plus ça change (plus c'est la même chose)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/238483.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Fandom: Merlin (TV)
Relationship: Arthur/Gwen, Merlin/Freya, Gareth/Lynette, Elaine/Lancelot (Merlin), Gwen/Lancelot, Gwaine/Leona (Lyones), Morgana (Merlin)/Uriens
Additional Tags: Death (minor character), Angst, incarceration, allusions to torture and sex, Violence.
Collections: Paper Legends 2011, Arthur/Gwen Fanfics
Stats: Published: 2011-08-12 Words: 35649

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by loveandthetruth

Summary

Reincarnation fic. Merlin's hopes to have left the past behind come under fire when destiny intervenes and history appears to be repeating itself. Chaos and adventure ensue as Merlin tries to stop this story ending in the same tragedy.

Notes

Huge thanks to flypaw for beta and epic hand holding, martinius for soundtrack and hoodedcrime for listening to me whine. Special shoutout to the muppet for modly awesomeness and the paperpushers community for support. With thanks to Red Bull for sponsoring this challenge. ;)

Allusions/references will be noted at the end of the work.

Art post can be found here.

See the end of the work for more notes

PROLOGUE
"The future is not a result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created - created first in the mind and will, created next in activity. The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made and the activity of making them, changes both the maker and the destination"

-John Schaar

Somewhere to the North lay Tintagel and, as he rubbed his chilled fingers together, Merlin wondered at the awful aptness of it.

He calculated it to be seventy miles away, maybe over two hours with the inevitable traffic of families rushing home at the end of the half-term break. There was barely anything left of the castle now but Merlin still remembered what is used to be and he could almost feel its immense shadow stretching across distance and history to fall on him, to witness again the conception of the king, as Merlin stood with his back against the cold car door, watching the last of the sunlight disappear behind the house and into the wide expanse of the Atlantic Ocean.

His thoughts of the past were broken by the sound of another car approaching, gravel crunching under the tyres as it eased its way through the small gate and into the field. He swallowed, throat suddenly and painfully tight with despair and helplessness, and he had to resist the urge to twitch and shift as the ink on his back grew warm and the old familiar voice, edged now with weakness, whispered, Patience.

He scoffed softly. His nonchalance was betrayed by the sensation of his stomach tying itself into knots and he knew Kilgharrah could feel that too, but the pretence that who he was wasn't important and what he may do here wasn't history in the making, had become a comfort. I've been waiting for eight hundred years, my patience is spreading a little thin.

The newcomer pulled up carefully beside Merlin and stepped out, drawing his coat tighter around himself against October's chill and Merlin was once more struck by the sheer unfamiliarity of the man standing before him. In another life he had been a tyrant but, despite the chill that crawled up his spine at the sight of him, Merlin was sure that this young man with his warm, boyish smile could never be capable of the cruelty that Merlin remembered so clearly.

Merlin straightened, feeling the hours, years, of waiting in the creak of his bones. "You're late."

Uther gave a half nod, pushing his hands deep into his pockets and thoroughly ruining the line of his suit; even in the near dark it looked ridiculously expensive. "I shouldn't be here at all. I almost didn't come, but..." He swallowed and his eyes skated briefly over the house, before falling to his feet and then to Merlin. "What made you change your mind?"

"You saved my life," Merlin said simply. "You could have had me put in an asylum or some experimental unit or had me killed and you didn't." He looked at Uther carefully, watching him shiver gently more with anticipation than with cold. "But one night is all you get. You aren't to contact her again. Ever. There may be other conditions, but I need you to give me your word now."

Uther drew a breath, visibly uneasy, and looked away. He stared blankly out over the horizon for long enough that Merlin worried that he had decided not to go through with this after all. He was torn between relief and regret for a moment before Uther finally extended his hand and said, "you have my word."

The moment Merlin's fingers closed around his hand, Uther gasped and shuddered violently. His left
hand closed tightly around Merlin's wrist, but Merlin held on grimly as Uther crumpled to the ground, agony clear in the way every muscle tensed and strained. Breathing heavily and digging his fingers into the grass, he stayed like that for a moment after Merlin let go before standing carefully, leaning heavily on the car.

Uther raised a shaking hand to his face, feeling the straighter nose and the longer, finer hair. He opened his mouth but said nothing, as if he had wanted to say thank you but had thought better of it.

Merlin watched him go and waited until the night sky was pricked with stars, guilt and fear gnawing holes in his gut. He slumped against the car and imagined he could feel his heart breaking.

_Hope, young warlock._

Merlin choked, pressing his knuckles into his eyes against the tears. He wanted to rail and scream and give in to the terrible fear that all his years had been wasted and that history wasn't something that he could fix. But he couldn't give in. It was too late for that. It was too late the very minute he had lain Arthur's cold body into the boat and sent him to Avalon.

He had made a promise then and he remembered it now as his heart slowed and the din in his head quietened. That promise had carried him through centuries alone and he would see this through or he would die trying.

CHAPTER ONE

"For our time is as the passing of a shadow, and there is no going back of our end: for it is fast sealed, and no man returns: Come, therefore, and let us enjoy the goods things that are present, and let us speedily use the creatures as in youth. Let us fill ourselves with costly wine, and ointments: and let not the flower of time pass by us."

_Wisdom 2:5-7_

The phone rang again while Arthur was shrugging on his jacket. Emrys picked it up just before the vibrations toppled it off the table, where he had set the phone down after hanging up not even ten minutes ago, and rolled his eyes at the name on the screen. Arthur looked over to the other side of the room at Uriens, who was squeezing his way through the crowds, and waved to get his attention before tapping pointedly at his wrist. There was no watch there, but the message was clear enough.

"We're coming right out. What's the rush?" Emrys' eyebrows drew together and Arthur tried not to smile. There was no doubting their friendship, but Arthur was sure that Gwaine made a special point of pushing Emrys' patient nature to breaking point. "What are you…I-" Emrys' jaw dropped and his voice pitched sharply. "You did what?"

Allan glanced at Arthur and raised his eyebrows while Emrys hurried out. They waited for the barkeep to pass them their Redbull and change before following slowly.

"Do you still think that bet was easy money?" Allan smirked at Arthur.

"Please," Arthur scoffed. "I've known him for nearly four years and I've only seen him lose his
temper twice. That man has the patience of a saint. Gwaine's not going to break him yet."

Allan's answering grin was confident and all sharp white teeth as he caught the door for a crowd of girls. "Gwaine's going to get punched in the face before this trip is over. I guarantee it."

"Maybe he will, but I highly doubt Emrys will be the one to do it."

Outside, the sun glinted off the open bonnet of Emrys' car, flashing a white stripe over the dark blue paintwork. Gwaine stood in front of it, hands behind his head, considering the engine block carefully while Lance paced behind him. He prodded Gwaine gently when he noticed the others arrive and Gwaine turned and took a surreptitious step to the side, putting Lance between himself and everyone else. Lance threw him a disparaging look over his shoulder and Gwaine shrugged.

"How is it that you've already managed to-" Emrys spluttered and flailed his arms at the car. "We're supposed to be on the road for a week. It's been five hours and you've already destroyed my car."

"I think destroyed it a little harsh," Gwaine said, trying not to sound as guilty as he felt. "We just can't get it started again."

"What happened?" Uriens asked as Emrys threw his hands up in defeat and Allan coughed to cover a laugh.

Gwaine ran a hand through his hair. "I was racing against Lance and the engine must have overheated." There was a sheepish pause. "It was his idea."

Lance looked at him sharply, eyebrows raised, while the others stifled exasperated smiles. Arthur moved forward and leaned over the engine.

"You're going to have to call someone out." He shrugged. "Who are you with?"

"We passed a garage around here somewhere," Allan supplied before Emrys could answer. "I'm sure we could get the car around to it. It beats waiting around for a breakdown van."

"We should call Gareth."

Allan turned to Lance, surprised. "What? Why? It'll take him an hour to get out here at the very least."

"He was supposed to have come in the first place," Gwaine said. "He couldn't get a break from work."

"Kay works him to the bone. It'll be good for him to get out of there for a while," Lance said and there were murmurs of agreement from the rest and a collective wince when he added, "and we still owe him for the thing at Exeter."

Lance made the call, tucking the phone into the crook of his shoulder and poking at the guts of the car while Gareth quizzed him on the situation. He turned to Emrys. "When was the last time you had the fan belt changed?"

Emrys hesitated and then shrugged, admitting, "I have no idea."

He relayed this to Gareth, and they exchanged a few more words before hanging up. "He says that's probably what it is, though he can't understand how your fan belt is worn out if you had your MOT
Lance frowned and turned back to the car, squinting across the windshield at the fresh, red tax disc. "You had your road tax renewed in April. You must've had your MOT done soon before that."

"Right. Right, of course." But Gwaine could see the bright flush rising up his neck and he grinned.

"You have a fake disc? I don't know whether to give you up or buy you a drink," he said, while Emrys shifted awkwardly, caught out.

Allan pressed his nose to the glass. "It looks perfect." He straightened and gaped at Merlin. "How did you...why would you even-"

Arthur laughed and clapped a thoroughly embarrassed Emrys on the back. "I suppose even you can't be by the books all the time."

Twenty minutes later, Gwaine threw himself out of the back seat with enough force to make the entire car rock and announced that he was going back to the pub for a drink. Merlin rolled his eyes; going to the pub for a drink was still Gwaine's answer to life's problems.

"No, you aren't," Lance said immediately from the where he sat on the boot, leaning back against the rear windshield. "You're driving."

"I'm just having the one," he whined. "I'm bored."

Allan smiled knowingly. "It's never just one with you, Gwaine."

"That," Gwaine pointed a finger at him, "was one time. It doesn't count."

"One time?" Arthur smirked. "Which one time are we talking about exactly?"

Gwaine closed the door on Allan's laughter, narrowly avoiding crushing his fingers as he mimed a drunk Gwaine sprawled across the dashboard. Lance's phone chirped from his jacket pocket.

"Damn," he muttered and they all exchanged worried glances as he read the message aloud. "Car not available. On bus. Will be a while."

"A while? How long is a while?"

Merlin chewed his lip thoughtfully. "An hour at the very least. Two at the most."

"Shit." Arthur grimaced. "Are we going to wait? We could just take it to the garage back down the way after all."

As if Gareth had heard those words, Lance's phone chirped again. He huffed a laugh. "Don't panic. I'll be there."

There was a pregnant pause. "Not the best of starts," Uriens said, more to himself than anyone else.

"I wouldn't worry. Gareth is as reliable as they come. And we've had worse than this. What about Cardiff? We got into that huge brawl at the bar the first day into the break."
"Fuck it," Allan said suddenly and hopped out of Merlin's car, heading over to his, a decidedly newer Honda Civic, champagne coloured and looking like it had just rolled off the line. "I'm going to go ahead. Who wants to come?"

Arthur rubbed his eyes and ran a hand through his hair before saying, "I'm coming. You?"

Uriens shrugged and turned to Merlin. "Sorry."

"Lovely," Merlin muttered, catching Gwaine by the back of his shirt when he moved to leave. "Not you."

Arthur frowned sympathetically but there was laughter in his voice. "It's your own fault, mate. You'll just have to stay and suffer."

Gwaine narrowed his eyes and slumped back against the car. "Tyrant."

He kept the smile on his face, but Merlin felt some of his mirth ebb away as the joke hit a little too close to his heart.

Gareth leaned forward and gave the wrench one last pull before straightening and wiping his hands on his already liberally greased overalls.

"I can't believe Kay wouldn't give you the damn car," Gwaine muttered. "Bastard."

"It's fine," Gareth replied, feeling a warm pang at the support all the same. "Lucky to have that job at all really. And he's not really so bad."

He was aware of Gwaine watching him while he replaced the damaged fan belt and wondered if perhaps now was as good a time as any to tell him. Emrys waited patiently behind the wheel to give the engine another go, gazing unfocused out of the window, while Lance sat in the passenger seat, feet up on the dashboard and a paperback in his lap. It was quiet, verging into late evening and the click of a woman's heels on the pavement was unmissable.

She leaned down, one hand on the open passenger door and the other on the body of the car in a remarkable invasion of privacy and said, "I need your help."

Lance looked at Emrys, who raised an eyebrow and shrugged, before putting the book down and getting out of the car. "Do we know you?"

Gareth peered around the bonnet, intrigued. She had stepped back slightly when Lance stood up but had kept her hands on the car. Pushy and entitled, he thought, and very pretty.

"My friend is in trouble. I need you to help me save her." She tossed her hair back and Gareth saw Emrys roll his eyes and drop his head on the steering wheel and had to duck down to hide a smile. She certainly wasn't the first girl who'd taken them for errant knights.

Scowling, Gwaine stepped forward. "Who is this friend and what is it exactly we're supposed to save her from?"

"That's not important. All you need to know is that she's rich and important and that you have to help her."

"What?" Gwaine threw his hands up, giving up the pretence of politeness. "We have to help her?"
What makes you think we just help strange women who turn up out of thin air? That's insane."

"But that is what you do, isn't it?" She smirked, somehow managing to look down her nose at them despite being a head shorter than either. "Lance and Gwaine. You've quite the reputation for saving damsels in distress."

Gwaine and Lance exchanged frustrated and slightly guilty looks. Lance turned to the girl, who scowled, because he was wearing the unmistakable expression of someone who was about to let you down gently.

"I'll go," Gareth offered, before Lance could say a word.

Gareth was visibly relieved but at least made a token protest. "Are you sure?"

The girl sneered. "Is this some kind of joke? You're sending this greasy little kid to help me? I'm probably better off on my own." She turned her heel and stalked off. "Some heroes you turned out to be."

"Charming." Gwaine stared after her, shaking his head. "Go on, you'd better get after her. God only knows what kind of trouble she might get into."

Gareth closed the bonnet and gave Emrys a thumbs up before turning to go, but Gwaine caught him by the arm. "Here," he said, holding out his keys, "take the bike." Gareth's jaw dropped and he struggled to find the words until Gwaine pressed the keys into his hand and pushed him in the direction of the red and black Ducati sitting on its kickstand behind the car.

It was creeping close to seven o'clock when Arthur finally got the call to say that the car was in good working order and they would be able to meet up again soon.

"Maybe we could stay the night at Jamaica Inn. I'm sure they'd be happy to see us again," Allan said, frowning and flicking on the headlights as the drizzle threatened to become a downpour.

"What happened at Jamaica Inn?"

Arthur craned his head to look at Uriens in the back seat and grinned. "You don't remember? We had your stag do there."

Uriens' eyebrows shot up. "Was that where it was?"

"The amount you drank I'm not surprised you don't remember." Allan laughed. "Luckily we scheduled it three days before so he didn't turn up at the altar reeking of whiskey."

"I did not drink that much."

"How much do you even remember about that night?"

Uriens rubbed his eyes and sighed. "Not much?"

"You had sex with the owner's little sister in the men's bathroom."

"I what?!" Uriens leaned forward. "No. No, no. That didn't happen."

"No. Not for lack of trying," Allan said, while Arthur laughed so hard he was almost doubled over in
his seat. "She was making eyes at you all night, but you're surprisingly hard to corrupt, even when you're four sheets to the wind. Maybe I'll have better luck tonight."

"If you weren't driving I'd kill you. How's that for corruption?" Uriens said, but he leaned back, looking relieved, all the same.

Gareth didn't have far to go before he saw her, rubbing her bare arms against the sharp drop in temperature and told him rain was coming. He pulled up ahead of her, square in her path, and glimpsed a hurt frown before she saw him and scowled.

"I thought I made it clear that I didn't want your help."

"You made it clearer still that you need it," he replied lightly, shrugging out of the sleeves of his overalls and tying them around his waist, revealing a cleaner, whiter tee-shirt.

"I'm not going to ride with you. You-"

Before she could go on insulting him, a young boy ran out from around the corner. He skidded to halt before the bike, almost slamming right into it. "Please. Please help!"

Gareth immediately whirled the bike around and shot around the corner. A man, clearly the boy's father, was being held against the wall by one man while another punched him low in the belly and snapped open a knife. He whistled shrilly for their attention and charged at them. They scattered and the man sagged to the ground as Gareth wheeled around in a wide circle, leaning low to pick up a metal rod, broken from the railings, but the thugs ran before he was forced to use it.

Leaning the bike against the wall, Gareth got off and moved to help the man up. "Are you all right?"

"I'll live," he wheezed. "Those thugs have been mugging people for the past month. What can I do to thank you?"

"I don't need any reward. I'm just glad I could help. Besides, I need to be on my way in the service of my lady here." He smiled faintly at the woman in question, who stood close by with the boy.

"I'm not your lady," she sniffed, instantly offended, it seemed, at the thought of being his anything.

The man coughed, sensing the awkwardness. "I'm Ben. And I'd be honoured if you'd stay the night with us. Call me old fashioned, but I don't think you should be riding around on that thing after dark."

Gareth looked up at the darkening sky thoughtfully and felt the first drops of rain on his upturned face. "Well. If it would make you feel better."

Ben smiled. "It's just a few minutes round the corner. You can follow us round. Alex."

"I want to ride on the bike," the boy, Alex, interrupted, looking hopefully at his father and then at Gareth.

Gareth laughed and hauled him up onto the bike, tucking him safely in front of him. He looked to the girl. "Lady?"

"Don't call me that."
"I've nothing else to call you."

She ignored his hand. "I think I'll walk. I'd rather you didn't get motor oil on my dress," she huffed. "And my name is Lynette."

"Well, I suppose we can't have you looking anything less than beautiful."

"I don't think she's very nice." Alex scowled as they watched her stalk away.

They made their way slowly around the corner. "Then we should be kind to her and hope that she learns to be kind too."

"But what if she doesn't?"

Ben waved to them, waiting at his open door. Lynette appeared to have already gone inside. Gareth dropped the stand and dismounted, before helping the kid the down and wheeling the bike around the side of the house, where it would be sheltered from the rain and hidden away, giving it a fond touch before leaving. "Then we have to hope kindness will bear its own rewards."

Alex frowned, brows drawing together. "I don't understand."

Putting a hand on his shoulder, Gareth laughed. "You will."

"Fuck it," Arthur said, after they'd been waiting at the bar for fifteen minutes. "My day has been too shitty already."

He had to shout to be heard. The bar was packed with students on their end of year pub crawl and their excited chatter was grating. They pushed their way back out and the sudden silence made their ears ring as the door closed behind them.

They headed out to Colliford Lake instead, where there was a small, quiet pub, and when they pulled up to the car park there were only three other cars there. They went in for a drink, deciding to take them out and walk around the lake instead of sitting inside. The sun was only just setting, but the air was still cold with the recent rain and the place smelled thickly of wet earth.

A narrowboat rocked on the waves that the wind was kicking up and, as they neared it, they could hear laughter coming from the open window.

Arthur was sure they hadn't made enough noise to be heard, but as they passed a woman leaned out of the window and called out to them.

They waved, Uriens a little sheepishly and left handed, his wedding ring catching the dying light, but they didn"t stop.

"Wait," she said. "Maybe you'd like to come inside."

"I don't think-"

"Come on." They turned around and saw another woman out of the aftdeck, smiling widely at them. "We were just about to have dinner, if you'd like to join us."

Arthur opened his mouth to refuse but Allan stepped forward suddenly.
"Yes," he said, looking a little dazed. "Yes, we'd like that. Come on, Arthur."

Allan's hand closed painfully tight around his wrist, palm clammy and the tips of his fingers freezing cold, and pulled him forward. His vision swam for a second and his protests died in his throat as he became suddenly aware of how tired he was and how warm it would be inside.

Behind them, Uriens muttered a curse and a half-hearted warning before a third woman, this one more strikingly beautiful than both the others, opened the door to the cabin and beckoned, holding out a thin, white hand. Even three feet away, Arthur could hear Uriens' breath catch as he fell into step behind them and they clambered dizzily onto the boat.

Merlin craned his neck a little further, before giving up and stepping up onto a chair to see over the heads of the crowd. He frowned, spotting several blond heads, but none that he recognised as Arthur's.

"They must be around here," Lance said, coming back from the bar. "The guy at the bar didn't serve them but he remembers seeing them in here and they knew we were coming."

Merlin nodded, a little dazed, panic curling in his belly, and Gwaine shook him gently by the shoulder. "Don't start that," he said. "They could've just gone for a wander. They won't have gone far."

"Right." He shook his head, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Right. Lance, try their phones again. Gwaine, you see if they've broken into the back. I'm going to look outside."

He shoved his way out before they could say anything, closing the door and breathing heavily against the thudding of his heart. Concentrating carefully, Merlin stumbled away from the building and the press of all the people in it. He tried to focus on Arthur, the faint tug on his soul and the murmur in the back of his head that sometimes sounded like Arthur's voice.

