gaius nodded warily, his eyebrows knitting together. “Of course I do. How could I forget an experience like that? You didn’t find another, did you?”

*No, thankfully. But I originally found it in a secret room in the library, and when I was on my way*
back tonight I remembered that I had seen a lot of books in that room that I didn’t get a chance to look at in the chaos of what happened. So I went back and took any that had anything to do with magic. Which wasn’t much, but anything is better than nothing, right? Merlin wrote.

Gaius picked up one of the books, a treatise on blood magic and its use in healing, and his gaze flew back to Merlin. “These are very valuable, my boy. You were lucky to have found them. They were lucky to have escaped the Purge.” Merlin nodded in agreement.

I thought even though it’s probably a long shot that maybe one of them might have an answer to my little problem, he wrote.

“You’re right that it’s not likely, but it’s still a marvelous find indeed,” Gaius said. “And what of the parchment? Am I to assume that Geoffrey is going to be very angry come morning?” Merlin shrugged, giving Gaius a sheepish look.

I didn’t think he’d miss it, he has so much. And I didn’t really get a chance to borrow any from Arthur.

“You know how Geoffrey is, he’ll definitely miss it. But I’ll keep your secret, so we can facilitate communication here for now. Just… try not to do it again.” Gaius sighed, and dished Merlin up some smoked ham and boiled potatoes that he’d kept warm by the fire. Merlin smiled at him gratefully.

I don’t suppose you found anything useful today while I was out? Merlin set the writing supplies aside as he tucked in to his food, and Gaius sighed heavily.

“Unfortunately no. It will take me more time to go through these new books as well as anything that I have here that may hold the answer, but to tell you the truth I am not feeling very optimistic without knowledge of the original spell. Are you certain you don’t remember?”

Merlin sighed and shook his head.

“Well don’t lose hope just yet. We’ll figure it out.” Gaius patted Merlin’s head as he passed behind him to return to what he was working on before Merlin had returned, and Merlin put his head down to concentrate on eating and tried his hardest to not feel the cold tendrils of hopelessness wrap around his heart. His new book would allow him to practice more sophisticated magic, so he wouldn’t be back at square one, like the green 17 year old he was when he first came to Camelot.

Feeling motivated, he rushed through the rest of the meal, eager to return to his room to start studying the book on somatic magic. He knew he could probably work on making all his verbally-spelled magic work nonverbally, and he made a point of promising himself that he’d practice every spell he knew until he could manage them as well silently as he had with the spells themselves. The problem lay with the spells he had never performed before. When you didn’t know what the ultimate outcome was supposed to look like, a spell to focus the magic was imperative, and Merlin didn’t want to chance that his eager magic would just do what it wanted without something to direct it.

Waving goodnight to Gaius, Merlin bounded up the stairs with his book, flopping onto the bed and opening to the first page without even a pause to take his boots off.
Several evenings later, Merlin clamoured into Arthur’s chambers and pressed his back against the door as if holding someone out. Arthur looked up from his dinner, raising his eyebrows.

“Is there an attack I should have been made aware of?” he asked, and Merlin grimaced. He walked over to the stack of parchment Arthur had taken to keeping at the center of the table, and scribbled a quick note.

_The boys that work in the kennels have been trying to scare me all day._

Arthur read the note, and couldn’t suppress a laugh. “Please tell me they set the dogs on you.”

Merlin frowned, wondering how Arthur knew.

_It isn’t funny, you know. Those are hunting dogs, not pets. Clotpole._

“Yes, I am aware, Merlin. They are my dogs after all.” Arthur took a bite of chicken, waving the half-eaten leg at Merlin to emphasise his words as he spoke with a mouth full of food in a decidedly un-kingly manner. “Why on earth are the kennel boys bothering you?”

_They think I’m lying about not being able to speak, so they’re trying to get me to yell so they can expose my lies to the entire castle, or something,_ Merlin wrote. He looked at Arthur, then grimaced at him chewing with his mouth open. _You’re disgusting, sire._

Arthur grinned. “I do it because it bothers you,” he said. Merlin didn’t bother writing a response; he knew Arthur did it to get to him since he would never be so uncouth in any other situation. “I’m sure you can handle a couple of teenagers having some fun with some harmless pranks,” he continued. “Though I wish I had been there to see it. I’d wager it was the funniest thing anyone has seen around here in awhile.”

_Your compassion for my plight is touching._

Arthur leaned over the table far enough to be able to slap Merlin’s arm. “Don’t be such a girl’s petticoat, Merlin. I’m sure even you can see the humor in the situation. You are the biggest chatterbox in the citadel, after all. The irony of the whole thing is what makes it funny.”

Merlin wrinkled his nose. _You see how funny it is when you’re the one who can’t communicate easily._

“Don’t be like that. I’m sure that any time now Gaius will have you as right as rain. Until then, lighten up will you?” Arthur tossed the bare chicken bone back onto his platter and pushed it away from him. “Clear this up, I’m finished.”

Merlin sighed. He knew Arthur was taking it seriously, but the joking was starting to wear thin. He hoped Gaius would figure out a solution soon, and things would go back to normal.

At least he had his studies to occupy his mind in the meantime.

“Oh, and Merlin?” Arthur said as Merlin started to pile dishes onto the serving platter. “Let Gaius
know that he can use whatever means necessary to get you cured. As funny as this is, not being able to talk to you easily is… inconvenient.” Merlin glanced up in time to see a complicated expression cross Arthur’s face, before it settled back into its normal somewhat-haughty neutrality.

*You’re telling me,* he thought, but he smiled a little as he completed his chore and left to drop the dishes off in the kitchens. Arthur didn’t let Merlin know in explicit terms that he cared very often, but Merlin had learned a long time ago to decipher Arthur’s words and their hidden meaning, and the fact that he had basically given Gaius permission to pursue any means, including magical means, to get Merlin back to normal meant a lot to him. Even if it was something he had mixed feelings about.

Setting the ethics of the king using magic when magic was still outlawed aside, it was nonetheless touching getting that small proof of Arthur’s concern for him.

Three months had passed since Merlin had been cursed, and the heat of midsummer was oppressive in the citadel. Merlin was in search of Gwen, with a note he’d written asking her to let the cook know to prepare provisions for fifteen knights to go on an emergency patrol the next morning. In the time since he’d lost his ability to speak, he had learned that his ability to draw clearly was hopeless, and his acting was even more so. So even though Gwen had new duties to attend as the person in charge of the citadel’s servants, she was who Merlin relied on to pass word on to any of the other servants when the knights were busy and couldn’t be bothered.

*Gwen, you know I love you,* the note read, and Gwen looked up at Merlin with raised eyebrows and a half smile.

“And you know that you don’t have to butter me up, Merlin,” she said, shoving playfully on his shoulder. Merlin shrugged and gave her a smile.

