Hiding (or when Merlin arrives in Camelot and has to hide more than one secret)

by **Blue_Night_Blossom**

Summary

Merlin is already in Camelot and the trouble starts in the form of sorcerers bent on revenge, magical creatures and Uther's enemies.

Between being responsible of all magical creatures, helping keeping Arthur safe, his relationship with Eghan, new friends and trying to block Gwen's crush, will Merlin be capable of balancing everything Camelot has to offer?

Notes

This is the second part of the series, and to those asking, yes, it will be longer. I thank everyone who comments, and it's a boost of confidence and inspiration for me. I hope you enjoy this book.

The posting schedule has been eradicated, it only pressured me and I do this as a hobby, so I will post more or less every 3 weeks, but nothing is sure.

Please bear with me and thank you for reading.
See the end of the work for more notes.
In which Gaius has a heart attack (or when Merlin helps a mother)

Chapter Summary

Set in the episode "The Dragon's Call"

Merlin looked up from his book and sighed, he couldn’t concentrate, he was still shaken because of his talk with Arthur Pendragon. Then he decided to think about the journey that took him to fulfil his destiny, and smiled slightly in remembrance.

The first thing he could recall were his mother’s tears. The woman was strong, but even her couldn’t stop worrying for her child. She waited till he was out of Ealdor, he had to give her that, but he forgot his bedroll, so he had to return and caught her sobbing in her bed. He spent time trying to calm her down and by the time she had fallen asleep (courtesy of a spell) he was already late, so he decided to take a shortcut in the form of his pathway.

He went to the forest and called his personal pathway, that took him to his tent. In it, Eghan was asleep in an uncomfortable position, with his head on the desk, which was full of paperwork. He felt a little guilty at letting Eghan in charge of most of his duties (that weren’t many but they were important) and so moved him to his bed, changing his clothes to a comfortable tunic. He then started writing a note, one that asked Eghan to order some inconspicuous sorcerers to be low-key in charge of the protection of Ealdor and his mother.

He looked around the tent, which was the only place where he felt he wasn’t being judged, and his gaze fell on his sword and he felt a headache coming. How could he had forgotten to take his sword! He was a fairly good swordsman, he spared with Alator and Eghan whenever he could, he could hold him ground and he was proud of that. He hadn’t told his mother that he had his own sword, because in Ealdor he couldn’t have gotten a sword of that quality, never mind using it with the efficiency that he now had. He summoned the scabbard and sheathed his sword in it. He was ready.

Then, Merlin smiled sadly, bowed down and kissed Eghan without noticing the tear that was rolling down his own cheek. “Goodbye, my love. May Magic allow us to see each other again”

With a backwards glance he left the tent, inhaling another forest’s air. He was a day from Camelot, so he would not be delayed. Merlin was supposed to arrive on Wednesday, but he was a day early, so he started walking. When he stopped to sleep he felt protective wards raise around him and internally rolled his eyes at the overprotective tendencies of his people.

The next day, on Tuesday, when he was arriving at Camelot, he felt a presence that was full of despair, so he followed it to the back of a house. The next thing he saw was an old woman sitting down in a blanket and crying her heart out.

He halted to a stop when he recognized her. Mary Collins, the witch who had entertained the children with her colourful shapes. His son, Thomas, had wanted to follow her footsteps, but they both had to travel to Camelot for the death of a family member and they hadn’t heard from them ever since, but not for lack of trying.

Now that he saw her he noticed that she was deeply deteriorated, she had circles under her eyes and
a pale complexion that united with her gaunt face made a horribly sad picture for Merlin, who sometimes had joined her shows when he was younger with Eghan and in need of a distraction from his duties or his life in Ealdor.

The woman looked up and stood in wobbly legs, fixing her gaze in the sword that rested on his hip as taking a couple of steps backwards. Merlin put his hands in the universal way of saying ‘I’m not going to hurt you’ while taking off his backpack and thinking of reasons that made sense of why was she like this.

He was paralyzed because of what happened next, but he had enough sense to make a privacy bubble and transfiguring a chair for the obviously grieving woman, and she jumped and looked around like a spooked animal, but upon sensing the wards she relaxed a little, and barrelled into him and kept sobbing. The poor lady ignored the chair, needing human contact to help her pass this moment, and when she was in a clear state of mind she started berating Merlin for using magic that carelessly.

“Young man, you don’t know what dangerous thing you just have done! If you value your life you can’t do that again, not if you don’t want to end like…” the lady started sobbing again, but Merlin had more or less the facts. He guided Mary to the chair and started thinking.

Obviously Thomas Collins was going to be executed (if he wasn’t already) and his mother was distraught. For a brief moment he remembered his own mother’s tears. Was she going to be like this if he was found and to be burned at the pyre? Would she hate Uther after losing her son? No question there, all magical people hated Uther, and only a miracle would keep Merlin for hating him, after all, he had killed HIS people under his reign, even children.

No, Merlin wouldn’t help Uther, only would help The Once and Future King, that was supposed to be in Camelot. What a joy! Couldn’t he be in a kingdom where Magic was allowed, like Cendred’s? Was it much to ask? Not in the heart of Camelot!

He stared calming Mary, thanking Magic that he was expected to arrive the next day, and, after she had told him the situation, he followed the woman to her house, the one that had been left for the deceased family member and put discreet almost unnoticed privacy spells, that would repel any curious person from approaching. After using a light dusting spell, he spent the rest of the day planning the best way for the escape of her son from Camelot’s Dungeons and the way it would not rouse suspicion.

That same night Merlin put the plan into action. He put an invisibility spell on himself and used a tracking spell to find the dungeons. When he arrived (thinking what the guards were paid for because they just followed the barrel that he sent rolling down) he saw the poor state in which Thomas was and unlocked the cell.

The man looked startled for a moment, but them felt the magic and relaxed a little. He got up and started walking through the door, but Merlin’s invisible hand stopped him for a moment. He took a rock from his pocket and pricked Thomas’ finger and collected a drop of blood. The rock automatically transfigured itself to an exact copy of Thomas, and the real one was soon disillusioned and smuggled out of the dungeons and into the lower town. The fake one would be executed the morning after the feast, where Lady Helen of Mora would sing.

They reunited with Mary Collins, that upon seeing her son she hugged him hard and started crying again. The poor woman had been scared out of her mind, trying to convince herself that in the next three days wouldn’t be two executions instead of only one.

When she calmed down they had a quick dinner and the nervousness only grew, because they had
to flee to the forest so that they could be safe. Mary tried to convince Merlin that it was a dangerous city and that he could die, trying to convince him to go with them to Sanctuary to no avail.

When Thomas had been rested enough, Mary and Merlin (with an invisible Thomas in tow) went to the forest, where Merlin called a random pathway (well, that’s what he told them, in reality he moved temporarily the one that leaded to the Infirmary so that Aliana and Alice could help the mother-son duo) and then, when he received confirmation that they were safe, he used his personal pathway to go into his tent and laid down on his bed to rest till the next day. After all that had happened he was going to arrive on a Wednesday, as his mother had told Gaius.

He woke up before he was supposed to, so he decided to go for a stroll to the forest while he walked to Camelot. He arrived early, and asked directions to the nearest guard and he was on his way. When he knocked down, the physician himself opened the door and the conversation started.

“Who are you?” The first impression of the physician was that he was old, very old. He had white hair and many wrinkles on his face, but he moved with sureness and determination, knowing exactly what he had to do. It was a person that Merlin didn’t want to cross, he seemed highly intelligent and very wise. “Answer me!”

“Good day, my name is Merlin, I have a letter for you” Merlin smiled charmingly and moved his backpack so he could reach it.

“Merlin? Hunith’s son?” Gaius seemed surprised at Merlin’s appearance, never mind his sword
“But you are not meant to be here till Wednesday!”