The magic flared and burned in his veins and against the back of his closed lids as he cast out as far as he could, stretching himself for miles, but there was only silence.

CHAPTER TWO

"The most spiritual human beings, assuming they are the most courageous, also experience by far the most painful tragedies: but it is precisely for this reason that they honour life, because it brings against them its most formidable weapons."

-Friedrich Nietzsche

It was song that woke Uriens, a familiar lilting voice carrying back into the room. He opened his eyes, squinting against the bright light streaming in from the wide windows. Morgan stepped back into the room, wrapped in a towel, skin and hair still wet from her morning shower.
"Morning." She smiled brightly, setting a glass of water on the bedside table carefully before dropping a pair of tablets next to it.

He blinked and just looked at her for a long moment, feeling like he'd been hit over the head with a cricket bat. "I don't remember coming back."

"I'm not surprised. You could barely walk when you came home. I wouldn't be surprise if you were still hungover tomorrow."

He sat up, reaching for the pills, the light driving knives into his skull. "I don't remember drinking either." He sipped the water slowly, pressing the cool glass to his forehead. "Fuck."

"It must have been quite a party." She raised a sharp eyebrow. "I hope you didn't do anything you shouldn't have?"

"A party," Uriens repeated dully. He could hear the amusement in her voice and knew that she wasn't being cruel, his hangovers were always pretty bad, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd forgotten something important. "Fuck. Morgan, I don't remember."

She laughed, stroked a hand through his hair and tugged gently. "I'm only teasing." She leaned close, brushing the tip of her nose along his cheekbone and pressed her tongue against the tender spot below his ear. "You know I can be such a tease."

His eyes slipped shut and he could feel her smile against his skin as she kissed his neck slowly. Uriens could always tell when she had every intention of dragging it out and usually just that thought alone would have him hard and aching for her. She dragged her nails across his shoulder and slipped a leg between his and the throbbing in his head eased slightly as he twisted his fingers into the towel but there was still something missing.

"Morgan," he whispered, breathless. "Something's wrong. I think -"

"Shh. Don't fret." Morgan kissed him softly on the mouth. "You've just finished four years of university. You got very, very drunk. I'm not angry with you. Let it go."

He gasped and pulled away. "We just finished uni. I'm not even supposed to be here."

Morgan frowned and reached for his hand. "You said last night that you'd called it off."

Uriens stumbled off the bed and bed and reached for the jeans that Morgan must've taken off when he got back. He searched his pockets, the unease becoming full blown panic when he couldn't find his phone. "Where's my jacket?"

"You weren't wearing one." Morgan slipped from the bed to join him on the floor, eyes wide, and pulled him to her. "You're scaring me now. I'm usually the one freaking out in the mornings What's going on? What's wrong?"

He pressed his face against her neck, as if the scent of her could fill the gaping hole in his memory or ease the terror that he could no longer ignore. "I think they're in trouble."
sunrise, after having followed the A30 for forty miles and seeing no sign of them.

They almost passed Colliford completely until Merlin braked hard and took a left at the last possible minute. Gwaine and Lancelot gripped hard at the car to avoid being shunted to the side and the driver behind leaned on the horn angrily but Merlin just shrugged and went on.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm not sure yet. I just...have an idea."

Merlin cast out his senses again. He had realised that although he had found no answer from Arthur last night, he had missed a glaring inconsistency in his panic.

All along the south bank of Colliford Lake Reservoir and a little way out to the west, everything began to feel a little off, a little numb, to his mind. It wasn't anything so obvious as an emptiness where there should be life but an imitation of something. It felt like realising that the window you walked passed every day wasn't a window at all but a photo of the view; something so obvious that you can't believe you hadn't seen it before.

They found Allan's car outside the Colliford Tavern and the body was as clean and shiny as ever, nothing to imply some kind of struggle. The inside was littered with crumbs and empty packets and pressed into a corner in the back was a familiar blue jacket. Uriens’ phone slipped into the footwell as Gwaine dragged the coat out and Lance picked it up to show them the nineteen missed calls that they'd made last night.

Frustrated with the whole mess and with himself, Merlin went to the tavern and hammered at the door until it was opened by a bleary-eyed middle aged man. Merlin cycled through the photos on his phone until he came to one of Arthur, Allan and Uriens, showing it to the man, who shook his head and made to close the door.

"Please. Wait. Take another look. I'm sure you remember them." Merlin pressed against whatever spell was over this place, not enough to break it but just enough to see recognition in the tavern owner's eyes.

"Yes," he said, as if surprised with himself. "Yes, I remember them now. They bought drinks and took them outside."

It was less than useful, but Merlin was satisfied that he had no more to offer and let him go. More worrying was the fact that someone with a magical talent, and a strong one, had been involved. Someone had taken the three of them and cast an enchantment to cover their tracks. Judging by the sophistication of the spell, they knew they had to hide from another magic user, which meant they knew who Arthur was. He paced restlessly trying to figure out how this fit together and what it meant but he was still missing so many pieces.

"Emrys." Gwaine's hand on his shoulder pulled him back to the present and it was only then that Merlin realised that they had been him that they had been calling for the last five minutes.

"The owner of the place saw them last night but there's nothing else to go on. The trail's gone cold."

"No, it hasn't. Uriens' wife just rang. He made it home last night. She thought he'd been drunk but-"

"He's all right?"

"He's all right, yes. Physically fine, but he doesn't remember anything from last night."
"Okay." Merlin rubbed his eyes. "Okay, we need to go to him. Regroup. Restrategise."

"We need to report them missing."

"No. I think this is something we're going to have to take care of ourselves."

Emrys managed to cut the hour drive to Constantine in half, leaving a frenzy of blaring horns in his wake. When he got out of the car, Gwaine felt unsteady on his feet, heart still racing from how fast they were going.

"I had no idea you could drive like that," he said, while they waited for Lance to pull up in Allan's car. "Lucky there were no police around. In fact, I don't think I'm letting you drive again for a while anyway."

"I didn't know you cared so much about being on the right side of the law."

"I don't." Gwaine caught up by the arm as he turned away, heading towards the door. "But you do. Things are crazy enough right now without you doing something stupid."

Emrys signed and scrubbed a hand over his face as Lance arrived. Watching him shift uneasily from foot to foot, Gwaine realised that he wasn't going to apologise or make a promise that he might not be able to keep and pressed a steadying hand between his shoulder blades and steered him to the house, hoping that Emrys would take the gesture for what it was; acceptance.

The door was already standing open for them and Uriens paced up and down the living room, face covered with his hands, utter helplessness clear in the tense line of his shoulders, in his every movement. Lance slipped past them smoothly, hooking an arm around his neck and pressing his palm to Uriens chest, pulling him close to murmur something reassuring in his ear.

Gwaine watched as Lance led Uriens to the sofa and managed to get him to sit down. He couldn't hear the words, but this was Lance at his finest. There was no one more reliable and he inspired a kind of trust that was more instinctual than logical.

Uriens began to relax, finally uncovering his face as Lance spoke. Morgan stepped out of the kitchen slowly, so as not to spill the steaming mug she held in her hands.

"Is that his wife?"

He turned to Emrys, who was watching her with a blank sort of disbelief. "Yes. Haven't you met her before?"

"No. I had to work over the wedding and…" he trailed off, shrugging, as Morgan set the mug on the table and gave Uriens' arm a quick touch before coming over to them. She looked tired, Gwaine noted and remembered Uriens mentioning something about nightmares. He wondered if they were anything like this.

"I've kept trying their phones," she said. "Allan's is still ringing out but I can't get through to Arthur at all."

"That's not a bad start. I have a friend who might be able to trace thee signal. For now, we can assume that Allan and Arthur are together." Gwaine waited for a moment but Emrys was silent. "Right?"
Emrys almost jumped out of his skin and Gwaine realised that he'd been staring at Morgan, the colour gone from his face. It returned now in a bright flush. "Right," he said quickly. "It's a good start."

They lapsed into an awkward silence and Gwaine studied Merlin carefully while he avoided looking too closely at Morgan, who gave a strained, slightly embarrassed smile.

"I wish this had been under better circumstances," she said finally. "I'm Morgan." She extended a hand and Merlin took it without missing a beat, seemingly recovered.

"Emrys."

Her phone rang just as she was about to speak and as she excused herself to answer it, Gwaine turned to Merlin.

"What the hell was that?"

"What?"

"There was something weird and awkward there. What are you hiding?"

Emrys looked honestly affronted. "I'm not hiding anything!" He cast another glance in Morgan's direction. "She just reminds me of someone I knew once. It's uncanny, that's all."

"Right." Gwaine kept his voice carefully neutral, but he sensed that there was a lot more to this story than Emrys was willing to tell and thought, not for the first time, that he didn't know as much about the man as he thought he did.

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They came to a fork in the road early in the morning, only a few hours of driving behind them. The landscape was bleak and there was nothing but a few sparse dead threes and wilted grass for as far as Gwaine could see. Along the left hand road, a black banner hung from a tree and he could just about make out the form of a motorbike leaning against it and two or three figures sitting nearby.

Lynette tugged on his clean, borrowed shirt and he coasted gently to a stop. "Take the right hand road."

"Right?" Gareth frowned and shook his head. "It'll take twice as long that way. Surely-"

"Forget it. That black bike belongs to the son of the man who owns all this land. He's not going to let us by out of the goodness of his heart, and no one ever passes through without his permission."

"And who gets his permission."

"People who have more money than we do."

Gareth shifted slightly so he could look over his shoulder at her, but she turned her face away. He had imagined from her attitude that she was rich and this admission that she couldn't buy their way across was a surprise. It was likely that whatever trouble her friend was in had caused financial damage as well as emotional. He thought about asking her but decided against it; there was no need to wound her pride further.

"We can't afford to take the long way round. I'll get us across."

Lynette groaned. "You can't get us across. You're better off leaving me here and going home. I'll find my own way."

She moved to slip off the back of the bike but Gareth put his hand on her knee before she can swing herself off. He reached down and squeezed the hand that was twisted in his shirt. "Trust me. If your friend is this way, then this is the way we're going."

"Fine. If they find your body face down in a river somewhere, it'll be your own fault," she said, relaxing back into the seat.

Gareth only smiled, declaring himself the winner of this round. "As ever, your kind words give me strength."

True to Lynette's word, a man dressed head to toe in black stood up as they drew near and strode casually into their path. He spread his arms wide as if the meaning wasn't already clear enough and Lynette hissed in his ear to keep driving, but Gareth killed the engine, letting the bike skid to a stop bare inches from the man.

The man in black smiled, pulled the key out of the slot and tossed it away before stepping around to speak to Lynette. "Hello stranger. Is this your champion? Your chaperone to protect you on these dangerous roads?" His smile turned dangerous. "I'm going to enjoy taking you from him."

Gareth barely suppressed the urge to roll his eyes as Lynette huffed and slipped off the bike. He noticed that for all her bravado she was careful to swing off to the right, putting Gareth between herself and the man in black.

"He’s no champion." She sneered, folding her arms over her chest and looking off at the road ahead instead of at him. “He’s just a child playing dress up. I wish you could get rid of him for me.”

The man laughed and Gareth kept his expression carefully neutral. “Then I have no choice but to oblige you,” the man said. “But maybe he’s not worth the fight. My squires can deal with him and then I’ll take you and this impressive bike as trophies.”

“If you want my bike,” Gareth said coolly. “You going to have to fight me for it yourself.”

He looked at Gareth with a raised eyebrow and spoke to him directly for the first time since he’d stopped them, even then his voice was heavy with condescension and distaste. “I don’t fight with weakling upstarts like you. There’s no respect in that.”

“I don’t think you know anything at all about respect. I’m better than you any way you care to look at it and I intend to cross this road,” Gareth said and he could feel Lynette looking at him sharply, recalculating her opinion of him, trying to reconcile the hard edge in his words with his usual easy going nature.

The man’s smile froze and hardened. “Very well.”

Gareth dismounted, leaving Lynette with the bike, while the man in black whistled to the boys who had been waiting at the side of the road and watching intently, and one of them ran up and held a switch blade out to Gareth, who bristled but took it. He should’ve known a man as arrogant as this would want to make this as bloody as he possibly could.

“What’s your name?” he asked, flicking the blade open and feeling the weight heavy and dangerous in his hand.

The man cocked his head, deliberating, before finally saying, “Sebastian. And you?”
Gareth opened his mouth to answer and Sebastian launched himself forward immediately, aiming the point of the knife at Gareth’s face. He blocked carefully, side stepping and bringing his left arm up to knock Sebastian’s attacking hand away.

Sebastian continued to attack relentlessly, throwing his pride behind the knife, while Gareth blocked and bided his time. He took the occasional cut, but there was no substantial damage being done and he observed and catalogued the other man’s technique. Sebastian had a fair amount of skill, but his movements were poorly executed and imprecise. Even so, he was a strong fighter, heavier and slightly taller than Gareth and he could easily have ended this, but he was overconfident and the longer Gareth went without taking the offensive, the more arrogant Sebastian became. He began to show off a little more and holes in his defence became blindingly apparent.

All at once Gareth drove forward, making small but precise cuts, here on the back on his left hand, there on the line of his jaw. They were shallow, but enough to make Sebastian falter with surprise and anger. Pride wounded more than anything, Sebastian snarled and attacked wildly and suddenly, driving his blade into Gareth’s shoulder.

Pained lanced up and down his arm and his fingers opened reflexively, the knife slipping from his fingers. He cursed softly and heard, dimly, Lynette cry out behind him as Sebastian charged. Gareth sidestepped quickly and grabbed for Sebastian’s knife hand as his momentum unbalanced him. Gareth twisted sharply, turning the knife back onto its owner and spun Sebastian round until Gareth was behind him, the knife sinking high into chest.

They both stumbled to their knees, Gareth flexing his hand as the pain in his arm dulled and the pain in his shoulder became more pronounced. The two boys, Sebastian’s squires, rushed to them, one pressing his hands tight around Gareth’s shoulder.

The other, tall and wiry, skidded to a stop to where Sebastian lay wheezing, swatting his hands away when he tried to pull at the knife.

“He’ll be needed a hospital,” he said, tugging Sebastian’s arm around his neck and lifting him easily into his arms.

“Will he be all right?” Gareth asked.

He shrugged as he walked away and Sebastian’s head lolled back nauseatingly. “I wouldn’t miss him if he didn’t survive.”

“Hey. You.” The one at Gareth’s shoulder motioned Lynette forward and shrugged out of his shirt, folding it roughly. He put it over the wound and placed her hands over it. “Pressure on the wound. I’ll grab the kit from the car to see to it properly.”

“Wait,” Gareth called. “What’s your name?”

The man frowned as if this was an insane question, which it may be coming from a man half delirious with pain and blood loss. “Percy.”


Shivering and pale with nerves, she still managed to scowl, pressing down on the wound until his vision greyed at the edges. “I still think you’re a moron,” she said, but Gareth was sure he heard a trace of fondness in her exasperation.
Arthur woke up aching, stretched awkwardly and uncomfortable. When he tried to pull his arms down to ease the ache in his shoulders he was rewarded with a biting sharpness against his wrists and the sound of metal clinking that made him open his eyes with a start.

Fuck, he thought, recognising immediately that he was in trouble, possibly more trouble than he had ever been in all his life. He scrambled up into a sitting position, manoeuvring carefully around his bound arms until he was as comfortable as he was likely to get given the situation. He leaned his head on the cold bars and tried desperately to remember how he had gotten into this mess.

At length, he recalled, dimly and through a haze that suggested copious amounts of alcohol, the girls on the boat. He swallowed nervously, the dry scrape of his tongue making him feel immediately thirsty. Arthur was sure that they hadn’t done anything illegal, but he couldn’t think of any other way he could have ended up in a cell. It took him another few precious minutes before he realised that the police weren’t in the practice of cuffing prisoners to bars in cold, dark cells.

He looked around the room, his eyes taking what seemed like hours to adjust to the darkness. He could see other figures slumped around the room and guessed that there were six of them here, including himself. More alarming was the sudden realisation that the wall at his back was not made of brick or concrete, but of rough and uneven stone.

Arthur dropped his legs off the bench and poked a bare foot into the leg of the closest figure, who jumped awake and swore quietly, but relaxed surprisingly quickly. He shuffled as close to Arthur as his bound hands would allow.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Clearly not,” Arthur said before catching himself and forcing himself to calm down. There was no sense in snapping at someone whose only fault was being in the same situation as him. “What’s going on here? Where am I?”

He shrugged. “I have no idea. I’ve been here for two days and the others have been here for longer than that from what little I can get. They don’t like to talk.” He dropped his head back against the bars and sighed. He turned to Arthur. “What’s your name?”

“Arthur.”

“I’m Leon.” He smiled wryly. “I’d shake your hand, but I’m afraid I’m a little tied up right now.

“Emrys?”

They all looked up at the sound of the front door closing and a voice calling again from the hall. Lance was draining his second cup of coffee, trying to chase away the bleariness from a short sleep and Emrys paused, one arm in his jacket, as Gwen stumbled in.

Lance’s heart clenched painfully tight. She looked utterly distraught, confused tears in her eyes. She was wearing a long, red dress, a simple gown, and he realised that she must have come straight from the benefit at the hospital.
“What’s happening?” she said, turning to Emrys while the others looked at each other awkwardly. “Do you know-?” She broke off, shivering.

Emrys bit his lip and Lance stepped forward quickly, pressing a hand to Gwen’s back and steering her gently into the kitchen.

“There’s not completely sure,” he admitted. “Emrys says he may have an idea of where they are. Possibly it’s up by Hawks Tor, not far from where we expected to meet them.”

Gwen drew a breath but Lance cut her off before she could say the words. “You can’t come with us. I need you to stay with Morgan.”

“No. There’s must be something I can do!” she cried, covering her face. “I can’t sit here and do nothing. I’ll go mad.”

“There isn’t anything,” Lance said, though his heart ached to say it. “There’s nothing to do but wait and hope.”

Gwen looked up at him, doe eyed, pupils blown wide, and he remembered with horrifying intensity, the feel of her lips against his. He lifted a hand and brushed a stray curl away and it take every ounce of his resolve to not let his hand linger, to not brush the back of his fingers along the soft curve of her cheek. “You’ve been fighting again,” he said, with too much certainty for it to be a question.

“No.” She shook her head but he knew it was a knee-jerk response.

“You always look at me like that when you’ve been fighting. You look at me like…”

“Like what?”

“You look at me like I would have been a safer choice. You look at me like you’re waiting for me to come and rescue you. Is that what you want?”

“He’s just…away so much,” she said and Lance didn’t know how he was meant to take that as an answer.

“I loved you first, he wanted to say, but now you’re with him.

Gwen leaned up to him for a brief second, their lips so close he could feel the warmth of her breath, could almost taste the champagne on her tongue. He didn’t move for an agonisingly long second and when he finally gave in, she had moved away and slipped back into the room before he could kiss her.

It seemed barely minutes after the boys had hustled out to the car and Uriens had kissed her goodbye. He had been much calmer by the time they left, but he had kissed her with a bruising intensity that, to
Morgan puttered around the living room, collecting empty mugs and fiddling uselessly, trying to find something to do. It was well into morning now and the sun was bright, making the roads shimmer while they were still wet from last night’s rain. As she passed the window, she saw a car pull up in the drive and recognised it immediately, rushing to throw open the front door as her elder sister stepped out of the car.

“I was just going to call you,” Morgan said. Anna came up the steps, words falling from her lips in a desperate rush. “How did you know to come? We’ve lost Arthur and Allan—”

“Hush now. It’s all right.” She pulled Morgan gently into her arms and turned them both back inside. “I’m here now.”

Morgan closed the door behind them and the latch chunked dully in the silence as she buried her face in her sister’s neck and breathed in the familiar, faintly citrus smell of her, the only perfume she ever seemed to wear. “You always know when I need you.”

Anna pulled back and held Morgan at arm’s length, turning her face to the light and brushing her hair back out of her face and frowned. “You look tired.”

“I don’t always sleep well.” Morgan shrugged dismissively.

Anna hummed in agreement and didn’t sound surprised at all when she said, “you’ve been having nightmares.”

Before Morgan could speak, they were interrupted by Gwen’s soft steps on the landing and she turned to see her coming down the stairs, showered and wearing one of Morgan’s dresses.

“I thought I heard the door? Are they back already?” She stopped short of the foot of the stairs, catching sight of them. Her face fell. “Oh. I’m sorry. I—”

“It’s okay. Gwen, this is my sister.”