*Can you let the cook know that fifteen knights are going to be going on patrol for a fortnight, starting tomorrow morning? It’s last minute, but there’s word of disturbances in most of the villages half a day’s ride from here, and Arthur didn’t want to dally. Not that the cook needs to know that bit, just that it’s the king’s orders.*

“I’ll let her know as soon as I can,” Gwen promised, tucking the note into the pocket of her apron. Merlin gave her a quick hug, and mouthed, *thank you,* at her before he trotted off to get on with his next task.

“You owe me!” Gwen called after him, and Merlin turned to jog backwards for a moment to shoot her a cheeky grin. He was happy their friendship had survived her exile and subsequent return to Camelot. He had missed her in her months away, and was afraid that things would be different once she returned and she and Arthur resumed their courtship and eventually married. Though the courtship hadn’t actually seemed to have gone anywhere in the seasons that had passed. Merlin was dying to ask her what had happened between her and Arthur, since the king was notoriously close-lipped about his love life, even to Merlin, but he couldn’t bring himself to actually say anything. In a way, not knowing was easier. If she and Arthur were courting in secret, then Merlin didn’t have to know and his heart could remain unbroken for that much longer.
Not that he’d begrudge either of his best friends the happiness they would find with each other. He just wanted to pretend for a while longer.

As he passed, Merlin raised a hand to the greetings of other servants. After the first few days of his curse, word had spread that he had been cursed, and when the shock and mistrust over his magical affliction had worn off, people felt sorry for the normally talkative Merlin stuck without a way to communicate easily. The pity had annoyed him to the point of tears of frustration but as everyone learned to live with it, and ask him only yes or no questions if he wasn’t with someone literate, things fell into a relatively easy equilibrium.

At least people were being nice to him, he figured. It could definitely be worse. That wasn’t to say that the teenage boys that worked in the kennels were still bullying him for being simple, as they said, and proving Uther right that he had a mental affliction, but they had been mean-spirited to begin with, and were easy to ignore, even though some of the boys that worked in the stables had joined in on the teasing.

Merlin slowed his stride as he approached the council chambers, opening the door to peek in and see if Arthur was still in discussion with the rest of the council over the disturbances in the outlying towns. Arthur himself wanted to go out and head the patrol himself, but Merlin hoped that the rest of the council had talked him out of it. Violence on the roads and livestock being stolen was definitely an issue that needed to be dealt with, but it was happening in such a coordinated way among many towns at the same time that it would take more than one patrol to handle whatever was going on, and Arthur was no longer the head knight and prince. He was king, and he belonged in the citadel, allowing Leon to step up and manage the knights the way his position as first knight was meant to do.

When he poked his head into the council chambers, he found the meeting breaking up. Geoffrey strode toward the door, and Merlin opened it wider for him as he stepped aside to allow him to pass. Geoffrey paused to give Merlin a knowing look as he exited, a deep mistrust in his eyes that Merlin tried not to let get to him. Ever since that night he had taken the parchment from the library, Geoffrey had somehow known that Merlin had been behind it.

“I don’t know how, I don’t know why, but I know it was you, boy,” Geoffrey had said, heedless of Merlin’s frantic wordless denials. Ever since, Geoffrey had been even more guarded over the library and everything in it. Merlin counted himself lucky that he hadn’t needed to request anything of Geoffrey these past three months.

“I have my eye on you boy,” he murmured as he finally moved on, and Merlin felt a shiver run down his spine. Gaius, who was behind him, patted Merlin’s shoulder.

Merlin watched his mentor walk down the hallway side by side with Geoffrey, a sad smile on his lips. He knew Gaius had all but given up on finding a way to cure Merlin’s curse. In a way it hurt that even his father figure had lost any hope of fixing things, but there was also a sort of freedom in accepting his lot in life. Gaius was always so apologetic whenever Merlin asked if he’d somehow unearthed a solution, and after a while Merlin had stopped asking. He had been unable to take both the disappointment, and the pain that crossed Gaius’ face whenever he had to report his failure. Instead of letting it get him down— well, too much anyway— Merlin threw himself into practicing his nonverbal magic. Every spell he had ever done he did again without the words until he could do them as well as before. He had been through Cornelius Sigan’s book twice, and had mastered about a third of the spells in it.

All in all, Merlin felt more powerful than he had before.

The senior knights filed out after the remaining older members of the council, most of them
clapping Merlin’s shoulder as they left. They had been invaluable in helping Merlin to adjust to his new way of existing. They hadn’t treated him any differently, and were all willing to lend a hand when Merlin was in need of someone to read something to the other servants. Elyan especially had always jumped to lend a hand to Merlin when he needed it.

“Nobody expects people lowborn like you and me and Gwen to be able to do something like read,” Elyan had explained. “So it’s nice to prove them wrong sometimes.”

Gwaine, the last knight out of the room, ruffled Merlin’s hair on his way past, and Merlin shoved at him playfully before looking back inside the council chambers. Arthur was still seated at the round table, a beam of sun shining down on him from one of the high windows and lighting him up in a way that made him look like an ancient deity; a god of light and nobility and righteousness. Merlin stood there staring at him for a long time until Arthur finally looked up and noticed him. He made his way over, Arthur gesturing at him to sit in the seat at his right. Something in Merlin clenched at being offered the seat reserved for the most important, most trusted of advisors, even if it wasn’t official. It still meant something to him.

“I’m supposed to be out training the knights right now,” Arthur said, sighing. He attempted to run a hand through his sun-kissed hair, forgetting the crown that held it down. With a huff, He pulled it off and tossed it onto the table with a metallic clank, raking his fingers roughly through his hair. Merlin shook his head and exhaled in a way that had become his new laughter.

Leon can handle it, he mouthed. Arthur rubbed his neck with a groan.

“Another thing I have to give up now that I’m king, huh?” he asked. Merlin put a hand on Arthur’s shoulder, and the two of them sat in silence for several heartbeats. “Do you think I’m doing the right thing, sending a patrol and staying here myself?” Merlin nodded without hesitation. Arthur searched Merlin’s face, for what he doesn’t know.

“What would you do, if you were in my place?” he asked. Merlin looked around the table for something to write with, but only found maps and reports that Geoffrey would have his head if he despoiled. Arthur, seeing Merlin struggle for a way to communicate, put a hand on Merlin’s wrist to still him.

“Gaius still hasn’t come up with anything?” he asked softly. Merlin shook his head. Arthur sighed. “For all your annoying qualities, I rather miss your chatter.”

Merlin rolled his eyes and shoved at Arthur’s shoulder. Arthur leaned over and shoved back, and for a moment the two of them wrestled with each other for the upper hand. It felt so much like the old times, that for a moment Merlin forgot he couldn’t speak and opened his mouth to call Arthur a clotpole. When no sound came out, he bit his lip and tried not to feel the crushing disappointment he had felt for the past three months. Arthur saw this, and put a surprisingly gentle hand on Merlin’s cheek.