“It is Wednesday” Merlin was greatly amused by the situation, but he kept a straight face for the old man’s sake and gave him the letter.

“I don’t have my glasses. I can’t read without them.” The court physician told the lad. “Well, you better put your bag in there. And be careful where you leave that sword!”

Then he collapsed into his bed and started reading the letter:

My Dear Gaius:

I turn to you for I feel lost and alone, and know not who to trust. It every mother’s fate to think her child is special and yet I would give my life that Merlin were not so. Ours is a small village and he is so clearly at odds with people here, especially Old Man Simmons, who think that his disappearances are sign that he is strange and an outcast.

He is growing well in confidence and manners, and helps everyone that needs it, but I fear what would become of him if he were to remain here. This village is too small for him, Gaius, and I fear that one more absence they will do something to him.

In these times, he needs a hand to hold, a voice to guide, someone that might find a purpose for him and his swordsman skills that he picked up with a traveller that visited often. To this end, I hope and trust, that you will have it in your heart to be that person. I beg you, if you understand a mother’s love for his son, keep him safe. And may God save you both.

Hunith

The next day found Merlin in his new room, with sunlight hitting his face, he woke up and went to find Gaius. He founds him sitting at the kitchen table, and when he approached he gave him some water to clean himself. Then they had breakfast chatting lightly, and Merlin tells Gaius that he can
help him delivering some medicine so that he has more time to treat a noble that was sick.

“All right then: Hollyhock and Feverfew for Lady Percival and this is for Sir Owain, he is blind as a weevil.” Gaius gave him a phial.” Tell him not to take it all of it at once. Off you go.”

Merlin got to explore the palace while asking for directions for Lady Percival. When he had delivered that, he only had Sir Owen’s medicine, he passed in front of the Throne Room, and glanced inside just in time to see Lady Helen of Mora, and Uther kissing her hand. A woman, possibly the King’s Ward for Gaius’ description, was looking with disgust at the scene and whispering with her handmaiden.

Merlin sensed a guard’s approach and kept walking to Sir Owen’s chambers, not wanting to be found spying near the Throne Room with a sword on his hip to top it off. He asked for directions again and soon he was knocking at the door. An old man opened and Merlin started talking.

“Good morning, Sir Owen. I brought you your medicine” Merlin smiled, but before the old man could extend his hand he started talking again. “Gaius said don’t take it all at once”

When he was sure the old man understood his instructions he gave him the bottle and watched like a hawk when he took the potion, and he was satisfied.

He then went to the courtyard, one of the places where he knew how to return to Gaius’ Chambers, but he saw some knights throwing knives to a servant, who was moving the target to a more suitable place. He was spooked and most likely going to get hurt, so Merlin, after much internal debate, intervened.

“I think that’s enough” Merlin didn’t shout, but he was heard all the same. The knife throwing stopped abruptly, and the younger man that was only watching frowned and turned to face him. Merlin’s breath got caught in his throat, his magic told him that he was his destiny. Well, Merlin wasn’t going to tolerate bullying from no-one, he was sure of it, so he armed himself with patience and started the negotiation.

“And who are you to tell us what to do?” The voice was full of arrogance and a headache was already making itself known in Merlin’s head.

“I am a person who thinks that this man could get severely hurt if you manage to hit him” Merlin was done with the injustice of it all. “Do you want the death of an innocent man in your conscience?” He saw that his supposed Destiny was thinking about it and was sufficiently admonished, so he prepared himself to keep going to his destination, but what he didn’t saw coming was the man next words.

“I challenge you to a due, only first blood” The man asked, with his earlier expression of sheepishness gone, replaced by arrogance once more. Merlin cursed, but resigned himself to the fight, after all, it was going to help to earn the respect of his other half.

“I challenge you to a due, only first blood” The man asked, with his earlier expression of sheepishness gone, replaced by arrogance once more. Merlin cursed, but resigned himself to the fight, after all, it was going to help to earn the respect of his other half.

“May I first know the name of the person I’m duelling?” Merlin asked, out of common courtesy, but what he didn’t expect were the laughs of the entourage, nor the arrogant smirk on his opponent’s face.

“Arthur Pendragon, Prince of Camelot” Merlin almost cursed out loud, his soulmate was… his mind crashed for a moment, but then his lessons took hold.

“It’s going to be an honour to fight against you. Pardon me for the rude tone, but I’m new and I didn’t know of your identity” Merlin bowed his head, and watched with hidden glee the surprise of
the Price.

“Answer a question first” The Prince stated, and when Merlin nodded in agreement he continued. “If you knew who I was would you have intervened?” Merlin notice that Arthur was expecting an answer, and his posture changed, something making Merlin nervous, but told the truth.

“I would have still called you out, no one has the right to put an innocent life in danger, even more so the one supposed to protect them” Arthur’s eyes gleamed with something that Merlin couldn’t identify, but looking through the window was Lady Morgana, who could do it without problem, and was surprised to see respect shining from the Prince’s eyes.

Arthur nodded, and signalled to follow him to the middle of the courtyard. Merlin did so and, when the Prince had unsheathed his sword he did the same. They started to attract people and Gaius was with them. The face he had was one of horror, but no-one made any attempt at helping him because they were curiously looking at the new person who dared to duel with the Prince.

The fight started and the both opponents circled each other slowly, studying the terrain. It was more for Merlin’s benefit and he knew it, so he nodded to the Prince, who smiled slightly. Then, without warning, Arthur sent a blow that would have deeply cut Merlin’s arm, but was blocked with precision and they went back to circling.

The next blow was also from the Prince, this time meant for the head, which Merlin blocked again, but this time counteracted with a blow to the side that was sidestepped easily. They kept exchanging similar blows, testing the waters. When they both were more or less sure of the other’s skill, the real fight started.

Merlin went to the offense and slashed at Arthur’s arm, but was met with the other’s sword. Arthur, for his part, was ecstatic. Here was a person that didn’t fear him because of his father, demanded the stop of the mistreatment and on top of that knew how to fight to the point when he was having trouble keeping up! Of course, it was internal, externally he was the epitome of concentration. He was no slouch, so he knew a good swordsman when he saw it.

In the balcony, Lady Morgana and Gwen were watching the show from the beginning and were amazed. No other person had been as bold as to face the prince head on.

“No Gwen, but I think that I am going to meet him at the feast” Morgana said, looking appraisingly at the man who fought against one of the best swordsman of the kingdom, but amended her statement “If he gets an invitation, after all, he is new here.”

They fight was still going strong twenty minutes in and the crowd was getting impatient, and even though the two swordsmen were in their own bubble they could feel the change of atmosphere. They blocked and parried some more, they were having too much fun to stop.

Then, Arthur noticed that Merlin was leaving some little holes in his defence that weren’t there before. When he looked at the man in the eyes he knew that he was doing it on purpose so that he would win in front of his people. Arthur was used to winning, but he knew that it was not an honourable thing to do, so he started leaving little holes too, so that they could tie.

Merlin’s eyes widened at seeing that and smiled, not knowing that Arthur’s stomach churned from anticipation at that. Then, as one, they both nicked the other’s neck at the same time and stopped, both breathing heavily. The crowd was cheering and they smiled, tired grins on their faces.
“You are a man of honour and a good swordsman, Merlin” Arthur said whispering. “Maybe I will have the honour to fight against you on a later date.” Then said on a normal voice, full of arrogance. “You are free to go; you have earned it.” Merlin bowed his head lightly in acknowledgement, hiding his surprise of knowing that the king was faking all the time and walks towards Gaius, who was pale as a sheet, but still with enough strength to speak his mind.

“You know, I was going to find you a job as a servant but, with this spectacle, if I try you are going directly as a guard” Merlin smiled lightly without responding him and guided Gaius up the stairs so that he could rest for the emotions of the day. “And I promised your mother you would be safe, and the first thing you do is go and duel the Prince! He could have you thrown in the dungeons for that!”