Anna smiled and reached out a hand but Gwen took a reflexive step back. Morgan caught her by the arm before she stumbled backwards and fell. She seemed to have difficulty righting herself and leaned heavily on the banister. “Gwen? Are you all right?”

“I’m sorry.” Gwen pressed a hand to her own face, cheeks flushed and hot and her voice was steady but there was an edge of hysteria in her embarrassed laugh and her eyes looked a little wild. “I just thought you were someone I knew.”

Morgan frowned and looked over her shoulder at her sister, all blonde curls and cheekbones almost as sharp as her own, and couldn’t think of anyone that Gwen might know who looked even vaguely like Anna. They had been friends since their early teens and Morgan was sure that she knew everyone that Gwen knew.

More alarming was the fact that whoever this person was, Gwen was terrified of her. She opened her mouth to ask Gwen who could have scared her so much, but Gwen cut her off, giving her arm a reassuring squeeze. “I’m fine. I’m probably just too panicked with—” she waved her hand vaguely. “I should just go and lie down for a while.”

Morgan stared after her until her feet disappeared from the small sliver of landing that Morgan could see and she heard a door open and close. Anna put a hand on her shoulder and steered her into the living room and Morgan sighed as she sank into the sofa. She felt like she could sleep for a weeks
and when she drew a breath it hitched painfully in her chest and she squeezed her eyes shut against useless tears.

Cold fingers curled around her own, comforting despite the almost painful tightness of her grip. She squeezed back and smiled ruefully. “It’s all gone a little crazy.”

“I know,” Anna said. “And I’m sorry. There’s more to come. There’s so much I need to tell you. It’s not going to be pleasant but—“

Morgan flinched and straightened, panic snapping quickly through her already strained nerves and her shoulders tensed. “What?”

Anna slipped off the table and came to sit beside her. “It’s all going to be fine. I just need you to believe that you can trust me. Morgana.”

Her eyes flared gold and a memory came back to her, washed up out of fragments and nightmares. She remembered a hot spark in her veins, a dull throb in her temples and the sound of her own screams, a candle lighting and fire catching on drapes and spreading and the knowledge that it was her fault.

She gasped and sobbed. On the table, the mug she’d brought in for Uriens hours ago shattered, spilling unfinished tea across the surface.

“I remember.”

Allan woke to darkness and dizziness. There was a fierce ache against his ribs that robbed the breath from his lungs and it was a long minute before he could think past the pain and realise where he was. He jerked back with shock and almost pitched himself into the well that he’d been half dropped into. Pressing a hand to the rough stone of the well walls, he rolled himself carefully sideways and fell onto the grass wheezing.

The grass was damp under him but the sun was bright and high in the sky and he was sure it was around midday at the very least. He lifted his shirt and winced at the dark, livid bruises coming up across his chest, running from hip to shoulder where he’d been lying on the broken stone wall, head and one arm dangling into the darkness of the well. If he had stirred in his unconsciousness, he was certain that he would have tumbled right into it and God only knew what would become of him then.

It turned out that he needn’t have worried about that at all. While his watch and signet ring were both gone, he discovered that his phone, a new and pretty expensive model, was still in his pocket when it rang shrilly, making him jump and curse.

There was a panicked female voice on the line. “Allan? Where are you? Are you all right?”

He slumped back onto the grass with a grimace, pinching the bridge of his nose. “God, you don’t know how glad I am to hear your voice right now, Morgan.”

“Where are you?” Are you hurt?”

“I don’t know. And yes, but only a little. Do you know where Arthur and Uriens are? What’s going on?”
“Uriens is fine. He’s –“ She took a shuddering breath and her voice broke. “It’s Arthur. He’s in trouble.”

“What? What trouble?”

“You have to help him, Allan. Please.” She said something else, but it was barely coherent and lost under the sound of her sobbing.

“Stop. Morgan, stop.” He ground the heel of his hand into his eyes; the sound of her crying was always enough to make him to do anything she asked. “Just calm down. Tell me what’s happened. Where is he? What can I do.”

There was a long pause and Allan got unsteadily to his feet, pacing while he waited for her, trying to get some strength back in his trembling legs. Arthur was one of his few friends and he wished that Morgan would understand that she didn’t have to beg Allan to help him. Arthur was the kind of person that inspired loyalty in all but the most selfish of people and he wasn’t quite that selfish.

“There was a man. He called and said that somebody would come and get you and that you would have to fight and that if you won they would let him go. Please. If anything happens to him I –“

She broke off, and the desperate edge in her voice made his heart hurt. “If anything happens to him you’ll what? What aren’t you telling me?”

“I only just found out. He’s my half brother. I need to tell him. I need him to know he has a family. You’ll find him won’t you? You’ll bring him back safe?”

Allan sighed. “You know I’d do anything for him Morgan. And you know I’d do anything for you, even now.”

“I know. Allan I’m –“

“Don’t. Don’t tell me you’re sorry. I’ve heard it enough.”

The cell lightened gradually by small holes high in the wall. It was only just enough to see by and there was no sense of orientation or time in this box but Arthur would bet that it was at least afternoon, if not later, judging by the gnawing pain in his stomach as his body complained it’s hunger.

He had dozed during the morning, but now he could see that Uriens and Allan weren’t in here with him, a real panic started to grip him. He turned to Leon. “Do you have any idea why we might be here?”

Leon shrugged and shook his head. The others, finally beginning to wake, were looking at Arthur warily as he glanced around the cell. Arthur didn’t like to think of it as a dungeon though he was fairly sure that’s what it actually was. The sight of its clean floors and new chains was unnerving.

From beyond the corridor there was the sound of a heavy door opening and closing and then steps, drawing closer and closer to the cell. His fellow inmates tensed and drew almost imperceptibly closer into their huddled groups.

An old man, bearded and grizzled, swung open the door, which squealed piercingly, making them all flinch. Leon was closest to the door and as the man passed, he pressed a foot hard into his thigh.
Leon grimaced and jerked his leg away, the fabric of his jeans darkening tellingly, and Arthur bristled.

Then man turned to him and grinned. “I trust you had a comfortable night.”

Arthur gritted his teeth against a sharp reply and the man laughed. He unlocked the cuffs and dragged Arthur to his feet. He waited a moment before taking a chance to attack his captor but it was a poor match, the man being both taller and heavier than him, not to mention well rested. Arthur landed a few ineffectual blows, but all it took was a well placed elbow to Arthur’s temple to end his futile attempt at escape.

The room swam dizzily and, nauseated, Arthur let the man haul him out of the cell, down the corridors and up a steep flight of stone steps. He found himself in a wide room filled with bright daylight that lanced into his eyes and doubled the throbbing of his headache while he was dragged, on his knees when he could no longer stand, to the centre of the room where a man sat waiting. He was tall and well built but not broad, in a sharply tailored suit and when he spoke it was quiet. Arthur could barely hear over the ringing in his ears, but it was with an unmistakable authority and an unmissable cold undercurrent.

There was no kind of introduction, but Arthur didn’t really expect one. “You have two choices. Stay and rot here with the other prisoners, or in two hours you can face the man who brought you here and fight him. If you win, you are free. If you lose, you die.” There was a heavy pause. “Do you understand?”

Arthur straightened as best he could with the cell guard’s hand still fisted in his shirt, keeping him on his knees. “I’m not afraid to die.”

The man laughed, humourless. “I expected nothing less from you.” He gestured to the guard. “Food, water, clothes.”

Once the guard had left, Arthur asked, “what do you mean you ‘expected nothing less’? What do you know about me?”

“I know a great many things about your past, Arthur.” He smiled and stood. “And maybe even your future.

And then Arthur was alone.

CHAPTER THREE

"If there is a soul, it is a mistake to believe that it is given to us fully created. It is created here, throughout a whole life. And living is nothing else but that long and painful bringing forth.

-Albert Camus

They had managed to go on for twenty minutes before they started arguing about the possible tactics that should be used to rescue Allan and Arthur, after Morgan had called to tell them about the latest development with Allan. Merlin’s hand clenched around the steering wheel at the thought of her,
while Gwaine and Uriens debated, very loudly, whether sneaking in was a better option than going in guns blazing.

Before they left, he had half wanted to confront her about what she remembered, because he was sure that she did remember something. She may have died where he never had, but she was still a witch, and that should still connect her to their past. He decided against it, trying to focus on one problem at a time, but she seemed so different now and the thought of being so close to having someone to share this burden with was heartbreaking.

Lancelot, sitting in the front with him, gestured and said something that Merlin couldn’t quite make out over the noise. Instead of repeating himself at Merlin’s confused look, he reached over and flicked the indicator down. Merlin’s confusion doubled but he dutifully took the exit and any other one Lance suggested.

They arrived at a small town shortly and Merlin finally recognised where they were. He raised an eyebrow at Lance as he switched off the engine. “What are you thinking?”

“I was thinking about what Morgan said. They called her, they know about all of us. I don’t think we should trust what anything they say when we don’t know what they want, why they’re doing this.”

“You think it’s a trap.”

“Probably. Whatever it is, I think we need help. Eric and his family are some of the most trustworthy people I know. I helped them once. They’ll help us now.”

Merlin craned his neck to look back at Gwaine and Uriens who nodded their agreement. He hadn’t met the family in question himself, but he knew of them and Lancelot’s judgement of character was usually on the mark so he and Lance waited outside for the door to be answered, drawing their coats tight and trying not to shiver, while the other two waited in the car, attempting to decide on a plan that would actually yield positive results.

When the door was finally opened, it was by a waifish girl, grey eyed and white blonde, and she looked so pale and fragile that Merlin could scarcely believe that she even belonged to this family.

“Lance,” she said, surprised but recognising him at first glance. “I wasn’t expecting to see you again.”

“I know. I’m sorry I didn’t call ahead, but I need to see your brothers.”

“That’s too bad. If you had called ahead I could have told you that none of them are here.”

Lancelot sighed and scraped a hand along his jaw and Merlin wondered how they must look to her, unshaved and tired as they were. He hoped he looked as desperate as he felt when he turned to her.

“Is there nothing you can do to get them back?”

She frowned and looked from him to Lance and back before finally pushing the door open and stepping back. “Come inside and tell me about this problem of yours and we’ll see what we can do.”

Gareth had arrived at another blocked road, this time decorated with red banners. He rolled his eyes. A tall man, wearing a red and black leather jacket, waved them down and Gareth slowed, despite Lynette’s half hearted protests.

“There’s toll on this road,” the man said as they stopped before him. “No one passes without paying.”
“I’ve paid one toll already.”

“Then the damage is already done and it won’t hurt you any more to pay it again.”

Gareth regarded him carefully. “I was hoping you wouldn’t be as arrogant as your brother, Mathias.”

The man, Mathias, started visibly. “How do you know my name? My brother wouldn’t have told you about me.”

“He couldn’t even if he wanted to, seeing as he was unconscious at the time. It was his squires who told me to expect you here.”

“You beat my brother?” He narrowed his eyes, flushing faintly with anger.

Lynette scowled. “He didn’t just beat him. He almost killed him. The question is, what are you going to do about it?”

Mathias snarled. “Get off the bike and fight me. If you win, you can pass. If you lose, you have to swear yourself to me and my brother.”

“Very well.” He waited for Lynette to swing down first and left her with the bike. “No knives?”

“No.” Mathias smiled cruelly. “You’ve already proven yourself against a blade. Let’s see you beat me bare fisted, the way God intended.”

He raised his fists up to his chin and Gareth did the same, ignoring the twinge of protest from his injured shoulder. Matthias landed the first punch, a right cross to Gareth’s chin that dazed him, but he recovered quickly and was more careful with blocking the following shot to his ribs, if only barely. Gareth saw straight away that Matthias was the stronger and better fighter, but he had patience on his side and he was sure that if he just waited, he would find the opening he needed.

“What’s taking so long Matthias?” Lynette called unexpectedly. “Have you realised you can’t even beat a little runt like this?”

Gareth knew better than to take this insult personally, but Matthias did not. He doubled his efforts and let his anger fuel him just like his brother had and, just like Sebastian, that was when he began making mistakes. When his left hand slipped down, leaving his chin briefly unguarded, that was all Gareth needed. He jabbed him hard in the chin, following fast with a shot to his ribs before he could recover and threw a right hook, catching him so hard on the jaw that Matthias sprawled to the ground.

Gareth dropped to the ground, pressing a knee into his chest. “Do you yield?”

“Yes,” he wheezed. “I give. Let me up.”

“Lady?” Gareth called to Lynette keeping his eyes on Matthias. “Should I let him go?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “For God’s sake, let him up, Gareth.”

He stood and offered a hand down to Matthias, who took it grudgingly. “I have to admit.” he said, spitting blood and pressing a hand to his jaw. “I didn’t expect you to be as strong as you were.”

“Likewise. You’re a good fighter, but your pride let you down. Your brother had the same problem.”

“Yes, you’re not wrong.” He smiled ruefully as they headed back to Gareth’s bike.
“I had a higher opinion of you,” Lynette said. “I heard you fought like a tiger but you couldn’t even beat a scrawny teenager.”

Matthias frowned. “He’s not as scrawny as he looks. I don’t know why you insult him when he helps you.”

Lynette said nothing and swung herself up onto the bike behind Gareth, who shook hands with Matthias. “Are there any other tolls I have to pass along this way?”

“There shouldn’t be.” Matthias smiled wryly. “Here, take my jacket. If you cover your face, I’m sure anyone else will assume you’re me and let you through. I suppose I owe you my life.”

“I suppose you do. Don’t make me regret it. I don’t expect to see you when I pass this way again.” Matthias nodded and let them go. Gareth waited until he could no longer be seen in the mirrors before looking over his shoulder at Lynette. “Thank you for distracting him for me.”

“I didn’t do it for you.”

“All the same, I don’t think I would have won if you hadn’t have done what you did.”

He had excepted her to say something biting in reply. I'll keep my mouth shut next time then, but she only told him to shut up and they both drove on in silence as the afternoon wore on.

Arthur paced the room that they had left him in, trying to stretch out the aches that came from sleeping shoved into a cold stone corner. Bright red welts ringed his wrists from the handcuffs and he wondered idly about this nameless fighter while he rubbed at them. It was almost certain that he would be in better shape than Arthur was just then. His mouth twisted angrily. The whole thing was probably set up for him to lose; he wouldn’t be surprised if this guy turned out to be seven feet tall and twice his weight.

He rolled his shoulder and winced. There were no bruises there, or anywhere else for that matter, but he was sure it was just a matter of time. He shouldn’t have accepted that challenge; he was in no shape to fight. Staying in that cell with the others and waiting for an opportunity to jailbreak together would have been a smarter option, but being more honourable than was sensible had always been one of his faults.

The door swung open and the cell guard walked in. Arthur watched him carefully as he deposited a pile of clothes on the vacant chair and placed a covered tray on the floor before leaving without giving Arthur so much as a second glance.

Arthur hesitated before finally going over to rifle though the pile. Everything was black; loose fitting jeans, t-shirt, denim jacket. There was a pair of bandannas too, presumably for covering his face and distinctively blond hair. He wondered if that meant there would be people there who might recognise him and whether he could get away with not wearing them.

As he picked them up, his fingers closed around something unexpectedly hard. He pulled at the knot holding the parcel closed and a sheathed knife tumbled to the floor. He crouched and picked it back up almost reluctantly. The sheath was old and dirty, cloth covering worn almost down to bare threads. The knife felt just as old in his hands, but the steel was as clean and sharp as if it had just been made. The hilt was made of a plain, pale wood, partly wrapped with a leather strap, and just below the crossbar was an engraving of a dragon.
Gwen slept fitfully, waking every few minutes. She kept seeing Arthur in her dreams, the way she had last seen him, calm fond smile while she asked him not to go. He had laughed and said *I’ll be home with you before you even know it* and kissed her. He’d kissed the fury right out of her until they fell onto the sofa of their tiny rented apartment, all they could afford on her internship pay and his freelancing journalism while they saved for a proper home.

The feel of his body slipping against hers, his mouth on her throat was almost as real as it had been that night, enough to make her breath catch and her hips roll against nothing. Her chest felt tight and she wanted to cry but the tears wouldn’t come anymore; she felt like she had been crying for days.

She lay in bed and dozed until the need for sleep was at least gone, though she still felt tired right down to her bones, she got up shakily, reasoning that the neither she nor the bed was going anywhere and she could always come back and sleep again. As Gwen stretched carefully and slipped out of the room, she had to admit that there wasn’t much else she could do.

The house was utterly quiet, the silence making her ears ring faintly and unnerving her. Gwen clung to the banister as she tiptoed down the stairs, feeling sick with nerves. She caught the murmur of voices as she passed the living room on the way to the kitchen, and paused with her hand almost to the door.

It was ajar only slightly, but Gwen could see Morgan sitting on the sofa, twisting her hands between her knees while her sister came in and out of view and she paced behind it. She was on the phone. Gwen couldn’t make out what she was saying but as she came around to sit beside Morgan, Gwen saw a satisfied smirk on her face as she hung up and took Morgan’s hands in her own and pressed the phone into them, curling her fingers closed around it. Now that she could see, Gwen could read the words she was saying. *Think of everything we’ve been through and you know what you have to do.*

Gwen shivered and backed away from the door before they could see her and crept back upstairs, her hunger forgotten under her unease. She paced the spare bedroom restlessly, chewing absently on her already broken nails. There was no reason to have assumed that Anna had been up to anything other than trying to get the boys back, but there was something about her that scared her in a way she couldn’t remember being scared of in her life, as if she wasn’t afraid of what she could do, but of what she was.

She wrapped her arms around herself and glanced at her phone lying on the bedside table. She was sure that she would be able to call Emrys or Lance, but how could she tell them that she suspected Morgan’s sister had something to do with all that was happening? It was irrational but every instinct was screaming that Anna wasn’t to be trusted.

Carefully, she went back downstairs, pressing close to the walls, trying to hear what was being said. She felt paranoid and guilty, but she had to know for sure. Gwen only hoped that she was wrong, and that, if she was right, it wouldn’t be too late.

As Emrys peeled off his t-shirt, Gwaine caught sight of his back and cursed out loud, making him freeze and turn, one arm in a borrowed white shirt. “What?” he said.

“When did you get that?” Gwaine stepped forward for a better look. “I never took you for the type.”
Emrys flushed when he realised what Gwaine was staring at. A tattoo covered almost the entirety of Emrys’ narrow back. A winged dragon, not at all like the twisted Chinese dragons that most people were fond of, stared out at Gwaine, its snarling head resting on his left shoulder, while its wings flared out almost completely over the right side, while the last curl of tail was lost under the waistband of his trousers.

“When did you get it?” Gwaine asked again.

“A long time ago.” He shrugged and Gwaine watched, unnerved, as the movement made the dragon throw its head back contemptuously. “I forget it’s even there these days.”

“What’s the story?”

Merlin smiled faintly as he finished getting dressed. “Who said there was a story?”

“There usually is. That one definitely looks like there’s a story behind it.”

“It’s…” Merlin sighed as he shrugged into his jacket. “It’s in memory of an old friend. He liked to think it was the equivalent of always being at my back.”

The wry twist of his mouth gave Gwaine the impression that he thought this was a ridiculous idea, but Gwaine wasn’t so sure. It must have meant a lot to him, after all he wouldn’t get something as significant as that done on a whim. Gwaine wasn’t fool enough to take Emrys’ general quietness to mean that he didn’t have many friends. He was, in fact, well liked by pretty much everyone on campus and by several people who knew him off it, but he had never appeared to be close to many people and Gwaine had imagined that the five of them together had made up Emrys’ innermost circle.

“What happened to him?” he asked eventually.

“He died.”

Gwaine frowned. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He’d lived for a long time, and he was dying for a long time. He was a big advocate of letting nature take its course. He believed in destiny.” Emrys shook his head with a faint, ironic smile. “It wasn’t something I really got the hang of.”

It must have been a long time ago for him to be able to talk about it so flippantly, but Gwaine still heard the hurt behind it and for one brief second he felt an irrational twinge of jealousy.

He bit his tongue on more questions when Uriens finally returned, suit now no longer too long in the arms and legs. He paused at the door, as if sensing the grim atmosphere and Gwaine tried not to think about the possibility that Emrys could be losing a few more friends tonight.

Arthur stumbled as they shoved him out of the car, feeling unbalanced with his hands cuffed tightly behind his back. It was almost dark now and the temperature had dropped sharply. He shivered and breathed carefully through the fabric of the bandanna, trying to keep himself calm.

A little way ahead was a crude circle, a fighting ring, made up of wrecked cars. The ring had been set up on an arm of land that was surrounded on three sides by water. He looked around trying to place himself and, following the shoreline out to his right, he could see in the distance a familiar
white building. Colliford Lake, he thought ruefully, back to the scene of the crime.