“I don’t tell you this enough,” he said as his thumb stroked along the jut of Merlin’s cheekbone, raising frisson goosebumps on his arms, “but thank you.” Merlin’s eyebrows shot up, and Arthur pulled his hand away to busy himself stacking the mess of parchment in front of him. “For being here, with me. For your counsel.” He turned momentarily to give Merlin a teasing smirk, “As infrequently useful as it may be. Just, thank you. I know things are difficult for you right now, but you never let it get to you. Sometimes I feel I could learn a thing or two about dogged determination from you.”

Merlin stared at Arthur, holding himself taut to resist the urge to hug him tightly. Arthur returned his attention to tamping parchment together to straighten it, and Merlin could feel the
embarrassment radiating from him at what he had said. He tapped Arthur’s arm to get his attention, and gave him a lopsided grin.

*Are you ill, sire?* he mouthed, and the tension of the moment was broken by the booming laugh Arthur let out when he had parsed what Merlin was asking.

“You cheeky thing,” he said, breathless with residual laughter. Merlin shrugged one shoulder. “I’m quite well. Now if you would mind doing your job for once and getting these things back down to Geoffrey. Honestly, you’re truly the worst manservant ever.” Arthur’s fond expression belied his words, and Merlin moved close to him to start helping.

As the two of them finished cleaning up, elbowing each other playfully and letting their hands brush together more than was strictly necessary, Merlin kept sneaking glances over at the king and feeling a deep, abiding affection wash over him that he didn’t even attempt to push down or control.

*I’m going to love him until the day I die.*

Things had settled into a steady, comfortable rhythm that Merlin was growing more and more accustomed to, which is why when it all went wrong several nights later Merlin knew he shouldn’t have been surprised.

Merlin and Arthur were in his chambers after dinner had been cleared away. Arthur was at his desk replying to correspondence from neighboring kingdoms, and Merlin was sitting in a chair by the hearth sharpening and polishing Arthur’s favorite sword. It was too hot for a fire to be going, so Merlin was working by a combination of candlelight and the waning twilight. They were in a companionable silence, only broken by the scratching of Arthur’s quill. It felt cosy and domestic, and Merlin wished that all their days together could be like this one.

He worked in languid strokes, setting the whetstone aside when he was satisfied with the newly-honed edge, and using his innate magic to imbue protective properties into the blade as well as truing it and making minor adjustments to the balance in a way that wouldn’t normally be possible without a blacksmith’s assistance. Excalibur wouldn’t have needed such attention, but Arthur didn’t bring that particular blade out for normal use.

It was a meditative task, one that allowed his mind to wander as he worked. He kept his head down to hide the glow of his eyes from Arthur as his magic worked— except when he flicked them up to take in the sight of Arthur hunched over his desk, his tunic sleeves rolled up to his elbows exposing his strong forearms, the candlelight catching the blond hair that Merlin longed to run his hands over in the deepest part of the night— but otherwise cast his attention out around him as he worked the polishing oil into the steel with a folded cloth.

Over the past months Merlin’s listening skills, and his ability to pick out individual sounds, had increased with the decrease of his own distracting chattering. He had learned to distinguish the footsteps of each guard that was assigned to Arthur’s chambers, as well as Arthur’s own step rhythm. The knights were a bit more difficult when they were together, as their training naturally took over and they fell into step with each other, but when they were apart Merlin could very
nearly always decipher who was trying to sneak up on him before they got close enough to touch him.

It was this newly-acquired skill that gave him pause when he heard the unfamiliar cadence of the footsteps beyond the closed doors of the king’s chambers. It wasn’t one of the guards, or a knight. The footsteps were too heavy for one of the older members of court, or a lady. Nobody else would have a reason to be wandering the hallway where the king’s chambers lie without being questioned about their business by a guard. Merlin had just looked up from his work and had scarcely had enough time to wonder who was there when the door opened a crack and a figure clad in black with a hood pulled over their head slipped silently inside. It was done with such stealth and fluidity that Merlin would not have normally noticed it until it was too late.

The man slipped through the shadows cast by the candles as if he were made of them, and Merlin stood abruptly, letting the sword clatter to the floor and startle Arthur as well as the intruder. Clearly he hadn’t expected to be noticed so soon after his entry. Merlin saw the man’s hand move to his belt, presumably toward a weapon.

“Merlin, what on earth—” Arthur started, sounding annoyed before catching sight of the man in black. Merlin knew that the king was thinking the same thing he was: nobody dressed and moved in such a manner if they weren’t up to no good.

Before Merlin could truly react, Arthur called his name again, holding a hand out for the sword Merlin had been polishing. He bent over to pick it up and tossed it over. Arthur caught it, lifting it to point at the intruder as he moved forward.

“Who are you, to trespass into the king’s chambers?” he asked. Merlin slowly crept back, moving himself behind Arthur and out of the way of any fight that might occur. The stranger didn’t answer, just stood in the doorway for a handful of heartbeats, before darting forward with an outstretched hand. Merlin blinked and saw the hand held a dagger. As the attacker moved further into the room, the candlelight caught the edge of the blade and glinted dully with an unnatural green tinge.

It was coated in poison. His heart in his throat, Merlin raised a hand as he tried to cry out and warn Arthur, but no sound was forthcoming and the rising sense of panic and frustration overwhelmed Merlin. Arthur met the assassin’s blade with his own, deflecting it easily, but the assassin wasn’t to be deterred. He disengaged to take a step back, and sidestepped Arthur’s answering attack. The man was lithe, and fast, and Merlin could tell just from the few movements he had seen so far that Arthur was going to have a difficult fight ahead of him. He didn’t waste energy with big, flashy attacks, and didn’t move in unless he thought he saw an opening. Arthur was able to defend and counterattack, but Merlin wondered how long that he would be able to last.

Feeling helpless to do anything, Merlin gripped the side of the table as he tried to recall any of the magic he had learned from Cornelius Sigan’s book. His mind came back blank, though, and he looked around desperately for something he could use to trip the assassin up. A blanket, a stray tunic, anything. Unfortunately though, he had tidied Arthur’s room before serving dinner and there was nothing on the floor he could use. He thought of taking a blanket from the bed, but he was too far to do it without being seen, and the magic would be noticed if he tried.

The sound of steel meeting steel grabbed Merlin’s attention, and he looked back over to where the assassin and Arthur were fighting, finding them mid-grapple before Arthur used a foot to shove the man in black away, the hood falling from the man’s head to reveal a face covered in old scars. With a grunt, the man straightened himself, and charged nimbly back at Arthur to re-engage. As he charged, his foot brushed against the fringe of a Persian rug Arthur had been gifted at Yule by a visiting noble, and with a thought Merlin drew the rug into a wrinkle, something for the assassin to
trip over. What he hadn’t counted on, though, was Arthur being pushed back himself, and tripping over the newly-created obstacle. He stumbled backwards, losing his footing and landing hard on his arse. The assassin took advantage easily, grabbing Arthur’s wrists and pinning them above his head and kneeling Arthur’s stomach to keep him from struggling.