Merlin waved him off and went to his room, he had to plan how to be near the prince without being suspicious so he could fulfil his destiny. “And because he is handsome”, Merlin blocked the voice, but couldn’t help a blush, so he decided to go to sleep, after all, tomorrow most likely would bring answers to his questions.

The third day of his stay in Camelot was normal. He had breakfast and Gaius started a conversation that worried him since he arrived.

“Merlin, I know you know how to use a sword” Gaius looked pained at having to start this conversation, but Merlin didn’t try to stop it. “But please promise me that you are not going to enter in more duels. I’ll find you a risk free job and you can stay here.”

Merlin sighed, he knew that the condition that his mother had sent was sitting heavily to the old physician. For one side he wanted to give Merlin a chance, but for other hand he was worried sick that he would get hurt doing whatever job he chose.

“Can we wait until I actually get a job?” Gaius nodded, still not sure about it, but told Merlin that he had to go to the lower town to check some patients. Merlin promised not to move and he smiled at having all of Gaius’ books at his reach.

He had planned spending the morning reading about medicine, but a tingling in his head changed his mind. He opened his senses and followed the magic trail to an enchanted compartment that was behind a lot of heavy books. Merlin enchanted the stairs leading to Gaius’ Laboratory with a sensor spell. He now would know if anyone tried to climb the steps to reach the tower, and that would leave him with enough time to hide his magic.

He opened the compartment and found a magic book wrapped in a dusty cloth, meaning that Gaius hadn’t opened it in a long time, in twenty years to be more precise. He flipped through it with a speedreading spell, thinking about the spells that could be there. To his disappointment, he knew every single spell in the book, not a surprise, but he expected something more. He put the book back exactly as it was, turning back time, and closed the compartment. He put every single book in their place and then went to browse the ones about magical creatures. At least he would not be bored, he would leave medicine for another day.

Apart from that, the morning passed normally, same as lunch, that passed in silence. When it was finished, Gaius sent him on some errands to give medicine to some nobles, that translated into going to the kitchen and giving them to the Head Cook to give with dinner. The last one was different.

“Listen to me, Merlin” Gaius said sternly showing a bottle “This is Lady Helen’s tonic that you must give her personally. Right now she is with the King, who is showing her the Kingdom. You mustn’t interrupt them. Wait for her in front of her rooms and when she gets there you give it to
her.” Merlin nodded, thinking of the Lady Morgana’s expression of disgust last day and unknowingly mirroring it.

He went down to the kitchen, asking for directions again and when he entered he asked for Mary. He was directed at a robust woman that had an air of authority. He talked with her about the potions and when he was sure everything was clear he went to wait for Lady Helen.

When he *finally* found the rooms he had been lost for an hour, and finally a servant that had passed three times took pity on him and showed him the way. He only had to wait a couple of minutes, because the Lady appeared just when Merlin was about to sit down on an alcove. He hastily stood straight and handed the Lady her tonic.

When he was dismissed he bowed and kissed the Lady’s hand and went to the market, he wanted to see the bustle of the streets to calm himself down because he felt that something bad was going to happen.

He saw Prince Arthur walking with only one guard and more relaxed than in their last encounter, more comfortable with the man at his side. He browsed the stalls, thinking of what to buy to eat that night, trying to ignore the presence that he felt coming his way. Merlin smiled when he felt that presence over his shoulder, and before Arthur could give him a scare he opened his mouth.

“Hello again, Prince Arthur” Merlin smirked, but when he turned around changed the smirk for a genuine smile. The Prince was smiling slightly, if you weren’t looking for it you would miss it, but Merlin was looking for the smile, after all, the feeling of being finally complete was not one you could ignore easily.

“Merlin” Arthur was smiling with his voice, and Leon’s eyes were almost out of his sockets, but when Arthur turned to him he went back to a polite face. “This is Leon, my closest knight.”

They both sized each other, but Arthur wasn’t worried, Leon was a fair man and he would never spread the word of him seeking a peasant (more like run after, the second he had seen him leaving to the market he had run to get a guard). They both smiled and shook hands. They chatted a bit of inconsequential things, evading the execution that was scheduled for tomorrow. More like Merlin was asking question on the working of Camelot, because he was from a small village.

“How did you learn swordfight then?” Leon’s tone was normal, but Merlin knew better, and stuck with the truth that had told Gaius.

“There was a man that visited our village often, and he sometimes helped to protect it from raiders, so he taught me when I asked” Merlin wasn’t lying, he had made a show of having Alator ‘teach’ him in a nearby clearing at plain sight, but his mother didn’t know about the sword. “When he wasn’t there I practised by myself”

“And the other children?” Arthur was curious, Merlin was a very friendly person, so he didn’t understand why he was alone.

“I’m afraid they didn’t like me very much…” Merlin’s face took a sad turn, and Arthur wanted to kill anyone who had dared to harm him. “I never knew my father, so they thought I was the root of all things wrong”

Leon watched curiously at his prince, noticing the tension in his shoulders and the protective gleam in his eyes, and came to a conclusion. His prince cared of the stranger. He wasn’t stupid, and Arthur told him the whole thing, from the way he defended Thomas to the way he talked to the Prince. Arthur wanted someone who didn’t care he was a prince, to speak their mind around him,
so he was already attached to this man. Add to that his sword fighting skills and Leon knew that they were going to be fast friends.

“Why?” The anger at Merlin’s words was palpable, but Merlin did a good job at diverting the issue and they started chatting lightly again, but the protective gleam never faded from the Prince’s eyes. Leon sighed, it was going to be a long couple of days.

“Will I see you at the feast?” And there it was, Leon almost sighed but kept his opinion to himself in public.

“I really don’t know” Merlin thought about that, but couldn’t come to a conclusion, while Arthur’s eyes dimmed at the prospect. “I suppose not, I’m only Gaius’ Ward”

“Gaius’ Ward?” A gleam entered Arthur’s eyes that had Leon sighing again. They both were going to be his death; he just knew it. And he only knew them together for fifteen minutes. “Well then, as the Ward of our esteemed physician you are invited to it”

“Thank you” Merlin bowed lightly his head on the outside, but on the inside he was doing a happy dance. He was going to spend more time with him! And Leon. “I will be there, although I don’t know I’ll have anything appropriate to wear…”

Thinking back to the day, Leon could only sigh and tell himself that the idiots were already in love, but the only thing he wanted to do was bang his head in the nearest wall. He was doomed to be with them for the sake of propriety, but he just wanted to get out of there.

‘There’ meaning the Prince’s Chambers, where they both were talking about everything and nothing, trying to choose a robe that could be made more simple without ruining anything. God help them, because Leon was certainly not!

When they finished and Merlin has to go to Gaius (with a simple black pants, white shirt and a cape) they say goodbye while Leon tried to make himself invisible. He was already shipping them, but, did they have to do it with him in the room?!

Merlin couldn’t believe the day he had with Arthur, he was a funny guy, with a kind word whenever he wasn’t acting like a prat and…

His line of thoughts was interrupted by Gaius, who raised his eyebrow. Merlin was amused, but on the outside he gulped hard. Then he explained everything that happened (sans the clothes incident) and that he was invited to the feast by the Prince. Gaius’ only reaction was rubbing the bridge of his nose in exasperation and sigh.

On that same night, below Camelot, the dungeons were occupied by only a couple of prisoners, but one was concocting an evil plan. He had heard rumours that the feast that preceded his execution was going to be well attended, and the Lady was a beautiful singer that put the audience into a sort of trance, so he was going to use that to his benefit. He was going to escape, go into the Great Hall and then kill Uther and the Prince. Then, he was going to escape and return to his family. He slept away, not knowing that, in a place out of reach, the real Thomas Collins was making a spectacle of light to entertain children.