As they approached, Arthur noticed that the cars had actually been crashed into each other, the body buckled and warped, leaving only bare inches of space between them; it was fairly clear that they didn’t intend for either of them to leave until one was the victor and the other was dead.

There was a heavy hand on his back and he was shoved awkwardly onto the hood of one of the cars, almost falling through the empty windshield, and waited while they uncuffed him. His opponent was already waiting for him inside the ring, which looked dangerously small now that he was this close. He briefly considered running, but there were at least ten guys he would have to fight his way through and he had never been a good enough swimmer that he might go across the lake; there was no way he would reach the other side before they did. Hands now free, he dropped down into the ring easily and reached for the knife sheathed on his belt, the leather strapping feeling simultaneously sickening and comforting.

His opponent made the first move, a neat swipe at his face with the knife that Arthur easily dodged. He kept ducking and weaving, trying to delay the inevitable, but it quickly became clear that this man was not holding back at all, nor would he let up until he had won. Arthur wondered what trick they had used on him that he was so determined.

All at once, Arthur surged forwards, hooking into his ribcage and again into his jaw. The man stumbled back a step, but otherwise showed no sign of having been hurt at all.

They continued to trade blows but to Arthur’s utter confusion, he was losing. The laws of physics seem to no longer apply; they were almost identical in height and weight and certainly equal in skill, but inexplicably Arthur was the only one taking any damage; his opponent appeared to feel nothing.

Arthur was becoming more and more tired, more hurt and more disheartened. He was covered in shallow cuts that bled easily and his head spun and his bones ached as he blocked desperately, giving up attacking completely as a waste of energy he did not have.

Pain lanced up and down his left leg when his opponent kicked hard into a tender spot behind his knee and he buckled, collapsing against the cars that made up the cage of the ring and thinking seriously about not getting up again at all.

A hand on his arm made him start and turn, muscles tensed defensively, but he was surprised to see a girl clambering up onto the car and pressing a bottle of water into his hands. He was sure he had not seen her here before and she didn’t look at all like one of them either.

As he drank, she pressed closer to him and whispered desperately in his ear. “On his belt. Take it.” A man grabbed her by the ankle and pulled her off the car while she clutched at his hand. “Don’t kill him.”

Arthur frowned and turned and sure enough there was something on his belt, a fragment of a scabbard. He got up slowly and tried to gauge the risk of taking it. He couldn’t imagine what it could be worth to him but, for lack of a better idea, he threw himself at his opponent, who had been pacing while he waited, and tackled him to the ground. After a brief struggle, and what Arthur was sure was a cracked rib, he closed his fingers around the piece and tore it away from the belt.

Arthur kept it clutched in his fist while the other man struggled up. He watched, heartbeat slowing and focus beginning to creep back in, as the other man swayed and stumbled to his feet, and he knew, beyond any doubt, that he had evened the field.
Lance tried to fight the urge to shift and twitch and despite his certainty that he was being still, the sharp pain in his ankle told him otherwise.

“You’re really bad at this.” Elaine’s voice drifted up to him.

“I think you’re just sticking me with pins on purpose.”

“Well, you needn’t fret,” she said, finally standing. “I’m finished.”

She tucked the needle back into the spool of thread and smoothed his suit jacket, tugging on the hem of his sleeve and making sure that the rushed alterations weren’t visible.

Her hair was coming loose; a slippery satin ribbon had been becoming steadily undone while she had worked. She pulled idly at the loose tail that fell over her shoulder and she hummed thoughtfully, taking it out. She tied it around his right arm, knotting it tightly, a broad, white stripe against the black of his suit, the ends trailing past his elbow. Her hand lingered there for a moment, one long enough to make Lance feel like the suit was suddenly too tight and he had to clench his fist to keep from pulling at his collar. He looked at the ribbon instead, at the kanji scrolling down one end of it.

She looked up at him, biting her lip. “Good fortune and long life.” She leaned up the small distance between them and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

She stayed close and Lance swallowed, throat tight. He thought about kissing her, he thought about telling her he was in love with someone else. He chose neither in the end and stepped back.

“How do I look?” he asked, voice rougher than he had hoped.

Elaine smiled faintly and moved away, heading towards the door where she stopped and waited for him to follow. “You’re not quite finished yet.”

Gwaine, Merlin and Uriens were already waiting when they arrive at the garage, standing in tense silence around a set of jet black motorbikes.

“We’re wasting daylight,” Gwaine said. “Hurry up.”

Uriens picked up a helmet and frowned. “I feel like I’ve walked into some ridiculous gangster movie.”

Elaine laughed softly. “Welcome to my life.” She handed Lancelot a leather overcoat as the others mounted the bikes. “But it helps sometimes.”

“Thank you, Elaine, for everything,” Lancelot said, touching her gently on the arm.

She smiled, a bare, empty thing. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Arthur couldn’t understand how this was happening. Even though the masked fighter had been taking hits before, he may as well have been made of stone for all it showed, but now he was crumbling. Arthur could feel bone give way under his fist.

He grabbed the man’s wrist and punched hard in the ribs. The man curled over, winded and wheezing. Arthur twisted his hand into his shirt at the shoulder and pulled him down, wrist still held.
He held the arm straight as he drove his knee up into his elbow. The sound of bone snapping would have been enough to make any spectator shudder even without the sight of jagged bone jutting through flesh, blood spreading into his clothes quickly. Flushed with adrenaline, Arthur caught the knife as it dropped from lax fingers and, without even thinking, jammed it into the man’s side.

The man stumbled and fell back, sprawling awkwardly to the ground, fingers of his broken arm twitching uselessly and his breathing harsh and loud, chest heaving against the pain of the knife still in his side and the need to breathe despite it. Arthur dropped to his knees and pulled off the balaclava covering his opponents face, no longer able to fight his curiosity.

Recognition hit him like a physical blow, ten times harder than anything he had ever felt in his life. All at once, there were a hundred different thoughts warring in his mind; shock, denial, fear, anger, so much guilt that he could taste bile in his throat.

He swallowed hard, but even then the words came out choked and half sobbed. “Allan. Allan, hold on. We can fix this.”

Arthur pressed his hands carefully around the knife, not daring to take it out. Blood had already soaked right through the fabric of his sweatshirt and Arthur’s hands were slick with it.

He looked over his shoulder, but he found himself suddenly alone. He hadn’t even realised they had been abandoned here, even the girl who had helped him was gone. Don’t kill him she had said. Arthur wondered who she was and how she had known. He turned back to Allan. He had no idea what to do. There was no way to he could get help out here.

“I didn’t know it was you.” Allan coughed suddenly. “I was supposed to save you.”

“Shut your mouth. Save your strength will you?”

“They said if I fought, they’d let you go.”


“Morgan. She called me.”

“She told you that you would have to fight to the death for my freedom?” Arthur’s head was spinning and he dropped his head against Allan’s chest, all the strength gone from his bones.

“They called her. She called me. I don’t –“ His breath was coming in great gasps now, chest shuddering under Arthur’s chest, the harsh sound making him flinch. There wouldn’t be enough air in the world for him now, not with his blood leaking away into the grass.

“It’s all right,” Arthur said. “Just rest.”

Allan flailed a heavy hand, reaching for Arthur and finding him, tightening his fingers in Arthur’s hair. “I think. I think she set us up. I-“

“It was a mistake. It must have been. They’ll find us. Everything is going to be fine.”

The words sounded full of denial even to his own ears and Allan was shaking his head. Arthur squeezed his eyes shut. He knew Allan and didn’t even have to look to know what it wasn’t pain that twisted his features, made him grasp at words that stuck in his throat before he can say them; it was guilt.
“It’s not your fault,” he whispered, even as Allan finally went still under him and his own consciousness began to fade. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

CHAPTER FOUR

"Change isn’t easy. Changing the way you live means changing how you think. Changing how you think means changing what you believe about life. That’s hard. When we make our own misery, we sometimes cling to it even when we want so bad to change, because the misery is something we know. The misery is comfortable.”

-Dean Koontz

Merlin opened his eyes and shifted, trying to ease the crick in his back from the hard hospital chairs. Arthur still lay unconscious, bruises half covering one side of his face and one eye slightly blacked. A line ran down from an IV bag and snaked under the blanket and into his arm. It made Merlin ache just to look at him and he stood up and turned away, walking up and down the narrow space between the bed and the closed curtain.

He wished there was something he could do. He had healed what he could without arousing suspicion and Arthur would survive, but this whole thing was something that Merlin hadn’t been prepared for. All this time he had only worried about how he could give this story the ending it deserved, how to give them the chance to fulfil their destiny. He had never considered the possibility that there might be someone else to who would remember before Arthur himself did, someone who would want Arthur dead.

He rubbed his knuckles into his eyes and yawned, heading back to the chair and sitting down heavily. He reached to the bedside unit for the book he’d taken from Lance so he’d have something to do with his hands even if he couldn’t spare any attention to actually reading it.

It was just then that Arthur stirred and opened his eyes, making Merlin start and almost drop the book. Arthur blinked blearily a few times before turning to him and Merlin tried not to look like he had been sitting here for the last three hours worried almost to tears.

“How are you feeling?” Arthur said nothing and Merlin lapsed into silence, turning the book over in his hands and thumbing the pages idly for a while. “How are you feeling?”

Arthur gave him a scathing look that was surprisingly impressive, given that he looked as pale as the sheets he was lying on. “How does it look like I feel, Emrys?”

“Well.” Merlin fished for the words for a second before giving up, shrugging and leaning back in the chair.

“Where are the others?” Arthur asked eventually.

“They’re...taking care of a few things.” Arthur hadn’t taken his eyes off Merlin since he woke and Merlin made himself ask, “what do you remember?”

His hand clenched around the sheets, knuckles bleaching. “I killed Allan.”
Merlin dropped the book onto the cabinet, rubbing his hands over his face. “Arthur.”

“Don’t think about lying about it. I remember that part very vividly.” Arthur grabbed at Merlin’s hands, pulling them away from his face. “Tell me what happened.”

“I...had a hunch that they’d take you back to the reservoir. Gwaine created a distraction to draw the bad guys away from you and then we ran them off. Allan was already dead when we got there. I thought you were too.”

“What about the girl?”

Merlin frowned. “There was no girl.”

“There was. Pale skin, dark hair. She helped me.”

“Maybe she ran off when she heard us coming.” Merlin shrugged and shifted uneasily in his seat. “Arthur. You have to tell me. There’s something about this whole thing that just doesn’t make sense.”

“You think it’s a trap,” Arthur said dully, eyes on the ceiling. “Why?”

Merlin turned the question over in his mind, trying to find the best way to answer it without giving too much away. With all that was going on, it was just too soon for the truth. “I think someone is trying to make you pay for something they think you’ve done.”

Arthur closed his eyes. “Well, they’ve made someone pay for it.”

It was so dark that Gwaine almost tripped and fell down the stairs. He stumbled over a few steps but managed to brace himself against the walls before he went head over heels and broke his neck. The smooth wood panelling was gone now, replaced by rough stone. He felt his way down carefully. The odd angle and the unevenness of the stairs made him think that the stairs too were made of stone.

Eventually, he found himself in a stone corridor, with a little moonlight coming through from somewhere and he looked up to see tiny grills cut into one wall. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness and realised that he was not just in a wide corridor. Bringing up his right hand, his ring clinked against metal and his suspicions were confirmed; bars.

There was a sound of fabric rustling and he leaned his forehead against the bars, trying to peer through the gloom by sheer force of will. He couldn’t quite make himself believe what he was seeing. The idea of someone having an actual dungeon under their house was just too surreal.

“Here!” a voice called, making Gwaine jump and swear. “Come over to the end.”

Warily, Gwaine did so. A hand patted him gently on the knee and he crouched. He could just about make out the outline of a man with hands cuffed around a bar. “There’s an oil lamp on a shelf on the end wall.”

Gwaine went, feeling his way along and after fumbling through three matches, he finally managed to get the lamp lit, cursing himself; quitting smoking was no reason to stop carrying his lighter around. He winched and squeezed his eyes shut when the light finally caught, bright after images flashing behind his eyelids.
He held the light up and his jaw dropped at the sight. Around the cell were figures handcuffs to rings in the floor and walls, or to the bars. A quick count revealed seven men of various ages, three women and a pair of twin girls who didn’t look much older than fifteen.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

The man who hummed faintly in agreement and pointed to the door. “The lock’s old.” He said. “I think you should be able to break it.”

Setting the lamp carefully back on the shelf, Gwaine kicked the lock once, twice and it didn’t give. He pulled experimentally on one of the horizontal bars before pulling himself up and swinging all his weight at the lock. It took a few tries, but the lock finally broke open with a shriek, the door swinging open and hitting one of the prisoners.

Sorry,” Gwaine said, dropping back to the floor. He dug in his pockets, fishing for his Swiss army knife. He crouched by the guy. “What’s your name?” he asked. The man clearly had his wits about him and Gwaine was sure that it wasn’t polite to keep referring to some you relied on as ‘that guy’ even if it was only in your head.

“Leon.”

Gwaine went back out for the lap, forgotten on the shelf at the prospect of opening a locked door. He brought it up close and inspected the lock on the handcuffs. They had been closed tight enough to cut the skin on his wrists and Gwaine winced in sympathy as he set about picking the lock. Leon hissed as they came away and dragged his arms down slowly and stiffly. Slipping an arm under his shoulders, Gwaine helped him up and let him lean for a few minutes until he got used to being back on his feet.

He finally let go, holding onto a bar while he worked the stiffness from his joints and Gwaine moved away to free the others.

“How did you get in?”

Gwaine flashed a wild grin over his shoulder. “As you may have noticed, locks don’t mean very much to me.”

“I meant, how did you get past the guard.”

“Frying pan to the back of the head,” Gwaine said. “They had a nice heavy one in the sink. Lucky me.”

Leon smiled and shook his head. A few of the captives smiled too, but that was about all the response Gwaine could get out of them. When he got to the girls, they both avoided his eyes. He could see a fierce spirit in one of them from the grim set of her mouth and they way her fingers twitched and clenched, as if she was eager to do something, to get some payback. The other flinched away from his hands in a way that made his blood run cold.

Once they were all free, Gwaine led them up the stairs, lighting the way while Leon brought up the rear. When they got back into the house, Leon tiptoed over to the guard who was sprawled on the floor. He knelt and felt for a pulse in his neck and frowned.

“I thought you meant you knocked him out.”

“That was what I intended to do,” Gwaine said, coming to stand next to him. “I can’t say I’m sorry about how it worked out though.”
“No, I suppose not.”

A small voice piped up from behind him. “Why didn’t you just take his keys?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Gwaine turned and smiled but the girl looked unimpressed by his charm so he admitted. “He tossed them in the fireplace. What’s your name?”

“The girl hesitated for a second, looking at him coolly. “Bella,” she said and nodded behind her. “This is my sister, Bran.”

One by one, they introduced themselves. Gwaine cocked his head, looking at them thoughtfully. There was something familiar here, an itch in the back of his mind. He dismissed it as some kind of weird déjà vu.

“I assume Arthur sent you,” Leon said as they made their way out to where a flatbed truck was waiting for them.

“Not so much sent.” Gwaine rubbed the back of his neck, the adrenaline rush fading and weariness beginning to let itself back in. “When we found him he was barely conscious. He kept saying something about having to ‘go back and free them’ so I came out to look for you. To be honest I didn’t think I’d find anything. I thought it was just delirious rambling.”

Gwaine clambered into the driver’s seat while Leon headed for the passenger side. The men graciously climbed up into the cargo bed despite the cool night, letting the women press together in the back seats. They huddled together as silently as when he had first found them and if Leon was thinking at all about what might have happened to them if they hadn’t been found, he didn’t let it show.

“How is Arthur?” he asked, voice almost lost under the crank of the engine.

“Alive. You’re all headed to the hospital anyway so you can see for yourself.”

“There’s something about him I can’t quite put my finger on.”

“Would you like to?” At Leon’s bemused but faintly smiling expression, he shrugged. “I just can’t help myself. But I know what you mean. When we first met, I had this feeling like he was going to be nothing but trouble.”

“And was he?”

“No. Well, much less so than some other I know at any rate. But the madness of these last two days...” He trailed off and shook his head. “I don’t know. There’s just something about this whole thing that just doesn’t add up.”

“Like there’s something important you just can’t remember?”

Gwaine looked at Leon sharply. “Exactly like that.”

Gwen perched on the edge of the bed, taking care to avoid the cannula and the monitoring wires.

“Gwen,” Arthur said, reaching slightly to brush his fingers against the back of her hand. “I’m fine.”

She smiled faintly and wrapped her fingers around his. “I was just thinking of dad. You’d think
working in a hospital would make it easier, but when it’s someone you know...”

Arthur hummed quietly in agreement trying not to think of everything that had happened. He remembered telling the man in the suit that he wasn’t afraid to die and that had been true, but now, with Gwen’s clammy hand in his and her wide, frightened eyes watching him like he might crumble into dust right there, he had never wanted more to live.

Emrys came in then, breaking whatever awkward tension had been building in the room. He passed a cup of coffee to Gwen, who took it with a grateful smile and eased himself into his seat as if he had just aged a hundred years in one night. Arthur wondered if he had slept at all.

He was just about to mention this when Gwen suddenly blurted, “I have something to tell you.”

They both stare at her for a minute before giving each other wary looks. “What is it?”

Gwen pressed her fingers to her lips and Arthur had to try hard not to panic. She had the same look on her face now as she’d had when she told him that her brother had disappeared and when she had received the call telling her that her father had been found half dead three streets away from home.

“I think,” she paused briefly, closing her eyes and steeling herself before she could think better of telling them, “I think Morgan had something to do with this.”

There was a heavy, ringing silence and the words seemed to hand in the air between them. Emrys slumped back in his seat, passing a hand over his face. “Are you sure?”

“I know it sounds insane. But her sister came, and she....she frightens me. And I heard them talking. I couldn’t make out all of it but –”

Emrys took her hands in his own as the desperate rush of words stopped suddenly. “It’s okay. Just tell us what you heard.”

“She told Morgan to call Allan and say that he had to fight to save you, that whoever had taken you, had told you that and she said something about it being justice –“

“You don’t seem surprised by any of this,” Emrys interrupted. Arthur sighed, still staring out unfocused at the green curtain. “Allan said the same thing before...” He shook his head. “I guess I just didn’t want to believe it.”

“Arthur,” Gwen whispered. “She told him you were her half brother.”

Emrys’ head snapped up and he stared at Gwen, then at Arthur. Arthur swallowed and stared at the sheet, twisting it through his fingers. He had no idea what to feel at that revelation. The fact that he had been adopted had never been a secret; he had known that for as long as he could remember. Hector had never mentioned his real parents, or the possibility that he might have siblings.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be” Arthur said. He touch Emrys’ arm softly hoping he seemed more at ease than he actually felt. “This wasn’t your doing. You saved my life.”

Emrys only smiled tightly and looked away.
They rode on in silence for so long that Gareth was feeling thoroughly unsettled by Lynette’s apparent change of attitude. He slowed down, the roar of the engine quieting to a low growl.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said into his shoulder. “Just keep driving.”

Gareth did for a few more minutes before cruising to a stop and craning around to see her face without getting off the bike. “You’ve been oddly quiet all morning.”

“We don’t usually speak while you’re driving.”

“Lynette.” Gareth sighed, smiling. “What is it?”

Lynette bit her lip and looked away. Gareth waited and she finally cracked. “Aren’t you scared at all?” she asked, voice rising slightly.

“Well-“

She didn’t wait for him to make a flippant response and slipped off the bike so she could face him. “Any of these men could ruin your life. They could kill you and get away with it. All I’ve done is insult you and you’re still determined to help me. Why?!“

“I’m not afraid of death,” Gareth replied simply. “I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

“You’re mad. I don’t understand you at all.”

“I’m pretty simple really. I just like to help people.” Gareth smiled wryly and reached out to touch her hair, tucking it back behind her ear.

Lynette covered her face with her hands to hide her flaming cheeks. “How can you possibly forgive me?”

Gareth laughed and tugged her hand away from her face, bringing it up to his lips and brushing a kiss to the back of her knuckles. “All is forgiven.”

She smiled faintly but still looked guilty and a little upset. Before Gareth could calm her any further the roar of a motorbike engine cut through the quiet and a rider shot around the corner and he dropped her hand, frowning. Lynette cried out and stumbled back out of the way as the rider drove straight at them.

Gareth scowled, drew the bandanna back over the lower half of his face and twisted the throttle, and they rode at each other. Gareth narrowed his eyes, vision coning down to the straight line between him and the other rider. He kept the bike carefully level; he had no intention of being the one to break and turn away.