No! No, no, no, no, no! Merlin mouthed, wishing he had his voice for the thousandth time.

He saw the assassin lean close to Arthur, squeezing his wrists together in one hand as he drew the dagger downwards, and heard him whisper, “King Æthelberht says hello.” With a swift movement, the man jerked his hand, intending to stab into Arthur’s gut, but Merlin couldn’t let it happen. He registered Arthur’s eyes widening, anticipating the blow, but Merlin’s vision went gold as he lifted his hand in a punch, his index finger and thumb in an L shape, and the rest of his fingers curled toward his palm. He twisted his wrist to the right, and shoved every ounce of power he had into it. The assassin was yanked backwards, pinned roughly to the wall and hovering above the floor.

Silence filled the room, and Merlin didn’t have to look at Arthur to guess what the king’s expression was. But Merlin wouldn’t have taken it back for anything. He wished there had been a better way to reveal his magic to Arthur, but he hadn’t been about to let the man he loved, the one he had sworn to protect to the end of his days get killed to protect his secret. Biting his lip, struggling to hold his arm steady, Merlin jerked his chin toward the assassin. He heard Arthur stand and retrieve his sword, and then the king approached the man in black.

“King Æthelberht sent you? To what end?” Arthur asked. The man didn’t reply, he simply squirmed in an effort to break himself free. Merlin squeezed the fingers curled toward his palm tighter, and the man stopped moving as the magic held him fast. Arthur shot Merlin an indecipherable look over his shoulder, and Merlin tried not to think about it.

“Does this have something to do with the raids that have been happening in the villages near here?” Arthur asked, but Merlin knew he wouldn’t get any answers this way. The man was clearly a well-trained professional. Arthur knew this as well, since he didn’t wait longer than a handful of seconds before shaking his head and striding toward the door to summon a guard. The door closed behind him, and it was several minutes before he returned with four guards. They came in, and looked confusedly between Merlin and the man pinned to the wall, as if unsure which one they were supposed to be arresting. Arthur waved a hand dismissively toward the assassin.

“Take him to the dungeons, and ensure that he doesn’t try to kill himself before we can get some information out of him,” he said. The guards pointed their weapons at the assassin, and Merlin reluctantly dropped the spell, allowing the man to crumple to the floor to be arrested. The magic faded from his eyes, leaving the room darker in his perception. When the guards left, two men holding the assassin’s arms, and two holding weapons at his back, Merlin saw the bodies of Arthur’s usual guard crumpled in the hallway in pools of their own blood. He brought his hand to his heart, remorseful that he couldn’t have saved them. They both had families, and were good men. Merlin knew Arthur was usually the one that told the families of fallen knights and guards when one had died, and he didn’t envy him the task.

The heavy doors shut with a decisive thud, and the two of them were left alone in a deafening silence.
For a long time Arthur stood with his back to him. Merlin was pinned to place by an invisible force, one that wouldn’t let him run, no matter how angry Arthur turned out to be. No matter what sense of self-preservation tried to win the day. He stared at a point between Arthur’s shoulder blades, tried to guess what was going through his head. When he finally turned to face Merlin, and he saw the cold fury in the king’s face, Merlin wished for a moment that he had fled when he had the chance. Panic gripped him, and his heart sped up as if he had just finished a sprint. His hands twisted in the fabric of the hem of his tunic, and he struggled to keep his breathing slow lest he start hyperventilating.

“Sit,” Arthur ordered in a voice as cold as the deepest winter frost, flicking the point of his sword toward the desk in an elegant, deadly arc to gesture where he wanted Merlin. “Explain yourself.”

Merlin made his way back to the desk on legs that felt as though they would collapse at any moment, as if they were made of the aspic that the cook used in her meat pies, all wobbly and unsteady. He sat, concentrating still on his breathing, and glanced up at Arthur, who had begun to pace the length of the room between the table and the bed. Merlin could see his grip tightening rhythmically on the hilt of his sword, and hoped that Arthur would at the very least allow him to write his mother a goodbye letter.

He reached for the quill, abandoned on the desk where Arthur had tossed it when the intruder had interrupted, and carefully dipped it into the inkwell. His hands were shaking badly, and when he pulled back to try and begin writing, he splattered ink across the half-written letter Arthur had been working on, ruining it.

Another thing for him to be angry with me about, he thought as he gripped the quill tighter, making his hand shake worse. He never honestly thought Arthur would kill him for the magic, not even in his worst imaginings. That honor had always gone to Uther when he was alive. But the angry hunch of Arthur’s shoulders, the firm, stubborn set to his jaw, the way he continued to hold his sword while he paced restlessly as if he expected another attack at any moment, it all gave Merlin pause.

Slowly he touched the quill tip to the parchment in front of him, scratching out a shaky I, but when it fell to the desk, unable to be held in the face of Merlin’s trembling, he pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes until he saw stars.

He’s my friend. He hasn’t had anyone executed for sorcery in nearly a year. He cares about me. I didn’t do anything wrong. I’m a sorcerer and I’ve lied to him for nearly ten years. He trusted me and I didn’t trust him. He’ll never forgive me.

Merlin’s thoughts swirled around his head like snowflakes in a blizzard, ephemeral but with deadly potential. He felt ill, stomach cramping as though he needed to throw up, and swallowed reflexively to try and stave it off. He pulled his hands away from his eyes and tracked Arthur’s movements once more, feeling a resolve crystallize in his gut that made him stand and walk with soft footsteps over to the agitated king, standing in front of him at arm’s length. Arthur stared at him incredulously.
“You’ve hardly been there any time at all, I can’t believe you’re finished—” he started, but cut himself off when Merlin knelt at his feet.

The sword in Arthur’s hand sagged toward the ground, and Merlin looked up into his king’s eyes as he reached out and took the blade near the crossguard between his thumb and forefinger and lifted it level with his shoulder. He let the weight of the blade rest on his thumb, hand still trembling though not as badly as before, sliding down the steel, freshly-polished by his own hand. His knuckle caught the edge of the fuller as it moved closer to the end. The razor-thin edge bit into the meat at the base of his thumb, sharp enough to not immediately cause pain, drawing a thin red line of blood that welled up, gathering in crimson beads as he positioned the point at the rapidly-beating pulse in his neck. If Arthur didn’t trust him enough after all this time they had spent together, after years of service and friendship and sacrifice, for each other’s sake, then Merlin didn’t want to wait until judgment was passed any longer.

He pressed himself forward until he felt the tip of the sword bite into his neck just enough to let a trickle of blood slip down his throat and soak into his neckerchief, holding the sword in place as he slowly lowered his hand to rest in his lap with the other one. Daring Arthur to end it, to play his part as judge, jury and executioner. To be the king, and uphold the law. Merlin held himself completely still, staring unwaveringly at Arthur, and waited. Distantly, the warning bell began to ring, but Merlin was focused only on the man in front of him.