The day of the feast dawned sunny, and the servants were caught up in a flurry of activity to prepare everything, so Merlin decided to help Gaius in picking herbs in the forest. When he returned from his errand, Merlin washes up and dresses with his new clothes and Gaius just raises an eyebrow, which Merlin easily deflects. He sheathed his sword and he sat down waiting for Gaius.
When they were ready they went to the Great Hall, and Lady Morgana watched the mysterious man that entered, but she was soon roped in conversation with a Lady, so she didn’t see the way Merlin’s eyes were instantly drawn to the Prince, who was tense as a bowstring surrounded by his supposed friends. Leon was the first to see him, and gave him a small smile, that Merlin returned. Then Arthur saw him.

It was like time was paralyzed just for the two of them, Merlin smiled softly, and Arthur’s face lighted up like a Christmas tree. Time resumed as normal, and the Feast started. Merlin knew enough to be respectful, and never spoke without being spoken. Gaius introduced him as his ward and the subsequent pleasantries that followed. Some were interested in his duel with the Prince, but the rest left him alone.

When dinner finished, the mingling started, and Merlin found himself alone in the side of the room, but not for long, because the prince started orbiting near him, giving pleasantries to everyone, but Leon could see that he was trying to reach Merlin. Leon rolled his eyes and went straight to the man, and started talking to him, knowing that the prince would use him as an excuse. He waited for a couple of minutes, and in three, two, one…

“Excuse me, My Lady, but I must talk with Sir Leon.” Arthur bowed his head and kissed the Lady’s hand and made a hasty retreat to join his knight and Merlin. Leon rolled his eyes and smirked when no one was noticing him. Arthur and Merlin were in deep conversation about who-knows-what and he would bet everything that they were the happiest people here now.

Sir Leon was partly correct, they were the happiest, but not the most excited because Thomas was smiling like a lunatic, he had stolen two daggers from soldiers and was going to wait for the music to start to put his plan into action. He looked around and saw the Lady Helen, a truly beautiful woman, going to the centre of the room, and saw his two targets. The King was in his throne, but the Prince was speaking softly with a black-haired man and a knight. Well, he could be killed later.

The Lady started to sing, and Thomas closed his eyes, it was really beautiful, but he was here for a reason, and no amount of beautiful singing would stop him He threw the dagger.

He miscalculated they trajectory because of the different weight of the daggers, and it imbedded itself into Lady Helen’s neck, who was dead before she hit the floor. At least she had a painless death. Thomas was panicking, guards were flooding him, and he threw the dagger to the prince, a closer target then the king. He saw the dagger about to hit his heart, but a body pushed him out of the way, hitting him instead. Thomas saw in slow motion as the black-haired man grabbed the dagger that was in his shoulder and pulled it out without a flinch. Barely three seconds later, the fake Thomas Collins was dead, with the dagger in his head.

Arthur saw it happen quickly. One second he was talking with Merlin in their own bubble, the next one Merlin tensed, and then Lady Helen dropped dead. Knights sprang to action surrounding the King, but Leon was too far away to protect him. Arthur saw the dagger and knew that those were his last moments. He saw his life passing in front of his eyes, but the clearest pictures were those were Merlin was in them, and he regretted only having known him for only two days, not even three hours.

Then, a body pushed him out of the way and in the next second the dagger was flying back with even more speed. He stood up with Leon’s help, that was white as a sheet and looked at his hands, he knew he was going to die, and then he didn’t thanks to Merlin’s reflexes. His father approached and Leon bowed his head; and Merlin did so a second later with one hand in his injured shoulder.

“You saved my boy’s life, a debt must be repaid” Uther said with a neutral voice. “You shall be rewarded. Who are you?” Arthur’s face is a mix between curiosity and trepidation. His father could
“Merlin, Sir, Gaius’ Ward” Merlin was tense, but he willed himself to relax, he was going to be rewarded by a person he hated, and looking at Arthur’s face it could end well or end up badly.

“This merits something quite special, you shall have rewarded a position in the royal household. You shall be Prince Arthur’s manservant.” Uther didn’t see the face of indignation in his son’s face, because it was hidden almost instantly, but the next words were heard quite clearly.

“That would be a waste of his skill, Father.” Arthur’s voice was vehement and had a regal tint in it, one that lacked all arrogance and only carried power. “He is the one who tied me in a duel fought in the courtyard” Uther’s face was surprised for a second, but then continued as if it was normal that someone tied his son.

“Then you shall be Prince Arthur’s bodyguard. Your chambers will be opposite if his, you move tomorrow.” Uther went out of the room followed up close by his knights while the court applauded and the Lords followed Uther, because they were going to plan Lady Helen’s funeral.

Arthur and Merlin looked at each other, sizing up the way their new relationship was going to go, but they end up shrugging, but they were too worried at hiding their blushes that to notice the other’s. Leon rolled his eyes again when he saw both blushing, and couldn’t wait for the day they would get together.

When there were alone except for the servants (Arthur had to order Leon out of there, with the excuse to see if Gaius needed anything else to treat Merlin when he went to see him), Merlin smiled slightly in an accomplished way, and Arthur couldn’t help but chuckle. Then he noticed the severity of the wound and paled.

“We need to get you to Gaius, he will patch you up immediately.” Arthur was watching all the blood flowing freely, and helped stopping it with a piece of cloth. He grabbed Merlin gently by the arm and guided him to Gaius’s Chambers.

“I can go alone.” Merlin protests were futile, and he knew it, but he still tried.

“I’m pretty sure you don’t know how to reach Gaius’s Chambers from here.” The smirk in Arthur’s voice was unmistakeable, and neither was the huff Merlin did when he complied.

When they arrived at the door, Merlin smiled lightly trying to distract himself of the closeness, and bowed his head lightly and bid Arthur farewell. Arthur smiled freely and Merlin’s breath caught on his throat, he was beautiful, but then a cough distracted them. Leon had opened the door and was looking pointedly at Arthur, who reluctantly took a step back and turned around to go to his chambers, Leon following him.

When they were at a reasonable distance Arthur felt himself relax and both jumped when the torches flared brightly. They looked at each other tensely and searched the corridor, but no one was there. Arthur knew he needed to be cautious, a single slip and he could send an innocent to the pyre, and he never would forgive himself. Leon looked at him with a neutral expression, but didn’t say anything. And that was the last of the incident.

In Lady Morgana’s Chambers, Gwen was preparing the Lady to sleep. “Gwen, where’s the sleeping draught?”

Gwen looked in the bedside table, but it wasn’t there. “Maybe Gaius has forgotten delivering it? I’ll go immediately.” Gwen curtsied and Morgana chucked lightly.
“Gwen.” Morgana called when the handmaiden was about to cross the threshold and Gwen turned around. “See if you can help a woman’s curiosity about a certain new bodyguard.” The smirk on Morgana’s face was scary, but Gwen took it in stride, knowing her Lady.

She went to the Physician’s Chambers and knocked. The muffled voice of Gaius greeted her and entered closing the door behind her. Gaius was tending Merlin’s wound, and the man in question was with his back to her.

“What can I do for you Gwen?” Gaius said gently, while he wrapped the wound.

“I have been sent by Lady Morgana.” Gwen said “She wants her sleeping draught”

“Don’t worry Gwen, I only need to finish it with some herbs, it will only take a minute.” Gaius went to finish it, but not before saying over his shoulder: “You can go to rest, Merlin.”

Gwen looked curiously at the new royal bodyguard, and tried not to blush, after all he was well defined. He had broad back and shoulders, he was lean, but not skeletal, ad had muscle. (Like Gwaine’s physique). She blushed when she was caught staring by his blue eyes.

“Good evening miss, may I ask your name?” Merlin asked while putting on his shirt, knowing that the woman was ogling him, but he liked men thank you very much, even though he had to admit that she was pretty.