The rider was wearing no helmet and his face was uncovered and Gareth could see clearly the surprise on his face when he realised Gareth would not stop. He swerved, dangerously late, over balancing.

The bike skidded wildly and tipped onto its side, the rider tumbling off, while Gareth turned and dismounted. He was barely back on his feet when Gareth tackled him back to the ground. The rider caught at his wrists as he drew back for a punch. “Wait! Enough. Enough, please.”

Lynette didn’t have to wait to be asked this time. She laid a hand on Gareth’s shoulder and said, “let
Gareth stood, smiled without hesitation and offered a hand, which the man took gratefully.

“You aren’t Matthias,” he said, and tugged down the bandanna covering Gareth’s face. “Who are you?”

“Gareth. And this-”

“Is Lynette Lyones.” The man finished with a smile. “I’ve met your sister, Leona, and you look quite like her.”

“And who are you?” Lynette asked.

“I’m Eric. Where are you headed? And why,” Eric gestured to the jacket Gareth had on, “are you wearing that?”

“You’re Eric Tully?”

“Yes.” Eric narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at Gareth. “Have we met?”

“I.” Gareth hesitated and flushed faintly. “You know my brother.”

Eric blinked and studied Gareth carefully. “No.” He smiled widely. “Not Gwaine’s little brother?”

Lynette turned to stare at Gareth, eyebrows raised, and his flush deepened. “I was barely eleven when my brother left with you.”

“And look at you know.” Eric clapped him warmly on the shoulder and led him back to his bike, picking his own up along the way. “Let me ride with you a little way. You can tell me what exactly you’re doing out here and I think you ought to hear what your brother is getting up to right now.”

Merlin jogged his foot anxiously while he leaned back against the wall of the A&E watching people come and go in various states of distress, waiting for Gwaine to turn up.

When he arrived, it was with twelve others. One man was supporting another who was limping badly and Gwaine himself was carrying a woman who appeared to be unconscious and Merlin stomach dropped as they near and the hospital lights showed their faces.

He followed them in as they were directed to a Minor Injuries Unit, keeping his distance and watching carefully. Vivian, Isolde, Elena, Tristan, Bedeviere, Elyan, Owain, Pellias, Leon and Ewan. Merlin was caught between elation at finding so many people from his past and terror at what it might mean. He had always known there was a chance that many if not all of their old friends would return, but this was all happening too fast; he had no idea how he could possibly help them all if their memories returned at once.

Two identical girls sat next to each other and Merlin wandered over to sit down with them and they watched him warily. “What’s your names?” he asked eventually. “I’m Merlin. That’s my friend Gwaine who brought you back.”

They looked at each other before one, the slightly taller of the two spoke. “I’m Branwyn. That’s Bella.”
Merlin smiled. “I don’t suppose one of you has a birthmark on their right arm?”

“That’s me.” Bella pushed back her sleeve and turned her arm until Merlin could see it, right where it was supposed to be. “How did you know that?”

Merlin sighed and wondered what to say. He had never imagined that any of them might be reborn into a different gender, given that everyone he had first met were exactly as they should be. The twins looked mostly like they back then, same blue eyes and black hair and button nose, Balan had been the taller one and Balin had had the birthmark.

Before he could think up an answer a constable tapped him on the shoulder. “Inspector wants to speak to you outside.”

He waved goodbye to the girls and followed the constable outside, where the uniformed inspector was sipping a steaming drink in a paper cup and having a murmured conversation with an EMT before turning to Merlin, whose jaw dropped.

“You really do have a knack for finding trouble, Merlin.”

“Gilli?” Merlin gawped, having no idea what he could say.

“Come on. Walk with me,” Gilli said and steered him gently away from the hospital buildings. “Are you alright?”

Merlin scrubbed a hand over his face. “Not so much, no.” He turned and looked at Gilli carefully. “So you remember everything?”

“I do. I’m old hand at this game.” At Merlin’s questioning look he shrugged. “I’m on my fourth life.”

Merlin made a distraught sound and ducked into the smoking shelter to sit down, slumped forward with his face in his hands. He felt Gilli settle next to him, arm pressed against his. “I thought I knew how this worked. Four lives, God, I-”

“Don’t. This isn’t your fault.”

“Isn’t it? I promised Arthur he would be king. Maybe, I did something-”

“You don’t have that power. No one does. You know what it takes to bring back the dead. And it’s not a price you’re willing to pay.”

“I don’t know where the grail is anyway. I gave it back to the druids to keep safe.”

“Well, there you are. So why the guilt?”

Merlin said nothing for a moment. “This is your fourth life, you said. Why could I never find you? Why didn’t you find me?”

“I had hoped you would let go. I didn’t want to come back to you as a reminder of everything you had lost.”

Sighing heavily, Merlin leaned back against the cold glass of the shelter and studied Gilli. He looked a lot different, certainly older than Merlin looked himself. “When were you born?” Merlin asked.


“I’m starting to go grey actually.”
Gilli laughed. “Well, you are eight hundred years overdue, I suppose.”

“How could you let this happen?!” Morgause was more furious than Morgana had ever seen, in this life or the other, as she shouted into the phone. “Not only does Arthur still live, but now the captives have escaped as well?”

Morgana tried to shut out the sound of the argument as she sat on the bed, twisting her fingers against the temptation to bite her nails. She was shaking, shivering, fragments of memory still coming back to her. There was no clear picture in her mind of the past, only vague imagine and a pervading sense of fear and guilt and loss. All she had to go on was Morgause’s word that it had been caused by Arthur and Merlin, but all she could think of was the Arthur who had been Uriens’ best man and who had salvaged the wedding when her father fell ill and couldn’t fly out to Cornwall to give her away. The old memories were difficult to reconcile.

She was hardly aware of having stood up until Morgause’s hand closed around her wrist. “Where are you going?”

“Just getting something to drink,” Morgana said, somehow managing to keep her voice even despite the sharp thrill of fear that had snapped up her spine when Morgause had grabbed her.

Her legs gave out halfway down the stairs and she sank down onto a step, clinging to the banister. Her heart clenched in her chest and she muffled a distraught sob with her hands, guilt making her stomach churn and nausea roll up her throat. She aught to feel guilty over Allan’s death but, while it upset her, she only felt glad that Arthur survived.

Morgause hadn’t been the one to tell her the truth about Arthur’s parentage. She had known for weeks that Arthur was her half brother and had been waiting for the right time to tell him. She had been thrilled that they turned out to be family. For a long time they had had a relationship that was familiar enough that she considered him to be a brother and she had imagined that he would be as pleased as her to know what they were blood related.

Now though, now everything had changed. In all her life she had never doubted her sister, but with her memory playing hide and seek and her nightmares becoming reality she had nothing to hold on to, no solid ground beneath her feet. Everything was quicksand. I’m going mad, she thought, this is what it must feel like.

She was going to lose everything, all for a hurt that she barely remembered from centuries ago, one that no longer existed. She wished she could take it back, wished there was some way she could fix this. She could still hear Morgause pacing in her room, voice raised, and she shivered. No, it was too late now. What she had done was irreparable and the time to walk away had long since passed.

Standing shakily, feeling weak and drained to the marrow of her bones, Morgana headed towards the kitchen. She dragged a hand over her face, tugged down the sleeve of her sweater to wipe the wetness from it and almost jumped out of her skin when the door opened suddenly behind her.

She turned and flinched, blood running cold, at the sight of Uriens standing in the doorway.
who had more than once surprised him with her quick reflexes in the past, caught it by the seat and helped him steady it.

He opened his mouth to apologise but Elaine put a finger to her lips before motioning for him to answer the phone. Sighing, he answered it and watched her wheel the bikes down from the truck carefully and set them back against the wall where they belonged while Emrys updated him on what was happening at the hospital. He didn’t say much in return only to give a cursory I’m fine when Merlin asked if he was all right.

It was a lie. Perhaps only a small one, but he felt miles from fine just then. He couldn’t stop thinking about the moment they had arrived at that ring, the frantic scramble over the husks of the cars to where Arthur and Allan lay, the blind panic as the sight of them unmoving on the ground. The short lived relief when they realised Arthur was still breathing.

He and Alan had never been what he would describe as close; they rarely met outside the group. Even so, he had been a friend and to find him bloody and lifeless on the ground had been a shock that he had yet to recover from.

Everything felt hazy around the edges as if he had just woken up from a very vivid dream, some moments of the last two days as sharp as cut class in his memory and many more felt so utterly surreal that he would wonder that the whole thing wasn’t just some kind of psychotic break. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes until colour flared behind his lids. God only knew what Arthur was feeling.

Elaine touched him gently on the arm and he flinched back. She frowned and reached out again, this time taking him firmly by the arm and shepherding him through to the living room and down onto the sofa, and hurrying back out of the room. He gazed after her absently for a long minute, unfocused, but didn’t realise she had returned until she was sitting on the coffee table in front of him and pressing a mug of tea into his hands. It was just short of scalding, but he drank it anyway, hoping the heat could burn away his disillusionment.

“You should sleep,” Elaine said, watching him with concern. There was a knowing look in her eyes. He wouldn’t be able to fool her into thinking he was all right even if he tried.

He clenched and unclenched his fists and jogged his knee. “I can’t,” he said finally, shaking his head.

They had a knack for attracting trouble and out of all of them, the adrenaline crash always affected Lance the worst, but this was beyond anything he had ever known in his life. Allan was dead. Arthur had been chained up in a dungeon. Gareth was out there somewhere on his own.

“Gwaine’s going to kill me if anything happens to him,” he said, barely aware that he was speaking aloud.

“To who?”

“Gareth. His brother. He suspected but I told him no because Gareth made me promise but if something happens—”

“Stop. None of this is in any way your fault.” She sighed. “Let it go.”

Unthinking, he leaned forward and caught her mouth in a kiss. She went utterly still before him, even as his skin tingled with anticipation and and every instinct was screaming at him that this was what he needed, the comfort of a warm body, to tell him that all was right with the world and life was
moving on, and he almost pulled away. Then she parted her lips under his and slipped from the table and into him.

Lance shook; he felt as if his very breath was trembling in his lungs. He felt wild and half hysterical as he twisted and pressed her down into the sofa and she arched up against him, with a quiet laugh, pulled him closer and said It’s okay. I’ve got you. It was over quickly, a needy, desperate thing, and he couldn’t stop saying her name.

After, they lay together in a sleepy, sated tangle of limbs, her arm slung loose around his chest and her thumb tracing lazy circles on her hip. He was almost comfortable.

“What are you worrying about now?” she murmured into his neck.

“Is there no hiding anything from you?” He sighed and pulled back slightly. “You were being kind and I took advantage.”

“Don’t be absurd. I didn’t do anything I didn’t want to do. I can take care of myself.” A warm, lax smile spread across her face. “I like to think I took care of you too.”

“Yeah, you’re funny.” He said dryly, trying to keep the amusement out of his voice.

She watched him thoughtfully for a moment. “Are you thinking about Gwen?”

Caught off guard, Lance pulled away so he could look at her properly, unwilling to believe he had heard her say that, and ended up tumbling off the sofa completely. He whacked his arm on the coffee table and Elaine leaned over the edge of the sofa, wincing, but he was too stunned to care about the pain.

He sat up. “No,” he said, which was the truth and a strange surprise to him, “how did you even...”

“I’ve seen you two together. You’re not very good at hiding it.” His heart sank low and it must have showed on his face. “Don’t worry,” she said, “your secret’s safe with me, though I can’t speak for anyone else.”

He shifted to let her grab her dress from where it lay on the table and watched her slip it on, reached for his trousers and shuffled into them without getting up. “You’re not going to tell me to stay with you?” he asked eventually.

“No.” She stood and stretched. “You can’t command love.”

He hesitated, biting his lip, before asking, “do you want me to stay with you?”

“Yes.”

Slumped back against the sofa, he thought about Elaine, all her seemingly unending kindness, her sharp wit and her wisdom, her frank honesty, the way she made complicated issues as simple as talking about the weather. “What should I do?” he asked, and when she looked at him askance, added, “I really want to know what you think.”

“She’s practically engaged to your best friend. These things tend to end in tragedy.”

“I’ve spent so long being in love with her. I don’t think I know how not to be.”

“You’re in love with an idea of her, a version of her that doesn’t love Arthur, and that’s a version that, if it existed once, no longer does. I can’t make you stay, but I can’t let you go without
knowing.”

He picked up the ribbon and stood, turning it around his fingers for a minute while she looked around for her errant underwear and held it out to her. She smiled wryly. “That’s yours.”

“I don’t think-”

She slipped it from his fingers and tied it deftly around his arm again before stooping to pick up his shirt. “I think that while we grow up we cling to this idea that love hurts and that we’re supposed to suffer and that if we don’t it’s not real love. We think that we need to give something up, instead of just give ourselves. And then when we find something simple we don’t think it could be worth it. Maybe that’s just me.” She held his shirt up and poked him until he slipped his arms into the sleeves and let her settle it on his shoulders before turning his face so he was looking at her. “Whatever you choose, just be happy.”

The sound of the front door opening and closing made them look around, just in time to see Eric walk in. He saw them, made a choked sound and walked back out into the hall, narrowly avoiding walking right into the doorframe. Elaine muffled a giggle and he came back in a moment later. Lance couldn’t help but smile at the discomfort he was so clearly trying to hide.

“Urgency transcends the awkwardness,” he said, clearing his throat. “I have news.”

Merlin walked back to the ward slowly, mulling over their limited options. He needed to find a way to solve this without bringing any more danger to Arthur, but could only chase ideas around in circles in his mind. This wasn’t how he had wanted it to go. He couldn’t understand at all how he could have missed the connection between Morgana and Arthur; he had no idea that Igraine had already had a child.

Morgause coming back into the picture was something that he had not foreseen either. He wondered how long she had lived, how long it had taken for her hatred to fester into something so strong, so corrosive that she would manipulate her sister. Merlin had no doubt that Morgana had no true sense of what was happening. Meeting her had been a shock, but once his initial worry had faded he had been able to sense that she was entirely untainted by the past. There was nothing of the old Morgana there and he had been fascinated, hopeful that he might come to know her and that, when she regained her memories, they could be the allies he had always hoped they would be.

He sighed, rubbed his eyes and pulled back the privacy curtain to the bed he knew was Arthur’s. He had made so many trips back and forth for coffee he was sure he could find it in the pitch black, but for one moment he thought he had it utterly wrong. Arthur was standing, his back to Merlin, but he was talking to a girl sitting on the bed, pale skin and dark hair, who was so ingrained in Merlin’s memory that he recognised her even though her hair hid her face from him.

“Freya?” He breathed her name as if even saying it aloud would make her disappear.

Arthur and Freya both turned. Merlin noted absently that Arthur was looking better, the colour back in his face, but his brain was still misfiring and he couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“You know her?” Arthur asked, but Merlin was stunned into silence. “Emrys, this is the girl I was telling you about.”

Before Arthur could comment on Merlin’s sudden stupor, Freya stood, brushed past Arthur and pushed Merlin out, closing the curtain again behind them, which Arthur must have interpreted,
correctly, as a sign not to follow.

“Merlin,” Freya said.

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t call me that. He’ll hear you.” He reached out a hesitant hand and touched her face, trailing his fingertips over her cheekbones and dragging them through her hair and it felt as think and soft against his skin as he remembered.

He kissed her suddenly, hard, too hard, their teeth clicking together painfully. He felt like his heart was going to burst out of his chest. He had become so used to missing her that to see her again, to be able to touch her and kiss her, was agony. It was too much and not enough all at once.

She pushed him back, covering his mouth when he leaned in again. He realised his face was wet only when she thumbed away the tears. She opened her mouth to speak and paused, darting a glance at the closed curtain, before ushering him out of the room and into the ward corridor. “Merlin.”

“You’ve come back to me,” he said, the moment she moved her hand away from his mouth. “I-”

“Merlin. Focus.”

“I don’t understand how you can be here. You became bound to the lake.”

“No. I became bound to the sword and the sword is bound to Arthur.”

Belatedly, Merlin began seeing the picture come together, missing pieces finally falling into place. “Arthur needed help. The sword brought you back to help?” He chewed his lip, trying to concentrate Excalibur had been forged by Kilgharrah. It was possible that some of the dragon’s life, his spirit, had passed into the sword with his magic. Something to add to the long list of things he had never considered. He wondered how much of this Kilgharrah had known of before his death.

Freya pressed a hand to his cheek. “I’m so sorry, Merlin,” she said, and he shivered, braced himself for more bad news. “They’ve stolen the sword.”

CHAPTER FIVE

"We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered.”

- Tom Stoppard

Morgana took a reflexive step back as Uriens moved toward her and he stopped short.

“It’s all right,” he said. “He’s fine. Arthur’s going to be fine. I can take you to him now.”

Morgana gasped out a sharp, “no.”

“No?” Uriens held out his hands, took a slow step towards her. “It’s fine. Everything is fine.”
Morgana realised that he had thought she’d had one of her nightmares. “No,” she repeated. “I can’t go. He’ll know it was me. I can’t go.”

“What was you?”

“It’s all my fault.” She couldn’t help the words. She wanted him to know, she wanted this to be over. “I did this.”

“No,” he said, but he hesitated, seeing that she was serious. “No. I don’t believe it. You’ve had a bad dream that’s all.”

“I...”

“You’ve known them your whole life. You loved the both. You’re not capable of this.” His anger was rising now, Morgana could see it. “Allan is dead. You’d never let that happen. Why would you?”

“It was meant to be Arthur,” she said, feeling dizzy with the relief of saying the words out loud. It didn’t matter what happened to her, only that he conscious was clear. “They were supposed to fight and Arthur was supposed to die.”

Uriens stared at Morgana in horror, eyes wide and a hot flush in his cheeks. He looked caught between anger and confusion. “How could you do this?”

“I don’t know.” Morgana’s breath caught painfully in her throat and she took an automatic step backwards. There was the sound of footsteps on the stairs and Morgause rushed in.

“What’s going on here?”

Morgana said nothing, a deer caught in headlights and Uriens turned on Morgause, confused. “What are you doing here?” He looked between the two of them and his eyes narrowed as Morgana sensed him putting things together.

He took a step towards Morgana but Morgause came between him and her. “Don’t touch her.”

He ignored her, reaching for Morgana’s arm. “I just need to know why.”

Morgause looked over her shoulder at her. “He knows?” Morgana nodded, lips pressed tight together and eyes wet. “Well, I suppose it would have had to happen sooner or later.” She drew a small blade from a sheath at the small of her back and stepped towards Uriens, who stumbled a step back.

“What are you doing?” Morgana cried, finding her voice at last as her heart jumped painfully into her throat.

“What’s necessary.”

Far too late, Uriens turned to run but Morgause, eyes flashing, threw the dagger and it flew unerringly into his back. Morgana screamed.

Urien crumpled, blood spreading across his pale blue shirt like a macabre sunrise as Morgana rushed to him. She turned him around gently. His skin was ashen but he breathed still, taking shallow rapid breathes. She didn’t know what to do. She kept her eyes on his and in her peripheral vision, she could see his blood leaking away. She couldn’t think, just cradled his head in her lap, wanting to scream and scream.
“I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I’m so sorry.”

His mouth moved, but he couldn’t get the breath to make the words. His arms twitch and Morgana reached for his hand when Morgause pulled her away.

“You don’t love him,” she said. “You never did.”

Morgana watched Uriens go still, even as his blood still spread across the carpet, slower now. *I did love him*, she thought, heart skipping a beat and then another, *I loved him.*

Gwaine had been dozing for the past half an hour, slipping in and out of proper sleep, curled awkwardly on the first row of empty chairs he had been able to find. He woke easily when Merlin shook him gently by the shoulder.

He sat up gingerly and stretched. Merlin frowned. “I’m pretty sure you could have slept in one of the spare beds for a while before they noticed.”

Gwaine sighed. “I’ll try and remember that for next time.”

“I need another favour.”

“You’re building up quite a debt here, you know.”

“Yes, I know.” Merlin stepped aside and gestured behind him. “This is Freya.”

Seeing Freya, Gwaine brightened. “Hello there.” He looked to Merlin and smiled. “Maybe you don’t owe me quite so much after all.” Freya smiled wryly at Merlin in a way that Gwaine immediately realised was too familiar for an uncomplicated kind of relationship. “Oh, I see.”

“Shut up, will you?” Merlin flailed his arms, exasperated. “Just. I need you to help her.”

Gwaine sobered as Merlin’s tone; there was a thread of desperation there that he had never quite heard before. He wondered if he had even slept. “Of course I will.” He looked between them. “Where are you going?”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I need to see Morgan.”

“I thought Uriens was bringing her here?”