In front of Merlin’s eyes Arthur’s expression morphed from annoyance to stricken to utter horror. His mouth fell open, and he jerked the sword back, dropping it to the floor behind him with a clatter that cut through the thick silence.

“Merlin, no,” Arthur said, voice hoarse with something Merlin couldn’t give name to. He bent forward and grabbed at the front of Merlin’s tunic, hauling him to his feet and steadying him as he found equilibrium. Merlin swayed in a mixture of relief and confusion, bringing his own hands up to clutch at Arthur’s biceps.

“You’re an utter fool,” he whispered, and before Merlin had time to formulate a response, Arthur crushed Merlin against his chest and kissed him.

Time felt as though it had stopped, and Merlin’s eyes widened in shock as his heart did its best to beat itself out of his chest. He stood there, leaning against Arthur’s strong form, feeling the heat of him in a way he had only dreamt of before. He didn’t know what to think, his head full of a buzzing noise that was steadily growing louder, his breath being stolen from him. When he felt Arthur freeze up and start to draw back, Merlin abandoned any semblance of trying to detangle his thoughts and feelings and squeezed his eyes shut, kissing Arthur back with a desperation he had never felt so intensely before. He tried to tell Arthur everything in the kiss. His feelings, his sorrow at having deceived him for so long, his devotion and yearning and love.

They drew apart for a moment, Merlin searching Arthur’s face for any sign that this was a cruel joke, or something he would take back, and only found a longing that matched his own. Before Arthur could say anything, Merlin leaned in to kiss him once more, his tongue tracing the seam of Arthur’s lips as his arms slipped around Arthur’s neck. Their lips parted as one, and their tongues slid against each other. Arthur made a needy noise in the back of his throat, and Merlin exhaled shakily as they mutually deepened the kiss. Merlin’s fingers slipped up into Arthur’s hair, twisting into the spun gold strands as Arthur’s fingertips dug into the small of Merlin’s back.

When they parted for the second time, Merlin let his hands fall from Arthur’s hair and took a step back, trying to catch his breath and gather his thoughts. Arthur looked wrecked, and he suspected he was the same. Merlin let his fingers lightly trail along the length of Arthur’s arm, his face
feeling warm as he moved back to the desk, his gaze lingering on Arthur as though he were afraid to look away and let the fantasy dissolve.

*This isn’t a dream. Arthur kissed me,* Merlin thought as he sat and grabbed the quill with a much more steady hand.

“Merlin…” Arthur said, and Merlin offered him a fleeting smile as he dipped the quill and began to write.

*I’ve had magic my entire life. I was born with it. My mother says that I could move things with my mind before I could walk. I didn’t ask to be born this way, but I was and I am not ashamed. I’m desperately sorry that I hid it from you for so long, and I wanted to tell you about my magic for a long time, but the longer I waited the less I felt I could just… bring it up. I didn’t know how you would react to my secrets and lies, and I honestly didn’t want to force you to choose. At first between me and your father, and now between me and your father’s laws and legacy.*

*Don’t get me wrong, I believe with my entire heart that your father’s laws are wrong, and cruel, and should be repealed. But he was your father, and I understand how difficult it is to live in his shadow with his expectations, even after he’s gone. And whatever you decide, if you prefer to keep things as they are or if you do end up wanting to change the laws, I will support you fully, but I hope that you would do it because you think it’s the right thing to do and not because of trying to keep the status quo, or to please me or someone else you personally know, or keep them from legal consequences. Uther overlooked magic when it suited him, and I know you’re better than him in every single way.*

*If you believe one thing I tell you tonight, believe this: my magic, and everything I am, belongs to you. I have only ever used it for you since my arrival in Camelot, and if you allow me to then I will continue to use it in your service until the day you release me.*

*As for the specifics… that is a long set of explanations that would take many days to detail like this. Perhaps that can wait for another day, if you prefer.*

Merlin read over his words, and handed them over to Arthur with a sad smile. Arthur took the parchment and sat on the chest at the end of his bed, tilting the parchment toward the candle to catch the light. Merlin saw his lips move as he read, and snorted a silent laugh. It was just one more thing that endeared Arthur to him in a pile of a hundred little things.

At last, Arthur lowered the parchment and looked at Merlin with a steady gaze. “You’re an idiot,” he said, voice firm. Merlin felt his face fall, and bit his lip as he tried to think of what to say to that. Arthur looked back at the parchment.

“I’m so angry with you,” he said, more softly. “I didn’t think I could ever be this angry at you of all people, Merlin. I feel… I feel betrayed. By my closest friend.” Arthur took a deep breath, and Merlin could feel tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. He blinked quickly to dispel them.

“But there is no world wherein I would want to see you dead. Especially not for the crime of keeping me safe.”

A tear slipped down Merlin’s cheek, and he wasn’t sure if it was relief or pain at having hurt his best friend. Probably both.

“I’m going to need to think about this,” Arthur said after a long silence had stretched between the two of them, Arthur looking thoughtful and Merlin crying silently as he watched. “A few days, perhaps more.”
Merlin nodded and stood, wiping at the tear tracks on his face with the sleeve of his jacket. Arthur stood as well, and reached out to stop Merlin as he passed by on his way to the door. He thumbed at the mostly-dry trail of blood on Merlin’s neck, trying to wipe it away.

“You really thought I could?” he asked, barely more than a whisper.

_I don’t know_, Merlin mouthed. _I hoped not._

Arthur searched his face, giving Merlin the ghost of a smile before letting him go. Merlin longed to reach out and catch his hand, to squeeze it and reassure Arthur that things would be well, that they would get through this. But even he couldn’t say how things would turn out.

He left.

Merlin took Arthur’s request for time to think as needing time away from him, and didn’t resume his normal duties the next day. When Arthur didn’t come for him bellowing like a banshee in annoyance, Merlin knew he had guessed correctly and tried not to let himself get depressed over it. Instead, he used his free time to practice his nonverbal magic and help Gaius with remedies and whatever patients came in to see him. He didn’t tell Gaius about the specifics of what had happened the night of the attack, not wanting to worry him needlessly until Arthur had come to a decision about what he was going to do about Merlin.

Two days after the incident in Arthur’s chambers with no word from the king, Merlin was getting antsy. The leech tank was the cleanest it had ever been in an effort to keep himself busy, and Merlin could tell Gaius was growing weary of his restlessness.

_I’m going out for a while, to get some fresh air_, he wrote. Gaius simply waved him off, and Merlin smiled as he left and headed toward the stables. It was midmorning, and as he approached he hoped that it was late enough that the stalls had already been mucked and the stable hands were elsewhere so he didn’t have to worry about them giving him a hard time as they had been all summer since losing his voice.

His luck wasn’t proving to be good, as he heard voices coming from inside the stable as he approached, and sighed to himself. He honestly didn’t care what people said about him, or if they spread rumors behind his back. It was simply a pain in the arse to deal with them face to face, especially when he couldn’t do anything to defend himself without a voice. None of the stable boys were able to read, and he didn’t want to drag Gwen or one of the knights into something so low stakes.