“I’m Guinevere, but my friends call me Gwen.” She blushed again, and almost cursed when Gaius interrupted them, it was really a minute. Well, at least he could gossip about Merlin’s appearance.

“She has a crush on you, you know?” Gaius’ words made Merlin gape, but he had caught her ogling.

“A pity that it’s in vain.” Merlin answered, while Gaius raised his eyebrow in disbelief.

“She is a sweet girl and she already has men on her door, only Morgana’s wrath stops the Lords.” Gaius told him, and Merlin smiled at the poor attempt at manipulating him, a pity that he already had sights on one…

He stopped abruptly, he hadn’t even thought about Eghan for a moment since he met Arthur, and he felt guilty at not having contacted him. He wrote a letter to him with intention of sending it the next morning, and he started reading a book, but soon his mind was full with conversations of Arthur Pendragon.

He returned to the present and told himself that reading the book was a lost cause and started thinking about his destiny, he had a good heart and a good head on his shoulders. He was going to enjoy being at his side. He blew the candles and prepared himself to sleep, heavens knew that he would need it, but his plans were thwarted by a voice calling his name again and again.

“Merlin… Merlin…”

He groaned, knowing full well that if he didn’t go now he would be pestered by the Great Dragon all night but still wanted to go to sleep to start off his new duties early tomorrow, so he raised his mental barriers and fell into a deep sleep ignoring the calls, not knowing that, far below Camelot, the Great Dragon was having the closest thing to a stroke he could have, and wondering if the young warlock knew about his destiny. If he did know, manipulate him to fit his plans of freedom was going to be very very tricky, but he would wait and see. He had waited twenty years; he could very well wait a couple of days more.
Merlin woke up the next morning with a light headache due to the insisting nature of the Great Dragon, who hadn’t stopped calling him all night, but he was firm on his decision. Before even getting out of bed, Merlin updated the conditions upon one could enter Sanctuary: No one that wishes harm upon Arthur Pendragon, The Once and Future King, can enter the kingdom. He felt the wave of magic and knew that it had been successful, so he got up and dressed himself.

He was in the middle of cursing the cape’s lace when he remembered that he didn’t have to do the ceremonial knot and almost banged his head into the wall, but refrained himself because the headache was getting worse. He went to see Gaius for a headache potion, that the old man gave him immediately.

The physician looked at his new ward with curiosity, he had already impressed him and, by the looks of it, Sir Leon and the Prince were quite taken with him. Not only had he tied with the Prince in a match but had saved his life, prompting King Uther to give him the Prince’s Manservant job and then the Prince had told his Father that it would be a waste of skill in front of the whole court!

Gaius looked at the man in front of him and sighed. Hunith needed to be informed of his son’s new job, including living arrangements. Gaius reflected that in only three days Merlin had touched Camelot in an inexplicable way, one that was going to leave a permanent change. Be good or bad it was yet to be decided.

“Merlin” the man raised his head from his breakfast, and nodded to show he was listening, even in his sleepy state “We need to talk.”

That woke him up quickly. Merlin knew that in Sanctuary that meant a lot of problems, in Ealdor meant his mother was worried because of his disappearance or that Will was suspicious about his whereabouts, nothing good. Now he needed to know how this conversation was going to go, but with Gaius looking him seriously he was going to be faced with a long chat, so he made up his mind.

“Do you mind if I eat my breakfast before you start? I really want to have something in my stomach first when someone says that words.” Gaius acquiesced and when the dishes were washed they both sat down and started to talk.

“Merlin, you have been here for barely four days and by the looks of it you’re going to be dragged to court intrigues. You need to be careful in who you trust, because people will try to gain advantage by befriending you.” Gaius was surprised at the relaxed way the boy was reacting, as if it was expected.

“I know” The words were said with such certainty that Gaius’ only option was to believe him. “I’m not going to trust easily, I never have” The last part was said quietly, with a tint of sadness that the physician couldn’t quite place.
“We need to tell your mother, I was supposed to be responsible of you, but being Prince Arthur’s bodyguard has a lot of risks” Merlin smiled a bit and agreed, so he wrote a letter to his mother detailing the new job and his living arrangements. He put it in an envelope and wrote the name outside. Then Gaius cleaned his shoulder wound and rewrapped it.

A knock sounded from outside, so Gaius got up and opened the door to find a servant. Gaius made him enter and the man started speaking quickly, but he was clearly nervous.

“Good morning, sirs” the man bowed his head a little “The Prince sends me to take your belongings to your new room and to show you the way to your new chamber”. Merlin was stunned for a second for the Prince’s thoughtfulness, but nodded and lead the servant to his room to pick everything up, being thankful that he had the foresight to pack before having breakfast.

The man carried everything and started a little tour of the castle, showing him the way things were. When they reached Merlin’s new room, opposite of the Prince’s Chambers, the servant opened the door and left the bags on a table and then showed Merlin his new wardrobe, the uniform of the royal bodyguards. Merlin was about to tell the servant that he would prefer to use his own clothes, but then he saw the clothes. It was not so a uniform, but shirts and trousers of the highest quality. Merlin smiled at the note that was on the table. It read:

*I thought you would prefer this instead of the stuffy armour that the Knights wear. Your fighting style is one in which you need to move constantly, so I think this type of clothes are more suited for it. If anyone comments tell them to move the complaints to me.*

*You have some basic things in the room, if you need something just ask Morris, he is the servant I assigned you. He is competent and discreet. He is in charge of getting you breakfast, cleaning your room, polishing your armour and other things you need.*

*Prince Arthur*

Merlin smiled even more and couldn’t help but blush, but one thing was weird, he didn’t have armour. He didn’t notice that the servant, Morris, was waiting for him. He looked up and was confused for a minute, but then it clicked. He was not going to be dressed. He thought of a way to distract him and found his mother’s letter.

“Morris, I want you to send this letter to Ealdor, in Essetir. It’s meant for my mother” Morris nodded and bowed before going out of the room. When he was sure he was alone, Merlin used his magic to open a place in the wall where he could put everything remotely incriminating and only him (or those who he gave permission) could open it.

He finished the task efficiently, and then hid his magic to everyone. Nobody could tell he had magic, not even those who had it. The downside is that he couldn’t know those who had, but he would take the risk. He took the Prince’s note and stashed it in one of the drawers for safekeeping, and then he dressed himself in his new clothes and looked in the mirror to see if he had forgotten something.

He had dilly-dallied enough, he was going to have to go to the Prince’s Chambers, so he went to the opposite door and knocked. Thomas opened the door and bowed a little to him. Arthur was signing some documents, but dismissed Thomas without looking.

When the manservant closed the door Arthur looked up and his breath caught in his throat. Merlin was handsome, he already knew that, but with new clothes he was even more. He swallowed and calmed himself. He needed to be in control of the situation, so smiled at his bodyguard and offered him a seat.
“How is your shoulder?” Merlin saw the worry in the Prince’s eyes, and he smiled reassuringly.

“It’s healing well, although Gaius told me off for being reckless and putting myself in unnecessary danger unprotected” Merlin let out a laugh, and Arthur did the same after a moment of deliberation.

“Well, Gaius’ right in one aspect, you were unprotected” The protective gleam returned in full force, but Merlin was oblivious, if not a little offended for the comment “And we’re going to remedy that”.

The finality in the Prince’s tone was clear as day, so Merlin didn’t bother with fighting, he knew to choose his battles and this was one he wasn’t going to win. Arthur had the same tone that he had when he was arguing with Eghan about his safety. He was washed with a wave of guilt for not having the foresight to send his lover’s letter with his mother’s, but he very well couldn’t send it directed at Sanctuary.

“The Tournament starts today” Arthur mentioned it casually, but Merlin knew he had a reason, and he was right. “Do you want to compete?”