“I. It’s complicated. I can’t wait.” Merlin dropped his hands and looked so tired that Gwaine wouldn’t be surprised if he collapsed then and there. He wanted to tell him not to go, to rest, but he knew that there was no way Merlin would be able to rest until he had seen this through. “You’ll do this, won’t you? And take care of her?”

“Yes. You know I will. Merlin, what -”

“I’ll explain later. I have to go.” He turned to Freya, pressed a lingering kiss to the corner of her mouth and murmured, “be safe. I-” He caught himself and shook his head, touched her gently on the arm and loped away.

They watched until he was out of sight. Gwaine sighed and heaved himself up. He smiled at Freya. “I’m Gwaine.”
“I know.” She gave him a small wink, his reputation had no doubt preceded him, and led the way out of the hospital.

“Wait.” He caught her by the arm and steered her towards the Minor Injuries Unit. He found Leon on one of the furthest beds, signing discharge papers. There was an expanse of white bandage on his thigh over his jeans. He looked a lot better than he had when Gwaine had brought him in.

“Hello,” he said.

Leon jumped and swore, turning to glare halfheartedly at Gwaine, who only flashed a brilliant smile. “Do you never stop?”

“And not really, but you’ll get used to me eventually.”

He looked past Gwaine to where Freya had been hanging back. “Hello. Who are you?”

“She’s our damsel. We’re -” He yelped as Freya cuffed him around the head. “Ow.”

“I’m Freya.”

She extended a hand to Leon, who took it and smiled, saying, “I like you already,” while Gwaine pouted.

“As I was saying, before I was rudely interrupted, she needs our help looking for something.”

“Our help? I don’t know,” Leon shrugged a shoulder and swung his legs back and forth experimentally. “They told me to rest.”

Gwaine came and sat next to him. “You can rest later. Something big is happening. You know that feeling you have that you’re missing something important? I think we’re about to find it.”

“You’ll be giving me the ‘last night on earth’ speech next.”

“Would it work if I did?”

Merlin found Morgana sitting on the bonnet of a car he didn’t recognise, which he could only assume belonged to Morgause, when he arrived at her home. She didn’t look up until he got out of the car, closing the door with a thunk that was loud in the silence. He couldn’t hear her, but he saw her say his name. Merlin.

She slipped off the bonnet and made for the house, but Merlin was faster. He caught her, covered her mouth and manoeuvred them both, stumbling, into the shadow of the house where they wouldn’t be seen. He blanketed his presence from Morgause as best he could.

Morgana struggled to get away and he shook her. “Morgana, stop. I’m not going to hurt you, but I need to know why.”

“Morgause.” Morgana bit her lip. “She wants revenge, she deserved it. We suffered so much.”

She tried to pull away from him but Merlin tightened his grip. “I can’t let you do this. Before I had understood. Uther was a tyrant and he made your life hell, and for so many others too. But now? There’s no reason for you to be doing this.
“We paid our debts, Morgana. Don’t you remember how it ended? Arthur died, along with almost everyone else. I lived for nearly a thousand years, waiting for another chance. This isn’t fair.”

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, the words lost against his throat. “She’s my sister, Merlin.”

Merlin caught her hands. “Morgana, please.”

His heart broke at the helplessness in her eyes, torn between an old duty and a new one. “No. I can’t.”

Morgana sobbed and fell against Merlin. “You have to go Merlin.”

“Come away with me.” He cupped her face, pushing her hair out of her eyes. “Look at me. I forgive you, Morgana. I forgive you. Come with me.”

She relaxed in his arms, all the fight, all the life going out of her. “The others never will.” And then, voice flat, she added almost absently. “She killed Uriens. She killed my husband.”

Merlin closed his eyes and held her, shirt wet with her silent tears, until Morgause’s voice echoing in the corridor made them both jump apart. She was calling for Morgana but Merlin knew that she must have realised he was here.

Morgana pressed her nails into his arms. “You have to run.”

He hesitated, wanting to beg her to come away with him. He wanted to save her, but he didn’t have the heart to drag her against her will, not knowing what fate would await her now that the others knew what she had done. In the end, he pressed his lips to her forehead before letting Morgana push him away and running.

Arthur shifted from foot to foot, waiting and watching people pass by. It was late morning now and there were more people coming in for scheduled appointments. They all felt a whole world away.

Emrys almost walked right past him. He caught him by the arm and Emrys looked honestly surprised. “What are you doing out here?”

“They discharged me. I can’t really hang around on the ward.” He let him go, and asked, with more curiosity than anger, “where the fuck have you been?”

“I had to take care of something. Sorted now.”

They head in the direction of the underground car park. “What happened to the girl? Freya?”

“With Gwaine and Leon. She’s looking for something.”

Arthur, unsettled by the clipped answers and the general listlessness, wanted to ask what was wrong but he bit his tongue and kept walking. He didn’t feel much up to comforting just then; he had never been much good at it anyway. The silence lasted until they reached the second sublevel where Emrys had parked his car.

He turned to Arthur, rattling his keys nervously. “Do you have a plan?”

“Yes. I’m going to go home and sleep for a month.”
Emrys scoffed softly and Arthur went still. It was a moment before Emrys realised that he wasn’t walking beside him. “What?”

“You don’t think I’m being serious.”

“Were you?” Emrys smiled faintly. “Come on, that’s not what you’re really going to do.”

Arthur was aware faintly that he must sound like a child, but he didn’t care. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do. I’m going to barricade the fucking door and not leave the flat for a long time.”

“You.” Emrys gaped at him and floundered. “What about fighting back?!

“I don’t care about that. I don’t want to fight back. As far as I’m concerned, my part in this is over.”

“What about Allan?”

The world blurred for a second and fury suddenly replaced the dull blankness that Arthur had felt since he’d woken in the hospital. “Don’t you dare. Don’t you fucking dare use that against me. He’s dead. Fighting isn’t going to bring him back. It’s not going to make his death mean something.”

“Yes, it will. We -”

“No. Fuck you. His death was my fault. It was my fault. You can’t understand that. I’ve earned the right to give up.”

Emrys clenched his jaw hard enough that he could see the muscle jump in his check, his mouth going thin and tight. “You’re a selfish bastard, you know that? You don’t know what we give for you, what we would suffer through. It’s you who can’t understand.”

“I don’t ask you to fight for me.”

“No. You would never have to.” Arthur opened his mouth to argue but Emrys raised his arms, palm up, in a wide shrug. “But who cares, right? You don’t want to fight. You don’t need any of us. Here.” He tossed the car keys to Arthur, who caught them instinctively but could feel his righteous anger fading fast. “Drive yourself home. I’d hate to get in the way of your self imposed exile.”

Arthur watched him go and grimaced, feeling stupid and yes, selfish. “Stop. Wait.” Emrys didn’t stop and Arthur sighed, raised his voice loud enough to carry through the car park. “Merlin!”

CHAPTER SIX

"No more shall I send you from Valhalla; no more shall you choose heroes in battle; nor shall you lead the victors to my hall; no more will you hand me my drinking horn at the feasts of the gods; no more shall I kiss your childish mouth; from the Host of the Gods, you are now parted, expelled from the family of the eternals, broken is our bond; you are banned from my sight.”

-Kurt Wagner
“Merlin!”

It took an insanely long moment for his name to stop echoing around the parking lot and sink in. Merlin stumbled to an awkward stop and turned slowly. Arthur stood still, eyes too wide and skin gone pale once again. He was saying something under his breath, over and over, and Merlin couldn’t hear him but he knew what he was saying.

Merlin took a step forward towards Arthur carefully, not wanting to startle him into running away, like so many of the skittish deer they had hunted in days that had disappeared into Merlin’s memory. “Arthur.”

“Don’t,” he said, taking a shuddering breath, looking very young. “Don’t come near me.”

Merlin shivered. He had spent so long, so many uncountable years waiting for this moment but now that it was here, he just didn’t know what to do any more. “Please,” he said, and stopped.

“Please what? Please let me explain?” Arthur asked. There was a faint flush rising in his cheeks. “Can you?”

“Arthur-“

“You remember don’t you? You remember everything?” Arthur moved slowly, as if in pain. He stepped back slightly, raised a hand and pressed it to his face and then suddenly stumbled back into the wall, breath coming too fast and too shallow.

Moving as fast as his leaden heart would allow, Merlin went to him and gripped his shoulder but Arthur jerked away, shoving Merlin’s arm away. “Don’t touch me.”

The words were a knife in Merlin’s chest, a horrible sharp twisting pain that made his breath stutter. “Arthur, I’m sorry. I am. But please-“

He didn’t expect Arthur to hit him at all. He sprawled back, jaw burning, and Arthur was on him suddenly. A knee pressed into his ribs while one hand twisted in his hair, pulling back and exposing his neck to the sharp edge of a knife.

Arthur’s face was twisted in a rage that Merlin had rarely ever seen, not now and not then and his voice had a low, flat quality. “What have you done?”

Merlin swallowed, keenly aware of the edge of the blade scraping faintly against his skin as his throat moved. “This isn’t me. Please, Arthur. I never wanted it to happen like this. I don’t know what’s happening.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Arthur.” Merlin shifted and grimaced against the pain in his ribs, the pressure of Arthur’s knee on his torso making him dizzy and he felt suddenly tired. “You’re not going to cut my throat.”

Arthur’s jaw clenched and he shifted his grip on the knife, turning the edge away from the side of Merlin’s throat where the pulse beat hard and pressed it up under his jaw. He was shaking visibly. Merlin felt a hot flash of pain as Arthur pressed the edge into his jawbone and the skin split easy, blood welling up and slipping down. Merlin shuddered at the wet trickle running down past his ear.

“I want you to make me forget.”

“What?” Merlin’s breath caught in his throat. “You-“
Take it back. I don’t want to remember.”

Merlin gaped, stared. “I don’t know how.” This was true. Merlin had tried more than once, to take the memories away of himself away from other people over the years to cover his absence, his lack of ages. He had tried to take away his own memories of Arthur and that old life, memories of waiting and waiting, but he never could.

Arthur’s fingers clenched and pulled, jerking Merlin’s head back. “Liar.”

“Do it, then.” Merlin hissed. His hands had been curled around Arthur’s collar, trying to push him away, but now Merlin shook him, hauled him close. “I don’t care anymore. How could you think this is what I wanted for you? Do you know how long I’ve lived waiting for you to come back? Do you know what it was like knowing that you and I still had a destiny to finish, when all I wanted for you was a life?”

Arthur’s eyes were wet and his chest stuttered under Merlin’s hands as he let the knife slip from his fingers to fist both hands in his shirt. The knife clattered to the floor beside Merlin, the sound ringing in his ears, and Arthur slumped forward against Merlin and said, “I can’t do this.”

“Arthur.”

“No.” Arthur shook his head, forehead against Merlin’s shoulder. “I can’t. I. It feels like someone else’s life. Not mine. I’m not that person any more. I can’t do it. Please, I can’t do this.”

Merlin wormed his way out from under Arthur and, with great effort, Arthur pushed himself up and crawled back to lean against the wall. He sat with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands and Merlin was reminding of the first time Morgana betrayed them all those years ago. He had looked almost exactly like this and Merlin felt the hurt even more keenly now.

“I wish.” He stopped, bit his lip and mulled carefully over the words. “There’s so much more to this story than I have time to tell you now. But I need you to know this much at least.

“When we first met, in this lifetime, you were only days old. I decided then that I wouldn’t tell you about the past, about who you were. I wanted to give you the life you never had then, a free life. If destiny slipped by us then so be it. I thought you deserved that freedom. And then over the years, I kept thinking if I’d made the wrong choice. Especially now, you know? Maybe if you’d have known from the start then maybe you would have been better prepared for something like this happening.”

He hadn’t realised he had trailed off into silence until Arthur prompted, “and?”

“I think it turned out better this way.”

Arthur looked at him, face wet and eyes half closed. “Why is that?”

“Because this is how we learn who we really are. When we’re about to have everything we love and deserve taken away from us, it puts things in perspective.”

“You’ve lost me.”

Merlin huffed a small, tired laugh. “It means you don’t have to change. You just have to be.” Arthur pulled a face. “Okay, let’s put it this way; are you going to fight?”

“I don’t see how I have much choice.”

“There it is. That’s who you are, Arthur. You won’t let your people suffer. You can’t even
comprehend the possibility of running away from this. You’re a king.”

“I was a king.”

Merlin stood and stretched awkwardly, a dull ache in his chest where Arthur’s weight had pressed him down, and extended a hand to him. “You will be again.”

“I don’t know how you’re going to manage that.”

“One step at a time. For now, get up.” Arthur rolled his eyes, but took Merlin’s hand and allowed himself to be hauled to his feet. “How do you feel?”

“I feel,” Arthur heaved a sigh, “like I’ve lived long enough to satisfy both nature and glory.”

Merlin smiled ruefully and clapped him on the back. “That’s the spirit.”

“He dies at the end.”

“We all die at the end. We can’t just lie down and wait for it.”

Arthur shook his head, a faint smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “You know, there are times, Merlin, when you seem almost...”

“Wise?” Merlin grinned and for the first time in a long time, felt whole.

“Yes,” Arthur replied, matching Merlin’s smile. “That’s what it is.”

Gwaine fidgeted impatiently, shifting in his seat, drumming fingers against the steering wheel. Leon was still. He watched men come and go, trying to judge between the people who were standing between them and their prize and the ones who were innocent bystanders. Freya sat in the back seat with her eyes closed.

“What now?” he asked eventually, when he could no longer stand the silence.

Freya opened her eyes and leaned forward. She pointed towards one warehouse. It looked exactly the same as any of the others. “It’s in there. Not on the ground floor.”

Gwaine didn’t bother to question her. When they had left, she has simply pointed them northwest and until they neared Port Isaac. Everything after that had been a convoluted mess while they took the first road they could in the direction she set them, often ending up driving in circles, and inching towards the warehouse, mile by painful mile. She had no address, or co-ordinates, and maps were proving mostly useless; it seemed to him that she was following some sort of internal compass. He wondered, not for the first time, what it was exactly they were here for.

Twisting in his seat, Leon looked back at Freya. “This thing, it’s an object? Small? We’ll be able to carry it? Conceal it?”

“Yes on all counts. But you don’t need to worry about any of that. We’re just doing the finding. Come on.”

She slipped out of the car, before they could stop her. “Wait,” Gwaine called, keeping his voice low as they caught up to her. “Don’t we need some kind of plan? We’re pretty exposed here.”
There were plenty of people who would see them if they had to make a quick getaway, mostly people moving to and fro with fish to be processed for transport, but there were some private warehouses which could, theoretically, have something more valuable.

“Don’t fret,” Freya said, keeping a route that kept them out of sight of at least the warehouse they were heading to, if no one else. “We just need to sneak in and make sure. I need to see it for myself.”

They crouched for a while behind one of the neighbouring warehouses. There seemed to be about five or seven men outside it, and God only knew how many inside. A distraction would make it easier for them to get inside, but if they weren’t going to steal the objective now, Gwaine thought they may as well save it for later.

“It’s an old building. Sash windows, easy to force open from the outside without smashing the windows.”

Gwaine stood and ambled round to another warehouse, one that gave a better view of the back of their intended target. In his two day old clothes, dirty from the rescue of both Arthur and Leon, he blended in easily with the packers. Leon and Freya followed after, hand in hand, looking for all the world like a local couple out for an aimless wander.

“The left window looks weakest,” Gwaine said when they joined him. “I’ll go first and get it open. You two follow as soon as the coast is clear again.”

He went before they could protest, slipping easily out of the crowd just as the guard made his way back to the front of the building. He flicked open his knife and fed the blade carefully through the gap until he felt the latch. It seemed to take forever to get it to open, but it finally gave and Gwaine tumbled carefully inside. As he closed the window and ducked down out of sight, he heard the guards’ heavy steps pass by.

Opening the window again for Leon and Freya, he helped them both in. Leon stumbled on his bad leg and would have fallen into a unit of shelves if Gwaine and Freya hadn’t caught and steadied him. They stayed pressed together for a minute, waiting for the initial surge of adrenaline to pass, before they relax and looked around.

Leon pointed to ladder on the far wall, set up next to an old pulley system that fed up to a portion of the ceiling that had been cut away. Freya edged a little away from them, and looked towards the front entrance. Gwaine followed and saw two guards, both sitting on the floor and one of them at least was definitely asleep. He was fairly sure that as long as they were quiet, the shelving units would shield their movements from the other guard.

Gwaine went up first, helping up Leon. Freya stepped past them easily and moved through piles of boxes with barely a glance at them. Leon shrugged when Gwaine looked at him askance and followed.

She was standing in front of a irregular object, covered by a tarpaulin sheet. He couldn’t tell at all what it might be from the shape, but Freya seemed certain this was what they were here for so he steeped forward and pulled back the sheet.

It was a sword, stuck point down through an anvil. Gwaine’s breath caught painfully in his chest. Leon reached out to the sword and Gwaine had caught him around the wrist before he have even realised what he was doing.

“It’s Arthur’s,” he breathed, “Arthur has to be the one to take it. Doesn’t he?”
Freya nodded. “The druids must have known it would be needed again. It’s not as strong as the binding Merlin could have set. Morgause will be able to break it.”

Gwaine ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I. I don’t think I—”

“We should go,” Freya said, taking him by the hand and tugging him away from the sword. “I’ll explain outside.”

The gate to the manor was broken and Gareth only just managed to ease the bike through the gap in the warped metal. When he reached the building, he slowed, revved the engine a few times before stopping, a short distance away down the main drive. The sound carried easily across the ground. It was only a matter of waiting.

He shifted, waiting for Lynette to slip off the bike first, but she tightened her grip on his waist and pressed her face into his shoulder. He shrugged gently. “Almost over.”

She didn’t move and said, finally, “I’m afraid,” lifting her head just enough so that she could look at him. “Why aren’t you?”

“Fear is only a small thing. You control it or it controls you.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We grew up in an orphanage, my brothers and I. It was a pretty shitty place to grow up, but we managed to learn that we should always do everything we can to do the right thing, no matter how scared we are.”

“What happened?”

“We got separated. My eldest brother ended up joining the army with Eric. My foster family set me up at a boarding school in the north. Everybody still thinks I’m there. I—”

There was a sound of banging from somewhere indoors and movement in the windows. Lynette shuddered. “Don’t do this. This was a mistake. We shouldn’t have come alone.”

Gently, he disengaged her arms from around his waist and they both slipped off. He squeezed her hand. “Too late to turn back now.”

A man appeared, closing and locking the door behind him. He was tall and lean, dressed simply in a shirt and jeans and armed with a sword. Gareth swore softly at the sight. “Who is he?” He asked as another sword fell out of a window abruptly, sinking point down into the grass.

“I only know him as Ian.” Lynette said through gritted teeth. “Though there are several other things we could call him.

Ian scowled and jerked it out before Gareth could even think about taking it. Another two swords fell. This time a figure leaned out of the window and waved. Gareth smiled and waved back as Leona blew a kiss.

Furious, Ian charged forward, swinging wildly. It was all Gareth could do to dodge and stumble away, moving in a wide circle towards the swords that waited for him. He wondered, with a sick sort of regret, if he was finally in over his head. He had never seen a sword in his life, let alone used one, but he gritted his teeth and pulled the swords out of the ground. Too late to turn back now.

He swung experimentally, feeling the weight pull in his wrists and elbows, across the back of his
shoulders. There was something familiar about it and when Ian charged again, Gareth parried the blow away, though the clash of blades shot up his arm painfully.

He let himself relax, letting his instinct, wherever it had come from, lead his moves, falling into step easily. He realised quickly that he wasn’t going to be able to keep this up for long. His mind seemed to know what it was doing, but his opponent was bigger and stronger and Gareth was unused to having the weight of two swords in his hands, already he was beginning to tire.

Leona must have dropped another sword, because Lynette was suddenly there with him, attacking Ian from behind, giving Gareth a chance to get his breath back.

She was good at it, he realised, and he threw himself back into the fight, the rush of having someone to fight alongside giving him a second wind. The tide turned quickly and Ian, fighting now on two fronts, began to stumble.

Lynette swung and caught Ian’s right arm, opening a neat cut. He dropped his leading sword with the shock and Gareth moving automatically had run him through, the blade sliding through flesh with disturbing ease, before he even realised it was over.

Gareth let go of the sword, surprised, and Ian slumped to the ground, landing awkwardly with almost a metre of steel through his chest, leaving Lynette and Gareth standing, only their harsh breathing breaking the silence.

“You realise this could be a trap,” Merlin said as they leaned against his car, waiting.

“I’m a master strategist. Of course I realise that.”