“Hey look who it is,” Merlin heard one of them say, and sighed. He considered turning around and taking a walk instead, but it was too late. The biggest one of them strode over and draped his arm around Merlin’s shoulders in a mockery of friendship. He was almost as wide as he was tall, and had greasy black hair that was tucked behind both ears.

“Still pretending to be mute then, are ya?” The youngest one said, shoving him in a way Merlin was used to with the knights, but with none of the easy camaraderie. Merlin ducked down to dislodge the arm from his shoulders, but the big one, Eldin, Merlin thought his name was, didn’t
“It has to be a ruse after all,” Eldin said, squeezing Merlin’s shoulder tightly enough to dig his blunt, filthy fingertips into the skin beneath his tunic and start hurting. Merlin refused to give him a reaction, though, and set his face in stony neutrality. “After all, if it was somethin’ to do with magic then the king wouldn’t let you near him. What with magic bein’ outlawed, an’ all.”

“The king is goin’ soft on magic, though,” the younger one, Owen, said. He tossed his floppy brown hair out of his eyes, and tugged at the tunic he was wearing to try and give it more length. He was tall and still had some growing to do, and his clothes perpetually didn’t fit him correctly. “Hasn’t been a burnin’ in Camelot since before Uther died.”

“Always hated the burnin’s,” Eldin said, confusing Merlin with his disapproval. “Smelled somethin’ awful. Always thought beheadin’ was the way to go with sorcerers.”

Ah, there it is, Merlin thought wryly, struggling to maintain his neutral expression. Eldin brought his free hand up to run a finger in a line across Merlin’s Adam’s apple, fingernail scraping the skin to mime where Merlin would lose his head to the headsman, making Owen double over in laughter.

Merlin smiled tightly, more of a grimace, when a voice from behind them caught their attention.

“Haven’t you two got tired of this shit?” Walter, the oldest stable hand asked. Eldin rolled his eyes melodramatically, but Owen stood up straight.

“We’re just havin’ a bit o’ fun, aren’t we Merlin?” Eldin asked, slapping Merlin’s back hard enough that he thought he might find a bruise there later.

“Yeah, well Tyr wanted you two to go to the saddler and pick up the new saddle the king ordered,” Walter said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, yeah,” Eldin said, shoving Merlin away carelessly. He hit Owen’s chest, but righted himself before he could get shoved by the younger boy. “Don’t gotta be a nag about it. C’mon Owen, let’s go.”

Walter moved to stand next to Merlin, and watched the others until they were well on their way toward the tanner in the lower town.

“Sorry about that,” Walter said when they were gone. “If I’da known you were gonna be here I would’a chased ‘em off sooner so you didn’t have to deal with them.”

Merlin shook his head, offering Walter a grateful smile. Walter patted Merlin’s arm.

“You here for the king? He need a horse readied?” Walter asked, and Merlin shook his head.

For me, he mouthed, pointing at his own chest. Walter watched Merlin’s mouth carefully, and nodded.

“For you, that’s fine. Let me help you saddle one of ‘em up.” Walter nudged Merlin ahead of him before Merlin could decline the help, pulling a well-worn and well-cared-for saddle from its place and meeting Merlin over by his favorite mare.

“Honeysuckle seems to really like you,” he said, gesturing his chin toward the dappled brown mare. Merlin patted her nose fondly.

I like her too, he mouthed with a smile. Walter smiled back, pink staining his cheeks.
“She’s not the only one who likes you,” he murmured, and Merlin felt the bottom drop out of his stomach at the shy confession. He didn’t know how he was going to turn him down gently, to tell him that his heart already belonged to another, but apparently the look on his face did it for him.

“It’s fine, you don’t have to say anything. Not that you could right now,” Walter said with a soft laugh. Merlin tried to smile, but he felt so bad that he was breaking the lad’s heart. “I just figured you should know that not everyone ‘round here is a horse’s arse.”

Merlin reached over and gently touched Walter’s face, freckled and tan from days working in the sun, and tried to convey how sorry he was that he couldn’t return his feelings. He was a nice young man, and Merlin wished he could have a simple romantic entanglement without the complications that came with Arthur’s station. He brushed his fingers over the light brown hair that curled around Walter’s ears.

I’m so sorry, he mouthed. Walter shook his head.

“Don’t be sorry for something like this,” he said. “I figure I already know who you have your eye on, and I know there’s no way to compete with that. Just,” he paused and brought a hand up to hold Merlin’s against his face more firmly before letting it go. “Perhaps someday you can teach me to read? I think I’d like that.”

Merlin nodded, smiling brighter. I would love to.

The two of them readied Honeysuckle to ride, and as Merlin rode out into the early afternoon sun, he thought about Walter, and Arthur, and kisses, and destiny.

A few nights later, Merlin was assisting Gaius brewing large batches of a remedy for the upcoming autumn when people would start taking ill with coughing sicknesses with the turning of the weather. It was something he had helped Gaius with for as long as he had lived in Camelot, every summer’s end to ensure they wouldn’t get overwhelmed when the need arose. Merlin had done it so often, that he allowed his mind to wander, and not pay as much attention as he probably should have been when simmering liquids and fire were involved. The wooden spoon he was using to stir the concoction fell from his grasp and clattered over the edge of the pot, and in his haste to try and catch it Merlin brushed the back of his hand against the scalding iron. He snatched his hand back as he cried out in pain.

The biggest shock, bigger than the reddening burn on his hand, was when a sound croaked out of his throat instead of silence. Ignoring the searing pain of the burn, Merlin’s hand flew to his throat as Gaius rushed over to him, abandoning his own pot of potion.

“Do that again,” Gaius demanded, and Merlin nodded.

“Hello?” he said, voice crackling and hoarse from disuse. It reminded Merlin of the sound the metal bits of cart wheels made in the spring after having been left unused for the winter, rusty and squeaky and grinding. Excitement bubbled through him as he realised that he could speak once more. The curse had been lifted, life could go back to normal. He grinned widely.
“My voice is back!” he said, though half the words were a barely-intelligible rasp.

“I can hear that,” Gaius said, clapping Merlin on his shoulder, then pulling him into a hug. Merlin hugged him back as he laughed. “But what changed, my boy? What just happened?”

Merlin pulled back, shrugging and holding up his burnt hand. “I just burnt myself while stirring the cough remedy,” he said. “But I don’t think that was what did it since I do that all the time when I’m helping you. It’s nothing special or out of the ordinary.”

Gaius shook his head. “Has anything changed in the last several days? Anything at all?”

Merlin looked down at his hand, rubbing pensively at the burn. It was true that he’d got used to not even trying to use his voice any more, so something having happened days prior to have triggered the curse breaking without him realizing it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. He thought about Arthur, and the kiss they shared, the way they had embraced each other. It was the only thing different in a string of weeks full of the status quo. He felt himself flushing at the thought, embarrassed of how much he enjoyed being in Arthur’s arms, of how much he wanted to be in them once more. It made him miss Arthur desperately, even though it had only been five days.