Merlin was taken aback at the proposition, but he took the easy way out. “Sorry, but I can’t, I’m no knight”

“Don’t be ridiculous” Arthur waved his hand as if it didn’t matter “One guard can compete, and I thought you would like it”.

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Arthur” Merlin started with a big smile and a passionate voice “But my place is at your side protecting you, and I can’t do that while I’m fighting myself”.

Arthur swallowed hard, trying to be discreet but it didn’t matter, because both of them jumped when the fireplace burned brighter than normal. Arthur, that was the one looking first, saw the shape of a bird formed in the fire and paled, but forced it to return to normal and put a neutral face when Merlin looked at him searching for something. Arthur felt that the room was going to crash above them at any moment, so he moved his schedule a bit. At the end of the day it didn’t make any difference.

“Come on, it’s time you knew one of the best blacksmiths in this city” Arthur moved to the door quickly and Merlin followed him. He didn’t know what Arthur was planning but he had an inkling, one that came true the second they entered the shop.

“Merlin, this is Tom” Arthur told him, and Merlin could only nod because of the uncanny resemblance that he had with Eghan. He had forgotten him again, and he was hurting deeply for it. He was not supposed to forget him so often, and even while he thought that the guilt was left to a side when Arthur reclaimed his attention. “Tom, Merlin is in need of a sword, some light armour, one normal armour and one official armour”

Merlin was about to protest, but seeing the sheer determination in Arthur’s eyes shut him up and he let the situation play out, he would find a way of repaying him (most likely by saving his life) and answered the questions about his fighting style that Tom sent him with precision. When they were finished, Arthur dragged him to meet Leon and train for the Tournament, but not before drinking water to replenish themselves because the forge was boiling hot.

They met Leon in a private courtyard where no-one was to interrupt them and all the windows that led there were closed, ensuring privacy. Leon bowed a little and exchanged pleasantries with the other two. Leon eyed worriedly Merlin’s shoulder, but he saw that he was going to help Arthur
train and shook his head lightly when the two of them were putting on the armour.

Merlin and Arthur started circling each other, but a few seconds later they started hacking and slashing. Leon couldn’t do more than look in amazement at both of their skill. They made the moves so effortlessly that it looked simple. He started to worry when both of the men were losing themselves in the rhythm of the fight.

They kept it for a few minutes when the expected fatality happened. Arthur swung his sword towards Merlin’s head with force, and Merlin blocked it, but he hurt his shoulder. Arthur returned to reality and looked alarmed for a second, but Merlin kept fighting as if nothing had happened.

Leon saw Arthur’s guilt and horror, masked with an indifferent front that didn’t fool the knight for a second, so he wasn’t surprised to see a torch glowing brightly and then turned to ash. Sadly, he was not the only one who had seen it, and Merlin was paralyzed for a second, and that meant that Arthur won the first round.

Leon panicked internally, but then he took control of the situation easily enough, as always happened when Arthur’s magic got out of control. He was an expert at making excuses, and he prayed that this would work.

“Looks like it was a faulty torch, we get one of those every week.” He didn’t have to look to know that Arthur was looking at him with a relieved look. Merlin looked at him with suspicion, and was a relief when he seemed to buy it.

“Merlin, you are hurt, go and see if your new armour fits you or if Tom needs to change something. Leon will help me train while your shoulder heals” Arthur’s voice was full of worry, and Leon was the only one that knew that it was not for Merlin’s wound. When Merlin nodded and went on his way to his chamber with Morris, Arthur dismissed Thomas.

Leon looked around and he nodded to the Prince, conveying that no one was near, Arthur collapsed on a bench and put his head in his hands in defeat. Leon sat next to him and put a hand on his Prince’s shoulder.

“Breathe, My Prince, breathe” Leon rubbed his back gently waiting for a response of his calming gesture. “It’s going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine”

“No, it isn’t!” Arthur shouted and started to pace agitatedly, losing control of his anger, but reigning his magic in “It’s not fine, Leon! Anyone could have seen that! What if lose control in a crowded place and someone notices? Or worse, what if my father notices it? Merlin would go to the pyre because of me! He could die because of me! Just because he is at the wrong place at the wrong time!”

“My Prince” Leon stood and approached calmly the agitated man “You have been controlling your magic flawlessly for twenty years, you can keep it hidden. Or you can tell Merlin, he seems like an honourable man”

“No! I can’t tell him” Arthur paled and shook his head unconsciously, and before Leon could ask why he answered the question with a broken voice “I can’t, Leon. I don’t want him to hate me! It has been just a day and I know that I would do anything for his happiness. It’s weird, isn’t it? My magic is calling him to me, I feel it surround him and trying to catch his attention, with him it feels complete…”

Leon sighed, he had read all about this case when they found the magic compartment in the library, but while the Prince was more into knowing how to control his powers, he was more into
knowing the history and the legends. And of course the Prince would end with a soulmate! He sighed again and ran a hand through his hair, it was going to be a long couple of days, and knowing Arthur he would do something drastic, even without the titbit of information it was in his possession.

They trained a bit more, and if Arthur was more aggressive than normal none of them commented anything. Then Leon was called to a meeting with the Knights and with a last glance at his Prince he went to fulfil his duty.

Arthur, for his part went to his Chambers, where Thomas prepared him a bath. When he was dressed he ordered Thomas to go to the Kitchens and bring two plates of food, and to tell Morris that Merlin was to eat with him. The mere thought sent Arthur’s stomach into a frenzy but he ignored it in favour of doing some paperwork.

When a knock sounded, Arthur was too absorbed into his work to even notice, so the person on the other side entered and waited till the Prince finished. Arthur looked up and saw Merlin standing waiting for him to finish, and he signalled for him to sit down. When they finished lunch, Arthur was feeling guilty for the plan he had concocted, but he couldn’t think any other way for keeping Merlin safe. They finished in silence and Arthur smiled at Merlin with all the emotion he could, and loathed himself a little at the way things were going to go from now on. Then he reminded himself that it was for his safety.

The time came when they had to go to the Tournament, and Merlin was still in a cloud for the smile that Arthur had given him. He almost missed when Uther started speaking.

“Knights of the realm, it's a great honour to welcome you to a tournament at Camelot. Over the next three days, you will come to put your bravery to the test, your skills as warriors, and of course, to challenge the reigning champion, my son, Prince Arthur. Only one can have the honour of being crowned champion, and he will receive a prize of 1,000 gold pieces.” At his words, a servant opened a box containing the gold. “It is in combat that we learn a knight's true nature, whether he is indeed a warrior or a coward. The tournament begins!”

All the knights exited the arena while Uther went to sit down. After some minutes, Arthur and another knight circled each other and started to fight. Merlin analysed Arthur’s opponent’s style, and having first-hand account on the Prince’s fighting style, he knew that Arthur would win. No sooner did he think that, Arthur disarmed his opponent.

Merlin cheered and Arthur took off his helmet and bowed to his father.

Merlin approached Arthur and congratulated him, but Arthur was quietly looking at some knights fighting, especially Valiant’s fight for his aggressive style. Merlin analysed every movement, and when Valiant approached he tensed, for he had a bad feeling about him.

“May I offer my congratulations on your victory today?” Valiant’s smile looked forced, and Arthur put his polite mask on and nodded accepting the compliment.

“Likewise” Merlin thanked his Council for the diplomacy classes, if it weren’t for them he would be laughing out loud because Arthur’s face was obviously fake. He still didn’t like Valiant.

“I hope to see you at the reception this evening” With a nod he left with his servant, and Merlin’s feeling of danger eased. He resolved at investigating later and turned to Arthur, who was looking at him with an unreadable expression.

“He has a very aggressive style” Merlin commented, wanting to make Arthur stop looking at him with intensity.
“Yes, he does” Arthur said, and Merlin almost jumped in joy “But I bet he doesn’t show mercy to his opponents”

They both went to the castle in comfortable silence, but Merlin could see the conflict in Arthur’s face although he didn’t comment on it. He knew that the Prince took the Tournament very seriously.