Merlin smiled faintly. Arthur had admitted that there were still some gaps in his memories, but he was pleased at how quickly they seemed to be falling into old patterns.

Arthur’s phone chirped, a message from Gwaine marking the start of a two minute count before they put their distraction into play. They walked slowly towards the warehouse, not wanting to raise any suspicions earlier than could be helped, and loitered around until their was a crash from inside.

Three figures hurtled out of the front entrance, one guard at their heels and several others from outside following. Two rushed inside and Merlin and Arthur, in the confusion, managed to slip in behind them.

The three remaining guards looked up as the door slammed closed. By the time they realised that Merlin and Arthur weren’t there to help them, Arthur had knocked out one of them with a solid punch to the temple. While Arthur made for the stairs, Merlin raised a hand and threw the other two across the room, a thrill jolting up his spine at openly using his magic, before toppling the shelves down over them. He grinned wildly and knocked down all the other units just for good measure.

The was a commotion outside as Morgause’s men realised the ruse and began to return. He shouted a warning to Arthur, who dropped down from the top level with an ungainly landing, sword in hand. Merlin ignored the urge to yell at him for being careless and almost breaking his legs, and headed toward the open back window. There was a bike waiting there and Merlin muttered a quick thanks to Gwaine for his foresight.

Merlin threw himself onto a nearby bike, firing up the engine. The growl and the shudder of the bike echoed the adrenaline rushing through his blood, his pulse a frantic drumbeat in his chest. His hands
were shaking and he tried not to think what turn his life would take if he missed this opportunity after so long waiting.

Sprinting flat out, Arthur sped out of the building, a familiar flash of steel in his hand. He held it naturally, as if he had been running with swords all his life, and Merlin felt a thrill of anxiety; it was coming back to him, all his old life. What would happen to him if this didn’t work? Merlin couldn’t imagine how they could go on.

His thoughts were broken when Arthur hopped up onto the bike behind him. He was rushing enough to be careless and almost toppled right off the other side, but managed to right himself even as Merlin was already pulling away.

As Merlin weaved into the traffic, Arthur unclenched his fingers from Merlin’s jacket, and tightened his legs around the bike. Merlin’s heart lurches as Arthur let go of him.

“I don’t know what you’re doing,” he shouted. “But now is not the time.”

“Relax!” Arthur yelled back over the noise of the engine and the wind. He chanced a quick look over his shoulder. “And don’t slow down!”

Arthur leaned back carefully, trying to ignore the way the scenery blurred nauseatingly as he focused on the sword in his hand. Awkwardly, he shrugged out of his jacket one arm at a time. Before he could drop anything or fall off the bike entirely, he twisted the jacket around the blade, hiding it and saving them from the telltale glinting of street lights and headlights off its polished surface.

He let himself fall forward against Merlin again, pressing his face into Merlin’s shoulder against the dizziness. The blade pressed between them, the pommel digging uncomfortably into his chest and Merlin’s shoulder blade. Once he was satisfied that he wasn’t going to be sick, he peered out ahead.

“Take the motorway,” he said. “Floor it.”

Merlin attempted to take the next exit, but one of Morgause’s men rushed forward and kept close to Merlin’s left side and shepherding him back into lane. Merlin swore, but didn’t dare press the issue; if he tried to make the exit there was no doubt that they’d clip each other and spiral into a crash and without helmets there was no way any of them would survive.

“I think I know where they’re taking us.” Arthur shouted. “Go along.”

“Are you insane?”

“This whole thing is insane! I want this finished. Now.”

Against his better judgment Merlin went back into centre lane, four bikes now forming some bizarre motorcade around them. Sweat made his shirt stick to his back even as the wind chilled his face and fingers. Arthur’s right arm was tight around his chest, the other buried between them and clutching Excalibur.

He was right, Merlin thought suddenly, this should be over, once and for all.

Leona was banging on the door of the manor from the inside and they both jumped. Gareth searched the man quickly for the keys and passed them to Lynette, who ran to free her sister.
The girl, surprisingly beautiful for a girl with dirty blonde hair and brown eyes, threw her arms around Lynette’s neck and Gareth smiled, closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the wall, content to sip into unconsciousness and wake up weeks later.

His hopes of a blissful coma were short lived when Leona fell onto him and kissed him. He winced as she broke away and blinked at her, feeling completely nonplussed. “You’re welcome?” he offered, unable to think of anything else to say.

Leona and Lynette both laughed, but he was too tired to protest. He didn’t want to get up at all. He definitely did not want to think about what needed to be done to take care of the body. He closed his eyes again, trying not think about the reality of having killed a man.

His phone rang, echoing shrilly around his empty and semi-delirious mind. He jumped and his heart hammered wildly. “Go away,” he groaned. “What do I have to do to get a break around here?”

It was Lynette who answered the phone and there were a few minutes of hushed but increasingly frantic conversation. She sighed after a moment and came to kneel beside him, with the phone pressed against her chest. “It’s Eric, passing on a message from Merlin,” she said. “He says he needs you to come back. It’s an emergency.”

“They didn’t find them?”

“Yes. This is something else.”

“What’s happened?”

“He won’t say. He said it’s complicated.”

“Of course I’ll go. He only need ask.”

Lynette’s grip on the phone tightened and her mouth turned down in that way that Gareth remembered. “You are such an idiot,” she hissed before putting the phone back up to her ear. “He’ll need a little time.”

“Lynette.” He made a grab for the phone but his arms felt numb and heavy and Lynette swatted his hand away easily.

“You’re hurt and you need rest.” She said, raising her eyebrows at him. “What good will you be in the state you’re in?” There was a pause while Emrys said something that Gareth knew was assent from the relieved expression on Lynette’s face before hanging up.

“Well,” Leona said, standing up. “We had better get you inside.”

They both eased an arm around him and help him stumbled into the house. “What about...” He couldn’t muster the energy to open his eyes but he turned his head blindly over his shoulder and he knew they understood.

“Don’t worry.” Lynette’s hand slid up his back and curled around the nape of his neck. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

With no small amount of pride, Arthur realised that he had been right in assuming that Morgause’s men had been herding them towards Camelford.
They were approaching traffic. “Speed up!” he called and Merlin, hesitating only briefly, did so.

Arthur reached forward and grabbed the handle. Before Merlin could react, he pulled sharply and the
they served across two lanes on onto the shoulder. Behind them there was a sound of screeching brakes and smashing metal and Arthur chanced a look back.

Several cars were now stuck side on, having served to avoid their bike and been hit with the cars directly behind. There were no serious injuries besides those to the cars themselves and the drivers’ pride and the accident combined with the traffic had created an effective cage for their pursuers. He could feel Merlin slow slightly so he could see the damage himself.

“Don’t. Let’s not stick around to see if they’re going to kill us.”

“Where are we even going?”

“They were taking us to Camelford. We have a head start now. I want to go to Tintagel.”

He didn’t need to tell Merlin what road to take. The bike shot forward suddenly and Merlin pushed the engine as fast as it could go, leaving blaring horns and shouting behind them the whole way. He felt his bones jolt as Merlin guided the bike down the steps of the bridge until they could take it no further and were forced to go on foot to the ruins.

“Why here?” Merlin asked, when they reached the first of the ruined walls.

“I doesn’t surprise me that Morgause picked Camelford, but I’d rather make my stand at the place I was born rather than the one where I died.”

Merlin stopped and turned to Arthur, who flushed faintly under the scrutiny. He expected a comment on the sentimentality or something about hope or faith or something equally sappy. He expected Merlin to make one of those small lifting comments that Arthur liked to brush off but looked forward to hearing, but Merlin only said, “there’s tunnels underground.”


“I come here sometimes. I found a passageway.” Merlin started walking again. “It’s down on the far side, but it feels like it goes all the way under the ruins. There are a few other places it comes out.”

Merlin showed him a patch of wall that looked like any other but when Merlin touched it, the air seemed to distort for a moment like a heat haze, until a heavy wooden door came into view.

“Why did no one else ever find tunnels?”

“I don’t know,” Merlin replied honestly. “They were walled off with the same stone as the rest of the ruins are made of, maybe they missed it. I had to break my way in and out when I felt the tunnels. I built the doors and sealed them by magic.”

A lamp, a heavy duty electric one, and a roll of paper sat just inside the door, at the top of set of stone steps and Arthur huffed a laugh. “You turned Tintagel into a safe house.”

“Well, there are no actual rooms here, but for lack of a better word, I guess that’s what it is.” He unrolled the paper to show a plan of the castle, with the tunnels marked on it. “So what’s the plan?”

“I don’t have one yet. I’m hoping something will come back to me. What about you? Any useful ideas?”
“Thank you for adding that modifier.” He paused. “I called Eric before we left, let him know that we’d probably need help at some point and he said he’d make sure the usual suspects were ready. No one else remembers yet, but they’ll still come. I’m sure of it. We can’t do this alone.”

They stared at the map in tense silence, trying to will the answers out of the ink. “You’ve been magically forging your road tax,” Arthur said. “Isn’t there some rule against using your talents for personal gain?”

“No really. And it’s not personal gain either. I’m just used to using magic to get things done, did it as much as I could in Camelot, how do you think I got all your chores done?”

“Well, that’s because -”

“You were a slave driver?”

Arthur coughed awkwardly and couldn’t think of an argument to that, instead he asked, before he lost the nerve. “What about family? Did you ever settle down?”

“I’ve lived with plenty of people over the years, but I have to move on eventually. It takes a lot of effort to make it look like I’m aging like everyone else.” He paused. “There were some moments where I thought I’d found some kind of peace. But it never lasted. I think it was destiny’s way to telling me I wasn’t finished with this. I thought it was my punishment for failing you.”

He said it simply, as if it were a matter of fact and Arthur put an arm around his neck and pulled him close, their foreheads pressed together. “No. Not that. Whatever else you want to think, not that. You didn’t fail me, Merlin. Never even once.”

They stayed like that in silence for a minute until Arthur pulled suddenly away and glanced toward the door. “Do you hear that? I think I hear engines”

Merlin heard nothing, but he pressed a hand against the wall and put the other on Arthur’s shoulder, grounded himself and cast out, ignoring Arthur’s warm and welcome mind beside him and shivered. Outside the castle ruins were a press of minds, focused, intent and intangibly dangerous, and among them a witch. Morgause.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

“We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another; unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations.”

-Anais Nin

They ran. Merlin felt a sharp snap across his senses and Morgause broke the seals on the tunnel entrances, all collapsing at once. They’ll be coming down at once, he realised, we’re cornered.

Arthur must have come to the same conclusion. “This is a bad plan,” he hissed and then sprinted on.
Merlin made a choked sound. “This isn’t even a plan! This is us running into a trap! You’re supposed to be the master strategist.”

“We -” Arthur was cut short when Merlin stopped suddenly in front of him. “What?”

“Morgause is here.” He didn’t dare cast to try and get a proper fix on her, he wouldn’t be able to do it without giving himself away. “And somewhere close.”

“Can you hide us from her?”

“Not while we’re moving. It’s.” He waved a vague hand and shook his head. “And we can’t stay in one place. Not with so many of them coming.”

“We’re going to have to split up.”

“No.” Merlin felt Morgause close in, behind them. “You go ahead, I’ll catch up.”

“But -”

“Go! Just go, I’ll meet you up ahead.”

Arthur ran and Merlin turned. The tunnel was narrow enough that they could reach across and touch both walls. The felt for the structure of the tunnels, pinpointing the weak areas. He hesitated and the pushed, pitching magical supports through the ground above the tunnels so he didn’t bring down any part of the castle when he caved the tunnel.

It was harder than he remembered, and he could hear Morgause approaching now. He increased the pressure on the tunnel ceiling, waited until Morgause came into view. When she arrived, it was with Morgana and Merlin’s heart stopped. He hadn’t been able to sense her before, but willed her now to turn away, to turn back, hoping she would feel that he didn’t want to hurt her.

Morgause threw out a hand just as Morgana ran, not away but toward him. She stumbled and sagged into him as the tunnel collapsed, the din covering Morgause’s furious screams. Merlin didn’t wait. He threw one arm around Morgana’s shoulders before stooping and scooping her up. He loped carefully down the corridor to where Arthur was waiting, feeling like he was going too slowly but knowing that if he fell and broke his leg he’d never hear the end of it from Arthur. If he was lucky.

The door flew open before he ran into it and as it slammed behind him, he sagged back against the wall and let Morgana slip down onto her feet. She collapsed to her knees almost immediately and Merlin finally noticed the high pitched gasps. He lay her back and trailed his fingers against her sides until he felt, just under the band of her bra, a small serrated blade that had found its way right between her ribs and into her lung.

“Oh, Morgana.” Morgause hadn’t cast her hand in a spell, he realised, she had thrown that at him. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

He pressed down around the wound and pulled the blade out as quickly as he could, the serrated edge agitating the wound, before covering it, pooling his energy into the wound, trying to get the flesh to knit itself back together, but Morgana held onto his wrist, pulled his hands away. “Save your strength. You’re going to need it.”

“Come here.” It was Morgana who spoke. “Please.”

Arthur glanced at Merlin, before moving forward slowly and dropping to his knees before Morgana. Merlin tried to gauge his feeling but Arthur was keeping his face very carefully neutral. Morgana pressed her bracelet, her old healing bracelet, into Arthur’s hands. “It’ll help hide you.”

Merlin watched as Arthur let Morgana slip it over his hand and onto his wrist. Morgana’s presence in his mind suddenly became stronger just as Arthur’s dulled almost to nothing. He could feel her growing heavier in his arms and she closed her fingers around Arthur’s. “Will you ever forgive me?” she asked.

Arthur raised their joined hands. “I think,” he said as he brushed a kiss against her knuckles, “I had forgiven you a long time ago.”

They sat in awkward silence for a long time after that, until Merlin finally lay her down on the ground and stood. Arthur stayed on his knees, toying with the bracelet.

“What do we do?”

Arthur looked up. “What exactly did she mean when she said this would hide me?”

“We can sense people if we look for them. Something like telepathy, but not quite.” He tapped his temple. “I didn’t know Morgana was here, presumably because that bracelet covered her presence. It’s covering you now.”

“Strong enchantment?”

Merlin shrugged a shoulder. “There was one exactly like it cast over Colliford Lake. It’s an illusion, like any other one. It only works until you know the trick. It’s her spell so it’s strong. It’s not fool proof, but it helps.”

“Then I want you to have it.”

“No.” Merlin stepped back before Arthur could take off the bracelet and give it to him. “It’s not me she wants.”

“But she’ll be able to find you. She’s going to assume we’re together anyway.”

“I know.”

Arthur stared at him. “So you’re bait.” His face went tight and grim, a pinched look appearing around his eyes but he nodded. “I’ll-”

“No. Don’t tell me, don’t let me see you. It’ll work better if I don’t know.” Arthur tipped his head back, rolling his expansively. He looked like he wanted to argue, but Merlin continued before he could. “I trust you.”

Arthur was quiet for a moment and then he stood. “The others should be here soon. Go and rally them. Leave the rest to me.”

Gwaine, Leon and Freya made their way up across the bridge careful having heard raised voices. Eric hadn’t been able to give them any information other than that Arthur and Merlin were here and needed their help.
Once they had cleared the cliff walls they had clear view of the ruins. There were beams from several flashlights and headlights from two cars cutting through the dusk. “They clearly weren’t expected reinforcements or they would have made more effort to conceal themselves,” Leon commented dryly. “We’ll have the element of surprise at least.”

Gwaine hummed something non-committal. Surprise was pretty much the only thing they would have. He counted at least ten flashlights, but they could well be working in pairs, and that only accounted for what he could see. “We’re going to have to get closer, before we can work out a strategy.”

They had a better view once they reached the inner ward. Gwaine crouched behind the remains of the south wall while Freya headed around to the other side for a count of anything he couldn’t see from there.

Leon sat awkwardly next to him, bad leg stretched out. “On a scale of one to ten, how bad?”

Gwaine dropped his head onto the wall, unmindful of rough stone. “Worse.”

“In over our head?”

“Drowning.”

“Well, there were only three on the other side, if that helps,” Freya said, settling on Gwaine’s other side.

“Joy.” Gwaine looked back out over the ruins. “I need to know where Merlin and Arthur are. I can’t!” Leon cursed as a pebble shot into his shoulder, another hit Gwaine in the face. Gwaine caught Leon and Freya by the arm before they could scramble up, “Don’t be alarmed. It’s only Merlin.”

The name didn’t sound strange on his tongue, now that he’d had time for the news to sink in. Freya said it would be some time before the memory came back to him fully and he figured it was better this way, at least he had some kind of warning.

He looked around carefully until he caught sight of a waving hand a little way into what he liked to think of as enemy territory and they shuffled forward to join him. He was surprised, when he arrived, that he wasn’t alone. Eric and Elaine Tully as well Gwen and Lancelot were with him. Gwaine left Freya and Leon to introduce themselves while he pulled Merlin to once side. “Where’s Arthur?”

“I have no idea.”

“Come again? You don’t know where he is?”

“Shh.” Merlin pulled him further away. “It’s part of the plan for me to not know where he is.”

“So you do have a plan.”

“In a manner of speaking.” Merlin shifted. “That’s the only part of the plan we have.”

“That’s a pretty shitty plan, Merlin.”

“Yeah, it’s been said,” and then, “what did you just say?”

“Merlin?” Gwaine shrugged, feigning more nonchalance than he actually felt just then. “Yeah. I saw the sword, Freya filled us in with the rest. But I don’t actually remember much.”
“How are you taking it?”

Gwaine couldn’t make out Merlin’s face in the dark, but he sounded surprisingly apprehensive. “All things considered, I feel fine with it.”

He heard Merlin suck in a deep breath, as if he were about to make some huge confession, but he only sighed and led him back to the group. “Eric’s in charge.”

“Thank God,” Gwaine muttered. “We could use someone who actually knows what they’re doing. We’ve counted twenty-three against us.”

“Plus one. What do you remember about Morgause?”

The name alone made him shiver. “Bad things.”

“Are you going to join us any time soon?” Eric interrupted, with a wry smile.

Gwaine stepped forward, shaking his hand warmly. “Glad you’re here, Eric. Tell me you have a plan.”

“Naturally. Your brother always left that part to me too.”

“I’ll tell him you said that.”

Merlin coughed pointedly and they both smiled. “Right then. Freya and Leon, sabotage the cars. The rest of us, teams of two. Gwaine and Elaine, Lancelot and I, pick them off one by one, knock them out and drag them back to the cars.” He handed out cable ties and various non-lethal weapons. “Gwen is will be standing by as our medic. It’s simple enough. They don’t have radio communication, just stay out of sight, and don’t bite off more than you can chew.”

Lancelot turned to Merlin. “You’re noticeably absent from that roll call.”

“Free agent.” Merlin smiled grimly.

Gwaine realised he was going to be using his magic. He bit his lip, wondering how long Merlin could be able to do that when he had barely rested in the past three days. He wanted to ask him when he last slept, wanted to warn him to be careful, but Elaine touched her brother gently on the arm and was moving away. He had to jog to catch up. Behind them the group began to break away, Merlin’s silhouette looking thin and fragile as he walked away alone.

Elaine tugged him closer. “We’re taking the south side of the castle.”

“The side with the most bad guys? I didn’t know you loved me so much.” He flashed her a wild grin, one that she returned tooth for tooth.

They were about to step through one of the remaining archways, when two men appeared around the corner and they found themselves in caught in the torchlight. “You see, this is why I love having the side with the most bad guys,” he said, dryly.

Before either side could make a move, there was a heavy thud and another. The two guards dropped and Gareth picked up the flashlights, flicking them off quickly. “Did you miss me?” he said and Gwaine rolled his eyes.

“I was worried you’d been eaten by wolves. It would never take me three whole days to save the girl.”
Gareth only grinned. “You’re welcome.”

Merlin slipped ahead, causing mischief as he went. He had no idea where Arthur was and was beginning to regret his decision that he shouldn’t know about the plan. He tried to push it from his mind and let his magic run amok.

He shorted several flashlights, threw stones, tripped them up ahead of his allies, anything he could think of to make them easy targets. It was Morgause that was his main target though, and while he focused half his energy on parlour tricks another part of his mind was working overtime, pulling magic from his reserves to cast small short lived illusions.

It was Arthur and Merlin himself that she wanted, so that was what he gave her. He made them ghosts, one minute on the far north side of the castle and the next in the tunnels, sometimes together and other times separate, like dangling sweets in front of hungry child. It was tiring, exhausting, even when he stopped making the effort of concealing himself, and let himself leave a trail for her to follow back to him. He could feel his breath grow short and his mind spin, but he only pushed harder.