“I might know what did it,” Merlin mumbled, unable to look into Gaius’ eyes. He picked at the dirt under his fingernail to try and stall, but Gaius would have none of it.

“Well?” he asked impatiently. Merlin could practically hear Gaius’ eyebrow raising expectantly.

“You know how several nights ago an assassin was found in Arthur’s chambers?” Merlin started, and Gaius sat down on the bench by the work table.

“Yes,” he said. Merlin chanced a look over at him, and cleared his throat.

“Well, I might have stopped him with magic. And Arthur might have seen me.”

“You did what? Merlin, you know how dangerous it is to use magic in the citadel. And Arthur saw you? And you aren’t in the dungeon?” Gaius had reached out to hold the edge of the work table as if he were going to fall over, looking at Merlin with abject fear in his eyes. Merlin crouched down in front of him and put a hand on Gaius’ knee to try and reassure him.

“I know, but I couldn’t let Arthur be killed. The man had a poisoned knife, and Arthur was pinned down. I didn’t have a choice.” Merlin coughed, the use of his voice after so long tickling his throat.

“No, I suppose you didn’t,” Gaius said, leaning over to rest his hands on Merlin’s shoulders. “Arthur was… fine with you using magic?”

“Not at all,” Merlin said with a wry laugh. “He was furious. But he doesn’t want me killed. He’s thinking things through right now.”

“I had wondered why I had the pleasure of your presence so often these past days,” Gaius said, shaking his head. “The king is a good man, but Merlin you must learn to be less reckless.”

“I know,” Merlin said.

“So you think that using your magic in front of Arthur was what broke the curse?”

Merlin felt his neck heating with embarrassment. “No, not exactly…” He fought the urge to hide his face, enduring Gaius’ gaze for a moment more to try and gather himself. “Well in the heat of the moment, Arthur might have possibly kissed me. A little.”
Both Gaius’ eyebrows lifted to his hairline, and Merlin hunched his shoulders up. “Is that so?”

“Just a little,” he said, voice faint. “Don’t judge me. It was a very stressful moment for both of us.”

“Hmm,” Gaius said, and Merlin was relieved that he sounded thoughtful and not judgmental. “True love’s kiss is indeed a powerful thing.”

It took Merlin a moment to parse what Gaius had said, but he stood so fast from his crouch that he almost knocked them both over. “Love? Who said anything about love?”

Gaius stared at Merlin, who felt as though his very soul were being laid bare. It wasn’t long before he finally cracked.

“Okay, fine, I love him,” he said, a stubborn twist to his lips. “But I thought the whole true love’s kiss thing only worked to cure love potions and spells. That’s how it worked with him and Gwen that one time, with the Lady Vivian.” Merlin felt his heart twist at the memory that Gwen was Arthur’s true love. Perhaps whatever had happened between them the other night was a fluke? Never to be repeated?

Gaius shrugged. “Honestly your guess is as good as mine. Magic as a craft has been extensively documented in some ways, but is a mystery in others. In either case, the most likely answer is that it’s simply a matter of true love’s kiss winning the day.”

“But what about—” Merlin started, spinning around when the door flew open. Arthur stood in the doorway, and Merlin’s question died in his throat. He was dressed in a simple red tunic, his chainmail having been removed already. Arthur shifted his arm behind him, but Merlin saw a stack of what looked to be a lot of parchment held in one hand.


Merlin, to busy himself so as not to look like an awkward thing in front of the king, moved to the cabinet where Gaius kept the burn salve to tend to his hand.

“In a manner of speaking,” Merlin murmured as he rubbed at the burn with the cooling cream. “Have I ever mentioned how your timing leaves much to be desired?”

“You can’t talk to me that way, Merlin,” Arthur sniped, and Merlin looked over his shoulder with a cheeky grin.

“I think you’ll find that now that I have my voice back I can talk to you however I want.”

“Come in, sire, and shut the door behind you,” Gaius instructed Arthur, who shuffled into the main part of the room and fidgeted with the parchment behind his back. “What brings you down here at the time of the evening?”

“Hm?” Arthur said, sounding distracted. Merlin looked curiously back at him, finding his attention split between Gaius and himself. He turned back around to meticulously replace the pot of salve, trying to calm his racing heart. “Ah, I took a rather hard hit in training today, and came for a pain remedy.”

Merlin wanted to call Arthur’s bluff, since the king never complained of the aches and pains he received in training lest his honor be called into question or some such rubbish, but it would require asking some uncomfortable questions that Merlin wasn’t sure he was ready to ask or answer himself.
Gaius saved him from saying anything by standing with a groan. “If it’s for pain, then let me mix you something to drink before bed,” he said, moving off to the side of the room and gathering the supplies for a mild pain draught.

“Thank you, Gaius,” Arthur said. Merlin moved back to the bubbling pot with cough remedy, poking at it with the spoon, before moving it from the flame.

“Pain, huh? Must have been one hell of a hit for you to want to swallow one of Gaius’ concoctions. You must be getting old.”

“Take that back,” Arthur said, lightly punching Merlin’s shoulder. Merlin laughed softly, which caused him to cough. Arthur was by him in a second, patting his back.

“Are you all right?” he asked. Merlin nodded, holding up a hand.

“Yes, it’s just a tickle in my throat. Suddenly using your voice after months of not using it is hard work.” He swallowed, and straightened up.

Arthur’s lips twisted into a half smirk. “Leave it to you, Merlin, to turn something so simple into such an arduous thing.” They stood there in silence, listening to the clatter of Gaius mixing and crushing herbs in the background. “I heard some of what you two were saying, when I walked to the door,” Arthur said, bringing his free hand up to rub at the back of his neck. Merlin refrained from groaning, but only just.

“Why am I not surprised?” he asked.

“So true love’s kiss is what fixed things in the end?” Arthur asked. Merlin felt his ears heat.

“Something like that,” he said, staring at a point behind Arthur’s shoulder in an effort to avoid meeting his eyes.

“It’s funny, I wasn’t aware that you had taken up with anyone,” Arthur answered, and the pout in his voice was clear. Merlin cocked his head, curious at the reaction.

“What?” he said, feeling wrong-footed.


“Arthur, you’re the only person I spend any significant amount of time with, you clotpole. When would I have time to ‘take up’ with anyone?” he asked, incredulity dripping from his words.

Gaius cleared his throat, interrupting them from saying anything further. “I think I’ll go check on the baker’s daughter. She should be giving birth any time now, and would probably appreciate the visit.” He gave Merlin a pointed look, and Merlin felt his face reddening.

“I’ll just finish Arthur’s pain draught then?” he asked.

Gaius shook his head. “No need, here it is.” He handed it over to Merlin. “Please behave yourselves while I’m away.” Merlin could practically hear Gaius calling the two of them idiots under his breath.