Merlin escorted Arthur to his room and left him to take a bath. He entered his room and couldn’t escape Morris attempts at unclothing him. The servant prepared his bath and he left when he was relaxing in the hot water. He took his time cleaning himself and his imagination ran away two months ago, when he was in the part of the river for council members.

He returned to reality when Morris knocked at the door, and Merlin sighed while exiting the bath and putting his pants on. He called the servant to enter and rolled his eyes noticing the hesitance in the man. He smiled at him while he helped with the armour and cape. He was ready. He waited in front of the Prince’s door, dismissing Morris to go and help with the feast.

Barely half an hour later the feast was on full swing and Sir Leon was looking for the Prince. He expected him to be talking animatedly with Merlin, but what he saw was something really different. Arthur was nodding politely to everyone and drinking more than was recommended. Merlin was behind him, with a neutral expression scanning the room for threats.

Leon wanted to bang his head against the wall. When he heard that they were having lunch together he foolishly thought that Arthur would tell Merlin everything, but the Prince chose to do the opposite and ignore his bodyguard. The poor knight rubbed the bridge of his nose, this was going to end up badly to everyone involved, and sadly that included him.

He moved towards the soulmates, trying to evade conversation with anyone, but his eyes caught those of Gwen and she smiled at him. He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. He shook himself when she returned to Morgana’s side, who was thankfully ignorant of the glances he gave her handmaiden. But something was wrong, Gwen was never this skittish, always with a smile, but now it seemed forced. Leon was really worried, but he saw her smiling at something the Lady said and the room lighted up with her.

Leon picked up a goblet to drink, trying to look away from the woman, but what at first glance looked like an impossible task proved to be quite simple when the wine in his goblet started a mini-whirlpool. He watched transfixed at it for a second and looked around trying to find the Prince or his bodyguard. He finally pinpointed the reason and normally he would roll his eyes, but now it was a cause of concern. Arthur was glaring daggers at a Lady that was flirting to Merlin, and the man was oblivious to it. Leon only had one word for them both: "Idiots"

Finally, the bodyguard stopped talking and got behind the Prince, who was still ignoring him. Leon approached, this time without looking anywhere but his target, to do some damage control before it spiralled even more. He needn’t have worried, for the King started talking with Knight Valiant, catching the Prince’s attention quite quickly.

“Knight Valiant of the Western Isles, My Lord.” Arthur was displeased, and one only could notice it in the way he pursed his lips.

“I saw you fighting today. You have a very aggressive style.” Leon saw Merlin nodding in agreement, but behind the outward pleased face Leon could glimpse his disapproval. He smiled into his goblet at that and his respect towards the man rose up several notches.

“Well, as My Lord said: ‘To lose is to be disgraced.’” Uther nodded in approval of Valiant’s words,
and spoke.

“I couldn't agree more. Knight Valiant, may I present the Lady Morgana, my ward.” Valiant bowed and kissed Morgana’s hand, and Leon saw Arthur look at them with a wry grin. Merlin, for his part, looked at the scene neutrally.

The knight’s attention was attracted towards Gwen, and he was sure that he was looking at her with heart eyes and only prayed that no-one had noticed. His prayers went unanswered because he saw Merlin looking at him with amusement.

“My Lady.” Valiant smiled at the Lady, while Arthur rolled his eyes without anyone noticing. A light wind picked up, and Leon was the only one to notice that all the windows were closed.

“I saw you competing today.” Leon noticed Valiant puffing his chest and Gwen losing her smile because something was worrying her. Suddenly the conversation was not interesting anymore, but he made an effort to listen instead of asking himself what could have happened to the cheerful woman for her to stop smiling.

“I saw you watching. I understand the tournament champion has the honour of escorting My Lady to the feast.” Leon listened with half an ear, still focusing on Gwen, whose eyes darting quickly everywhere in fear. Leon was filled with rage, she was scared of someone, and he was going to investigate who would dare to intimidate her.

“That's correct.” The Lady’s smile was more fitting of the cat who caught the canary than of a Lady. Leon saw Arthur about to turn to comment something not very appropriate to Merlin, but stopped with a neutral face at the last moment.

“Then I will give everything to win the tournament. My Lady.” Valiant nodded and went away.

Morgana turned to Gwen and both smiled, Gwen a forced one, and talked a little.

Meanwhile Arthur bowed to his father, and when the conversation was finished the Prince approached Lady Morgana, Merlin in tow.

“They all seem rather impressed by knight Valiant” Merlin, just to mess with Arthur, nodded along to Lady Morgana’s words as if he paid attention to Valiant all along.

“They're not the only ones.” Arthur’s voice was a little more forceful that intended and Leon saw him wincing a little bit when Morgana looked at him with curious eyes.

“You're not jealous, are you?” Morgana asked with a hint of amusement in her voice, looking at Merlin, who was looking at Valiant with not so hidden curiosity. Leon almost winced at the Lady, who had hit the nail on the head, and repressed the urge to hide his face behind his goblet.

“I don't see there's anything to be jealous of.” Arthur said tightly, trying to see if Merlin was watching Valiant or not. Morgana’s smile faded while Arthur stormed out of the room, Merlin doing his duty and going after him, but not before bowing and kissing the Lady’s hand and smiling to Gwen.

Leon was stunned to notice that Gwen was blushing, but he calmed himself down. Merlin didn’t even reciprocate, so it was fine. Or at least that’s what he told himself, while wincing mentally at the tantrum that the Prince would give if he found out just how many people wanted to drag his bodyguard to their beds.

Leon shook his head and kept talking to Sir Owen and Sir Ewan, the second one competing in the Tournament. He couldn’t compete because the Physician told him that his wound was not ready
for the strain of the Tournament. He rubbed the wound subconsciously and watched Gwen again, trying (and failing) to deduce what worried her to the point of fear. Idly, he wondered how the soulmates were faring and hoped that they were more successful than him.

The men in question were still fuming for different reasons. Arthur was jealous, he didn’t have to hear it from Morgana to know. He was still pissed off at the Lady that dared to flirt with Merlin, never mind his bodyguard checking out Knight Valiant. He had to stop every ten minutes to not to blow up, quite literally, the Great Hall. He caught himself when all the liquid in the room started to swirl, dangerously close at imitating his mood.

Merlin, for his part, was confused and angry. He didn’t know what had he done to deserve this treatment, but he was going to find out and call the Prince on his bullshit. After leaving the Prince inside his Chambers with Thomas, he went to his and dismissed Morris, who bowed and went away, but not before preparing his bed and nightclothes.

Merlin had no intention of changing anytime soon, so he waited penning a letter to his Council, detailing the recent developments (except his strained relationship with the Prince) and signed with a flourish, sending it with magic. He lay on the bed and waited, The Great Dragon was going to call him soon. Sure enough, not even fifteen minutes later, Merlin heard his name called out in the darkness.

He put an invisibility spell over himself along with making himself soundproof and walked leisurely towards the dungeons. He had talked with his Council about what to tell him, and they had come to an agreement. He passed between the guards without problem and he almost whistled a merry tune while descending the stairs but refrained. When he was next to the opening of the Dragon’s Cave, he cancelled the spells and entered, acting hesitant.

“Merlin” Merlin looks around trying to see something, because he forgot to light the torch, and asked the most pressing question for a clueless boy.

“Where are you?” Merlin lifted the torch and waited for something. The Great Dragon landed in front of the boy, looking at him in a calculating way. He lighted the torch with his fire, and watched in hidden glee as the boy jumped in fright.

“How small are you for such a great destiny” Kilgharrah said in an awed voice. It wasn’t a lie either, he was awed at how naïve the boy seemed. He wasn’t going to take pleasure manipulating him but he wanted to fly free and he would use everything that was in his reach to get it, even if it meant Emrys would destroy himself in the process.