She was there suddenly, Merlin worn down enough that he hadn’t felt her coming, but that was fine too. His wild goose chase had obviously had the effect he had intended because she was furious.

“Where is he, Merlin?”

“I don’t know.” For that, he found himself hurled back into the stone wall. “I don’t know where he is,” he said again, pain flaring but he didn’t let himself make any counter attack. He could bide his time, save himself for that one final moment.

“Has he abandoned you to your death for your magic? Just like his father? And you call him your friend, your brother. What kind of brother has he turned out to be Merlin?” She drew her sword and pressed the point against the hollow of his throat.

There was a sound behind her, a soft footfall on the grass, and a figure emerged from the shadow of the wall and into the moonlight. She turned, blocked a sword stroke, pushing Arthur back and getting to her feet.

“What kind of a brother have I turned out to be?” Arthur repeated, mouth curling with contempt.

“Let’s find out.”

She hurled herself at him and for a moment all Merlin could see was the bright flash of moonlight on steel and they fought, trading blows and giving and taking ground. Morgause didn’t have the inconvenience of being fatigued, but Arthur was the true-born king and he wielded the sword of his birthright and that was powerful magic of its own. The ink on Merlin’s back, long since cold, pricked and stung now, with every clash of the sword. Kilgharrah’s magic lived in it still and Merlin’s heart lifted.

Swords locked, Arthur pinned her to the wall. “Where is she, Arthur,” she said suddenly. “What did you do to her.” She kicked him viciously, and grabbed his wrist as he stumbled, snatching the bracelet and tossing it away.

“She’s dead,” Arthur spat. “You saw to that.”

Merlin crept forward as Morgause stilled. “You,” she breathed, her voice low with rage, “you took
my sister from me.”

“No. You took my sister from me.”

She screamed then, inarticulate fury, and the hair on the back of Merlin’s next pricked as magic
carged the air around them. It was all Arthur could do to block her attack and her sword caught him
in the shoulder and the left side.

Arthur fell and Merlin stepped forward as Morgause raised her sword.

“You killed her, Morgause,” he said. He didn’t need to shout, his words carried easily and she turned
slowly.

“You’re a traitor to your own kind, Merlin.”

“You killed your own sister. You couldn’t let go of your hate and she died for it.” Merlin stepped
back and around, drawing her away from Arthur as she advanced on him instead.

“No-

“She saved my life. She gave the bracelet, your gift to her, to Arthur of her own free will. She
wanted him to win.”

Morgause caught him by his collar and shook him roughly. “You’re a liar. Traitor!”

“You’ve lost the one person who was ever loyal to you”

She snarled and threw him back. “She was my sister, my blood. I do everything out of love for her.
I’m giving her vengeance, justice.”

“Love?” Merlin scoffed as Arthur returned, shakily, to his feet. “You used her for your own ends.
You pushed her too far. You killed the man she loved. You destroyed her Morgause.”

Blinded now by her rage, she could not sense Arthur behind her and as he raised his sword, Merlin
reached for that last spark and pushed her with everything he had. She fell against Arthur, Excalibur
cutting through her. Merlin felt her power stutter and fade as she sank to her knees. She swore and
cursed and they watched as she died slowly. Merlin felt nothing for her.

Arthur dropped the sword and stepped away, making Merlin’s heart stop. His face was blank as he
stopped to pick up the bracelet Morgause had cast away, rubbing his thumb over the engraving.
Merlin couldn’t think of what to say; he knew Arthur wouldn’t want to hear that Morgana had been
avenged, that wouldn’t bring her back after all. Gwaine’s voice cut through the silence, calling
Merlin’s name.

“Here!” Merlin turned and shouted. “We’re fine! We-

He turned and the word caught painfully in his throat. Arthur was nowhere to be seen. and Merlin
stood alone as Morgause’s body crumbled to dust. “We won.”

Lance watched Gwen tend to the gash in Eric’s temple, swaying between guilt and objectivity that
that he had never had before where she had been concerned. He felt as if he owed it to himself, to
Gwen, to regret was had happened between Elaine and himself, but he didn’t.
It was at that moment that Emrys returned, holding something that he had covered with cloth. When he passed through the beam of the headlights, Lance noticed a dark stain that looked suspiciously, chillingly like blood. Arthur wasn’t with him.

He passed the bundle to Gwaine as Lance stepped forward. “Arthur-”

“He’s fine,” he said, voice raw and then he coughed raised his voice. “Arthur’s fine. It’s finished. We won.”

“Where is he?” Gwen asked.

“I don’t know. Split up, he can’t have gone far.”

They didn’t need to be told twice and Emrys slumped against one of the cars, shivering. He looked like an utter wreck. He leaned back with his eyes closed and Lance settled next to him, letting his mind wander, unwilling to leave Emrys alone.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Lance said quickly, looking up, surprised to find Emrys watching him. “I was just thinking.” And then suddenly, “have you ever been in love?”

Emrys looked confused and then laughed, surprised. “Yes, I have. Why do you ask?”

“What does it feel like? I mean, how do you know what’s the real thing and...” He trailed off and shrugged.

He just looked at him for a minute that dragged on long enough to make Lance uncomfortable and he flushed. “I can’t tell you who to love,” Emrys said eventually. “But, in my experience, the kind of passion they talk about in the old stories is overrated. You don’t want someone who makes you burn, you want someone who makes you feel free.”

Lance felt his jaw sag. He though, for an awful, terrifying second that Emrys knew about Gwen and opened his mouth; he didn’t know what he was going to say, but it would no doubt be reflexive and defensive. Emrys stopped him, straightening suddenly, he put a hand on his shoulder and shook him gently. “Don’t worry. Just to what your heart tells you is right.”

He watched Merlin lope carefully away and then turned, ran and snatched the key’s to Gwaine’s bike. He rode too fast even though it wasn’t even far to St Issey and cut the journey almost in half. He threw himself off the bike, letting it lean haphazardly against the wall and banged on the door, heart hammering in his chest. He was very conscious of the ribbon around his arm when Elaine opened the door.

“You were right,” he said, in a rush and still trying to catch his breath. “I thought suffering for love’s sake made it real, but you were right. There should be something more. And when I was with you, there was no guilt. I thought I should feel guilty but I don’t.” He paused and sagged against the door frame. “When I was with you, I felt...whole.”

Elaine said nothing and Lancelot held his breath, until she smiled and laughed and when he kissed her he felt more free than he had ever imagined anyone could feel.

He was halfway around the castle when Gwen hurtled right into him. He winced and stumbles as Gwen threw her arm around his neck and pulled him close.
“Are you all right?” she asked, pulling away and running her hands over him, seeing blood and searching for wounds. “You’re hurt?”

“Nothing that can’t wait a moment or two.” Arthur felt a little heartbroken at the memory of how things had ended between them all those years ago. “Are you?”

“I’m fine. I’ve found you.” Arthur could feel her smile against his neck.

Arthur sighs and peeled Gwen away from him. He tugged a stray curl out of her eyes. “I know you’re in love with Lance.”

Gwen started and looked hurt. “What? I –“

“No. Listen, it’s alright. I understand.” He smiled ruefully. “I was always away a lot before and things are about to get incredibly complicated, so I understand if he’s the one you want to be with.”

Gwen stared at him for a moment, looking utterly confused, and then narrowed her eyes and punched him in the chest.

“You’re an idiot, you know that?” She punched him again.


“Good!” She hit him again for good measure. “You are away all the time, and it drives me crazy, but it’s you that I want. I’m not some kind of dolt that just lets herself be strung along by guys that she doesn’t actually have a chance with. I stay with you because I love you, moron.”

“I love you too.” Arthur raised his eyebrows and waved his hands defensively. “But.”

“But nothing.” Gwen sighed. “I kissed him once, a long time ago, but I was hurt and lonely and it was a mistake. We both knew that. And he’s kind and sweet and–” Arthur coughed pointedly and she smiled. “And he’s not you. I know who I want to be with, Arthur.”

Arthur shook his head and smiled wryly. “We’re doing things differently this time.” Gwen frowned and raised an eyebrow. “Never mind. I’m sure you’ll remember soon enough.” Before she could argue, he slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, kissing her softly on the forehead. “I have to say I’m glad you didn’t choose him because I’ve no idea what I’d do without you.”

“No, I don’t know what you’d do without me either.” She rested against him for a moment. “Why did you disappear? You scared Emrys.”

“Did I?” Arthur sighed. “I just needed a few minutes alone. You go on ahead and call him for me, tell him where I am.”

Gwen slipped out of his arms and looked at him carefully. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Of course I am. I’ve found you.”

Gwaine came, limping slightly, to join Gareth and Lynette, who stepped back immediately to give them space. “So tell me about this quest of yours. What exactly was it you were doing that took you so long?”
“Oh, you know how it is, you start helping people and suddenly they’re all lining the street for autographs.” Gareth said, very aware of Lynette watching him.

“I know.” Gwaine smirked. “But seriously, you were gone three days. Some of us were worried.”

“You needn’t have been. We just spent the time driving around the country.” Out of the corner of his eye, Gareth could see Lynette throw her hands up and mouth the words for God’s sake just tell him and he found himself shivering suddenly with anticipation.

“The Multistrada goes like a dream though,” he said, looking back at the bike fondly. “I still remember when you got the first model way back when. We still have it at home. I should’ve known really that you would still go for a Ducati.”

Gwaine stopped dead and Gareth tried not to show his worry. Behind Gwaine, Lynette was biting her lip and watching him anxiously.

And then Gwaine punched him right in the jaw. Gareth stumbled, and put his hands to his mouth. His lip had split. “I suppose I deserve that.”

Gwaine tackled him to the ground. “Deserve it? You little shit. I knew it. I fucking knew it. I told Lancelot-”

“I know. I asked him not to tell anyone.”

“And you.” Gwaine got off him and Gareth stood wincing. “You’ve been sending me emails as if you were still at Durham, for the past year!”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry? Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I didn’t want people treating me as your little brother. I wanted to prove myself on my own terms.”

Gwaine sighed, looks skyward and cursed under his breath. Suddenly, he pulled Gareth in for a tight hug. “I guess you’ve done that. My idiot little brother.” And his voice was full of fondness enough that Gareth flushed with pride.

He let go, and dusted dirt off him, plucked grass and a daisy out of Gareth’s hair. He twirled the daisy between his fingers idly while he stared at Gareth until Leona arrived to distract him. Gwaine turned on the charm, flirted a little and gave her the daisy. Gareth rolled his eyes.

Lynette slipped a hand into his and Gareth tried to think of something to say but she saved him the trouble, leaning up to kiss him instead.

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Letting the bracelet slip from his fingers, Arthur slumped against the wall and slid down, letting himself fall onto his back. He watched with eyes only half open as the sky lightened gradually to a pale grey-blue. He felt Merlin come up to stand next to him and prod a booted foot into his shoulder.

“Remind me,” he said without looking up, “I need to punch Gwaine.”

“What the hell for?”

“I don’t care if Allan is dead. I can’t stand owing that bastard money.”
It hurt him nothing at all to say it and Merlin laughed softly. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get away from here.”

Arthur seriously debated just lying there for a couple of days, Eventually, he raised a heavy arm for Merlin to help pull him up. He swayed, knees protesting against the effort of standing, his bones felt as heavy as lead. Merlin held on to him, pulling Arthur’s arm across his shoulders and slipped his own across his back. Arthur hesitated for a second before relaxing and leaning in, letting Merlin take his weight.

He sighed heavily. “What now, Merlin?” he asked. “I don’t suppose you planned for this eventuality?”

“What?” Merlin frowned. “Of course I planned for it. Did you think I expected you to die out here?”

“Well, it has happened before?”

Merlin flinched and stumbled a step, making them bump into each other awkwardly. “I wasn’t going to go and make the same mistakes. I couldn’t let it happen.”

“So what’s going to happen now?”

Merlin was silent for a moment. “I’m not sure.”

Arthur raised his eyes skyward and muttered God help me. “You just said you had a plan!”

“Well, I do.” Merlin shrugged. “Only it’s less of a plan and more of an idea, really. The chain of destiny can only be grasped one link at a time.”

“It’s a mistake to try and look too far ahead?” Arthur shook his head. “Well, I think I could do with an extended holiday while you figure out this plan of yours.”

EPILOGUE

"Seeking but not finding the House Builder,
I travelled through the round of countless births:
    O painful is birth ever and again.
    House Builder, you have now been seen;
    You shall not build the house again;
    Your ridge pole is demolished too.
My mind has now attained the unformed nirvana
And reached the end of every kind of craving.
    I have attained the unborn."
My liberation is unassailable. 
This is my last birth. 
There will now be no renewal of becoming.

-Buddha

“So, are you ready to become king?”

“Again, you mean?”

Merlin smiled. Arthur twitched and brought a hand up to itch at the back of his neck under the high collar. It was high summer and much too hot for this heavy suit, but the coronation wasn’t expected to take place until winter, when all the red tape had finally cleared.

Arthur looked as calm as ever, but Merlin knew, from experience, that he was really a seething ball of nerves. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” he asked finally after dismissing the tailor and beginning to painstakingly peel off layers of regalia that he may have been used to in another life, but not this one.

Merlin moved forward to help unfasten the sword belt. “You’re going to be fine.”

“I’m not sure people will be happy about dissolving parliament.”

“It’s only until we have a better system. Things will actually get done and then they’ll see you were right.” He shrugged. “And in the meantime, at least the republicans will be pleased.”

Arthur scoffed and shrugged into a plain shirt and considered the ties Merlin was holding up. Merlin tapped his foot and made a show of rolling his eyes until Arthur finally snaked the blue tie out of his fingers and knotted it deftly around his neck.

“Come on, Arthur.” Merlin stood by the open door, ready and holding open Arthur’s suit jacket. “They’re going to start without us.”

“They won’t,” Arthur said, letting Merlin help him shrug into the jacket and smooth it down, a little more heavy handed than was strictly necessary, but in a way familiar.

“I don’t care. You’re not allowed to be late for your mate’s wedding, king or no.”

Arthur turned and grinned wildly, reaching for the fragment of scabbard that Merlin held out to him and slipping it into his breast pocket. “Well, in that case.” He jogged easily past Merlin, who was holding the door open for him. “I’ll race you to the car.”

Merlin sighed and smiled and ran after, jumping into the passenger side seat as Arthur slipped behind the steering wheel. “I win,” he said, smiling brightly, all teeth.

“What. I-“

“You said ‘race you to the car’. You didn’t say ‘race you to the wheel’. I still beat you.”

Arthur frowned. “Shut up, Merlin.”

True to Merlin’s words, they were the last ones to arrive. Leona was already waiting outside the
doors of the church and laughed when she saw them. She ushered them towards a side entrance and they slipped in quietly and into their seats at the front pew before anyone noticed them.

Too late it seemed. Gwaine, standing at the head of the aisle, taking to the priest, looked around when Gareth tapped him on the shoulder and gestured towards them. Arthur and Merlin both glanced at each other and schooled their expressions carefully into complete innocence.

Gwaine wasn’t fooled in the slightest and took a step down in their direction, but then the music began and he paled, shut his mouth and stepped back into place.

Arthur startled slightly when Gwen kissed him softly on his cheek, leaning a little from her seat next to him to whisper in his ear. “Were you that horrified when we got married?”

He smiled at the memory. “Almost as horrified as I was when you told me I snored. Like a pig, no less.”

On his left, Merlin choked on a laugh as Leona walked agonisingly slowly up the aisle.

The ceremony itself passed without incident, Arthur kept his hand in Gwen’s, playing absently with her ring while his mind wondered off at a tangent until Merlin tapped his knee gently and gestured him to stand.

Gwaine found them shortly after. “Cut it a little close there,” he said.

“I’m sure you would’ve forgiven us if we were late.” Arthur smiled slightly.

“The fuck I would’ve forgiven you,” Gwaine said, voice hard, but he was smiling, grinning from ear to ear, for any of them to take his words seriously.

“Careful,” Merlin said. “You’ll start glowing in a minute.”

“He’s practically neon already.”

“Shut up.” Gwaine slung an arm around each of their shoulders and pushed them towards the church doors where some thoroughly unprofessional wedding photos were being taken. “Let’s get this show back to the house.”

They went, small groups trailing off into separate cars. Merlin and Arthur were joined by Gwen and Freya and they spent the short drive to Gwaine's new house. The house had been a wedding gift from Arthur, who had come into plenty of money and immediately decided to spread lavish gifts around for his dearest and most loyal friends, the ones who had been present at Tintagel and had saved his life.

The house was in Cornwall, not far from the chapel, and though it was not huge, it would fit a family and extended family quite comfortably. Gwaine had been much pleased and there was plenty of good natured joking about having plenty of children to fill it.

They were one of the first to arrive. Gareth and Lynette had gone ahead to open up the house and make sure everything was ready. White ribbons hung in great arcs from the ceiling, coming low enough that Galahad, sitting on his father's shoulders could reach up and tug at them, easily bringing a few down. There were a few waiters milling close to the kitchen, waiting for the guests to arrive. Tables had been set in the garden and the weather had managed to hold onto the sunshine despite predictions of rain. Merlin was glad that he didn't have to intervene, manipulating the weather was
more effort than he cared to spend when he could be busy enjoying the wedding instead.

Slowly, the house began to fill up. It was a rather private affair, with only immediate family and close friends being invited and Merlin knew most people by face. He stood close to Arthur while people he hadn't yet met personally fumbled and blushed over meeting the man who would soon become king, unsure of the correct etiquette.

Arthur only laughed and waved them towards the bride and groom. "Not today, friends. I'm off duty." He shook hands with everyone warmly enough that they left beaming and pleased, but he turned to Merlin once the crowd had dissipated and murmured, "this is hard work. I don't remember it being this..." He shrugged and trailed off.

Merlin clapped him on the back and steered him towards his seat, not far from the head table where Gwaine, Leona, Gareth and Lynette were already seated. "Don't worry, it'll come back to you. And I never tire of hearing you complain about sycophants."

There was a choked sound and Merlin turned and grinned absently at Arthur's protests that he did no such thing.

Dinner and speeches past quickly enough, music almost completely drowned out by chatter and laughter. A few couples had wandered through the patio doors to the bare dining room where a local four piece band had been set up to dance and Arthur had just extended his hand to Gwen when Leon tapped him on the shoulder and gestured that he should follow. He looked grim and drawn and Arthur passed a quick, worried glance to Merlin before following. Merlin sat awkwardly for a minute before standing, and he, Freya and Gwen headed indoors to the living room. A hush fell on the crowd and the band stopped, making Merlin turn to see that Gwaine and the others were following too. He almost asked them to sit down and not worry, but Gwaine glared and Merlin nodded and led them inside.

The living room was quiet and there was a stranger in uniform talking softly to Arthur. Merlin went to him and touched him gently on the arm. Arthur raised his head and took a shuddering breath, shaking the hand of the man who Merlin now recognised as Uther's aide. Realisation dawned, and Merlin felt suddenly cold.

"Arthur."

It took a few attempts for Arthur to get the words out, but when he did his voice was measured and calm. He had known this would be coming sooner or later, but perhaps he had hoped not so soon as this. "My father died early this morning."

Leon was the first to move, kneeling smoothly and the others followed suit. Merlin turned and realised that many of the guests had been hovering close to the door and were now kneeling too. "The King is dead," Leon called.

As one, the crowd answered. "Long live the King."

They didn't shout, they didn't need to. The words had their own weight and Arthur sighed and straightened, but Merlin could feel him shivering with tension. He leaned close and whispered. "If it makes you feel any better, you'll always be a prat to me."

End Notes
+The full wish printed on the ribbon reads "May you have good fortune as great as the eastern oceans, and may your life last as long as the southern mountains"

+"May you find what you are looking for." is reputed to be a curse, or a forewarning of Chinese origin.

+The scrap of scabbard belongs with Excalibur. In the legends, it's said that if one wore the scabbard, their wounds would not bleed.

+Elaine words 'you can't command love' is a reference to the line 'Madam,' said Sir Lancelot, 'she would have nothing but my love, and that I could not give her, though I offered her a thousand pounds yearly if she should set her heart on any other Knight. For, Madam, I love not to be forced to love; love must arise of itself, and not by command.' from Tales of the Round Table by Andrew Lang.

+“Urgency transcends the awkwardness,” quote from White Collar episode Power Play

+“Yes. I’m going to go home and sleep for a month.” is a reference to "I'm going to the hotel. Gonna take a shower. Gonna sleep, for a month." from Heat

+Arthur quotes Julius Caesar "I have lived long enough to satisfy both nature and glory."

+In the original legends Lynette ends up with Gwaine, but I didn't want to loose all the development between her and Gareth.

+"The chain of destiny can only be grasped one link at a time." - Winston Churchill.

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