They didn’t say anything, just watched Gaius leave in a swirl of robes. Merlin didn’t know if he would ever live his embarrassment down in a hundred lifetimes. The silence between him and Arthur drew itself out long past the point of comfort, and Merlin searched for a way to break it before it got worse. Arthur beat him to it, though.
“Would it be so awful if it were me you were in love with?” he asked. Merlin saw him biting his lip, and felt his breath catch.

“What says it isn’t you?” Merlin answered before he could think better of it. The expression that bloomed on Arthur’s face was worth it, the shy smile lighting him up like the midsummer dawn. Turning away abruptly, Merlin set down the vial of pain remedy on the work table and sat down heavily on the bench, moving things around in a mimicry of tidying to keep himself busy. After a moment, Arthur joined him, sitting close enough that Merlin could feel the warmth of him, their thighs almost touching.

“The pain remedy was just an excuse to come down here,” Arthur said after a few minutes of silence. Merlin shot him a half smile and a shrug.

“I figured,” he said.

“I just… couldn’t stop thinking about what happened that night. Between you and me. Not just the magic, but also the… other thing.” He cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable at coming this close to talking about his feelings. Merlin sympathised.

“Me too,” he said. “Is that why you brought all the parchment?”

Arthur let out a startled laugh, and pulled the stack from behind him to lay on the table. Merlin wasn’t sure why he was still trying to hide it, but figured it was Arthur being awkward.

“You saw that, then,” he said. Merlin nodded with a tiny grin. “I simply figured that there would be a lot of writing during this conversation, based on what you said the other night. About it being a long story for another time.” Merlin nodded, grinning wider. “So I may have borrowed some parchment from Geoffrey.”

Abruptly Merlin’s grin fell, and he groaned. “Oh no, you’re going to get me into trouble.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur’s brow furrowed at Merlin’s sudden mood change.

“He already thinks I’m a parchment thief. I’m the first person he’s going to suspect.” Merlin banged his forehead on the edge of the table and groaned again. Arthur laughed. “Let me guess, you helped yourself to his stash as well, didn’t you?”

“I’m not saying you’re right, but I’m also not saying you’re wrong.” Arthur laughed again, and Merlin looked up at him with a pained expression. “Parchment is expensive, and Gaius can only afford so much! And most of my money gets sent back to my mother, so it’s not like I could have bought much either.”

The two of them fell silent again once Arthur’s laughter faded. Merlin drummed his fingers on the table softly to fill the silence. “You’re not going to like everything I have to say,” he warned, sneaking a glance over at him from the corner of his eye.

“I don’t expect to,” Arthur answered, serious. “But I need to hear it anyway.”

Merlin worried his bottom lip between his teeth, trying to figure where to begin. Next to him, Arthur sat patiently, not pushing. Merlin appreciated it.

“Gaius said that true love’s kiss is very powerful, and is probably what broke the curse,” he finally blurted, figuring the magic could wait a few more minutes. Arthur’s mouth stretched into a slow smirk.
“If you haven’t been going around kissing other people, then am I to take that to mean that you’re in love with me, and the kiss the other night is what broke the curse?” Merlin leaned over to nudge Arthur’s shoulder even as he rolled his eyes.

“You’re apparently in love with me too, cabbagehead. Otherwise it wouldn’t have worked.” Merlin gathered every bit of courage in his body and turned to face Arthur, whose smirk had transformed into a soft, fond smile that made Merlin’s heart squeeze in his chest.

“Yeah. I am.”

Three words, and Merlin was gone. He hadn’t expected such a sincere retort from Arthur. All thoughts of questioning him flew out of his head. Merlin had meant to ask about Gwen, and what was going on between the two of them. He had meant to say so many things, but all he could do was replay Arthur’s words over and over, and try not to die of happiness.

Arthur reached over to take Merlin’s hand in his own, stroking his thumb over the back of it, before he turned it over to trace a gentle fingertip over the healing line of the sword wound. Merlin watched the emotions flicker across Arthur’s face as he studied his hand, heard Arthur exhale in a regretful sigh. He leaned closer, his heart in his throat and pulse pounding in his ears, drawing Arthur’s attention from his hand to his face. Arthur held Merlin’s gaze, unblinking, until he finally spoke.

“God, Merlin. Seeing you kneeling at my feet like that, ready to die. It was all my worst nightmares come true.” Arthur threaded his fingers through Merlin’s and squeezed his hand almost painfully tight.

“I couldn’t… you were so angry that night, after what you saw me do. The not knowing how you were going to ultimately react was just too much,” Merlin said, closing his eyes and resting his forehead against Arthur’s.

“Don’t you dare try to throw your life away like that ever again. You hear me, Merlin?” Arthur whispered fiercely. “It seems like you make so many assumptions about what people are thinking and feeling, and you act on those assumptions without confirming them first. But you have to give people, no, you have to give _me_ a chance to think and act for myself.”

“I’m sorry, Arthur,” Merlin said, his already-weak voice breaking with the emotion of the apology. The beginning of tears pricked at the corners of his eyes. He knew Arthur was right, but he didn’t know any other way to be. He had been acting on his own for so long, all in the name of some nebulous destiny he couldn’t control, that he had forgotten how to trust. “I was so scared. I didn’t think you would actually kill me, but in the moment I didn’t know.” He took a shaky breath. “I didn’t want to hurt you, but most of all I didn’t want you to hate me.”

Arthur lifted a hand to Merlin’s face, thumbing away the unshed tears. “You’re the bravest man I’ve ever met. And also the stupidest. As if I could do anything to harm you. As if I could ever hate you. Believe me, I tried. Idiot.”

Merlin laughed, opening his eyes to look at Arthur, who was gazing at him with obvious affection mixed with exasperation. When the tenseness of the previous moment had passed, Arthur tilted his head to the side, moving slowly in as if for a kiss, his lips turning up in a smile that was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. Merlin flicked his tongue out to wet his own lips, and nudged the tip of his nose against Arthur’s, holding them where they were for a moment. The hand not tangled in Arthur’s moved to wrap around his broad torso, twisting his fingers into the fabric of Arthur’s tunic. The smell of him, so close and so warm and so familiar, intoxicated Merlin. He felt dizzy with the nearness he had always craved, half afraid that he would wake up and find it was all...
a dream.

“We were supposed to be talking about this,” he said, trying not to let the proximity to Arthur
derail his thoughts. “The magic. And us. Now that I’m able to and all.” Merlin’s voice was barely
above a whisper.

Arthur stared unblinkingly at Merlin, brushing his lips lightly against Merlin’s in a ghost of a kiss.
“Yes, we probably should. And we will, there are so many things I need to say to you. But if I’ve
learned anything over the past three months, it’s that talking can definitely wait.”

Their mouths met, and Merlin’s eyes slid shut as talking became unnecessary.

End Notes

Well that’s it! I would love to know what you guys thought. Leave a comment and let me
know!! Thanks for taking this journey with me ❤️

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!