“Why? What do you mean? What destiny?” Kilgharrah almost smirked at those words. For a moment he was worried that the boy had known of his destiny and thus being impossible to manipulate. He didn’t respond to his calls and he was scared that all of his plans had been in vain. Of course, he would tell him most of the truth, he wasn’t that heartless. Or so he told himself.

“Your gift, Merlin, was given to you for a reason.” Merlin faked a frown of confusion, and then the picture of relief, that was not fake, seeing that the Dragon was believing everything he told him.

“So there is a reason.” If the Great Dragon could jump from joy he would be doing exactly that. There was a possibility that he could be freed and would have his revenge on Uther! All in the hands on the clueless pawn that was the young warlock.

“Arthur is the Once and Future King who will unite the land of Albion” Merlin almost rolled his eyes, but stopped just in time. He already knew that, his magic had been shouting at him from the
moment he laid his eyes on him, and there was this magnetism that made him gravitate towards him without stopping.

“Right” Merlin wanted to see the Great Dragon sweating, so he made it sound as if he didn’t believe a word that he heard. He saw the Great Dragon ransacking his brain to find an excuse.

“But he faces many threats, from friend and foe alike” Merlin put his most disbelieving face and felt the Great Dragon holding his breath.

“I don’t see what this has to do with me” The warlock stated flatly while he relished in the irony of being the Prince’s bodyguard.

“Everything. Without you, Arthur will never succeed. Without you, there will be no Albion” The Great Dragon didn’t take into account that the Prince had made such a bad impression, so he was stuck doing damage control. That wasn’t in his plan.

“No, you’ve got this wrong.” Merlin kept refusing everything stubbornly while fighting laughter. He wanted to call the Great Dragon on his bullshit, but he resisted the impulse. Merlin realised that Kilgharrah was desperate enough to turn him into his personal pawn, and he didn’t like that one bit.

“There’s no right or wrong, only what is and what isn’t.” Merlin admired the Dragon for his capability for distraction, but he still didn’t like him.

“But I’m serious! If anyone wants to go and kill him, they can go ahead. In fact, I’ll give them a hand” He retaliated with the big guns and if dragons could look astounded he had the firm opinion that Kilgharrah would.

“None of us can choose our destiny, Merlin, and none of us can escape it” Merlin was getting tired of the riddles and he wanted to go to sleep. Tomorrow he would have to accompany Arthur to the Tournament and he was sure that it would be the same. Time for more rebuttal.

“No. No way. No. No. There must be another Arthur because this one is an idiot” Merlin forced his voice to evoke denial, and almost laughed out loud at the face of dragon.

“Perhaps is your destiny to change that.” Merlin sighed at the responsibility that the Great Dragon put on his shoulders, and the factual tone in which he said it left no room for doubts. He wanted to pressure Merlin into his role of Emrys.

Kilgharrah flew off and Merlin started shouting after him.

“Wait! Wait! Wait, stop! No, I – I need to know more!” Kilgharrah smiled to himself, the trap was laid and the young warlock had stepped right into it, he just needed to play his cards right. He had only one goal in mind: freedom.

The darkness made path to sunlight, the second day of the Tournament dawning clear. Merlin grumbled in his head all the way to the Tournament grounds, not wanting to leave the Prince’s side but tired of being ignored.

In the morning Arthur and Valiant won their respective rounds. When they finished, Leon approached Merlin and Arthur and acted as a sort of mediator between the two, but when he had to go the tension resumed.

In the afternoon, Merlin thought that he could actually pinpoint at least where his gut feeling was coming for at seeing the brute that the Prince would have to fight. His worries turned out to be in vain, because the blond was quick, contrasting with the slowness of the opponent.
They both watched Sir Ewan’s fight against Knight Valiant, but Arthur left in the middle because he couldn’t stand Merlin watching the man with interest. What he didn’t know was that the interest was caused by the gut feeling, that made the bodyguard memorize Valiant’s fighting style. When Uther announced that the last fight was going to be between Valiant and Arthur, he tried to search for his son, but he found nothing, so he frowned but didn’t comment anything.

Arthur locked himself in his chambers, dismissing everyone except Thomas when he came with his dinner and a message from his father that his final fight would be against Valiant.

Merlin was left in his room, penning letters for the Council and sending them with magic, wondering why the Prince was acting like a prat but soon the letters where forgotten in favour of brooding.

They both had a restless sleep and the next day were in an extremely foul mood. Morris and Thomas threw curious glances at them, but both of them ended up shrugging, not having any idea of what happened between them. They both followed the men into the tent in which Arthur was going to put his armour on and Merlin went to the stands to watch the fight.

The final fight started between the uproar of the crowd. Arthur ducked one of Valiant’s blows and attacked with a slash of his own. They parried and blocked for a long time and the crowd was growing restless.

Merlin grew bored watching the fight and looked at his side, where sir Leon had been watching the fight without observing it. He was in deep thought, but sad ones, and Merlin decided that it was worth a shot starting conversation.

“Sir Leon, are you alright?” The man was startled, but he soon located the interruption. Merlin was looking at him with concern, and the Knight almost blushed at being singled out for not paying attention.

“No, I’m fine” He did his best trying to reassure the younger man that in fact he was in perfect health, but he didn’t manage, because Merlin raised an eyebrow in a Gaius-esque manner. It was so uncanny that the words left his lips without permission “I’m worried about Gwen.”

“Lady Morgana’s handmaiden?” Merlin watched in fascination that at the mere mention of the maiden the poor knight blushed in a shade that the Pendragon red would be jealous of. Sir Leon nodded but stood his ground, as if preparing himself for a fight.

“I’m not going to tell you that nobility shouldn’t mix with servants. I find that a horrible rule. She is a sweet girl and has a good head in his shoulders. She is very pretty, but she has a crush on me.” Merlin saw Leon sag into his seat in defeat, and he just chuckled a little. “I don’t have any intention of courting her, or even be in a relationship with her.”

“You… don’t?” Leon sounded hopeful in a childlike way and Merlin almost laughed out loud but refrained. Merlin smirked and started teasing the knight, but the blushing man soon retaliated.

“And what about Arthur?” Leon wanted to kick himself the second the words left his mouth, seeing Merlin hide into his neutral mask. He decided that he needed to be blunt, he had always been straightforward and he wasn’t going to change now.

“You know he is fond of you, don’t you?” Leon saw the hope mixed with anger at the thought, and he pressed a little more “He has been more relaxed around you than anyone I know. He really apprec-...”
“Then why is he behaving like a prat?” Merlin winced a little at the harshness of his tone, but the
annoyance didn’t go away. Leon finally saw the kind of damage that the Prince was doing to the
cheerful man and sighed again. It was going to take a heartfelt apology to start healing the damage
and the Prince wasn’t good at apologies.

The crowd roared when Sir Valiant and Prince Arthur took their helmets off and Merlin and Leon
jumped in surprise. After a couple of seconds, Leon answered, but not with the ‘why’.

“You should talk to him after the Tournament, he will be more willing to talk then.” With that last
piece of advice, Leon got up and approached the part of the stands that he was supposed to guard.
When Arthur disarmed Valiant, Merlin focused on the hate filled face of the loser.

Arthur won, securing his title as reigning champion. Merlin felt a proud feeling soar through him,
but he squished it with force of will. He never saw Arthur finish the fight and look directly at him
and give him a smile, nor the disappointed face he made when he saw that Merlin was looking at
Valiant.

Merlin walked calmly towards the tent, thinking to escort Arthur to his Chambers for Thomas to
dress him. When the Prince was in his Chambers the gut feeling that Arthur was in danger receded,
but didn’t vanish. Merlin’s mind wasn’t in the task, so he didn’t complain when Morris started
dressing him in the formal armour, but with much more movement that normal ones. He mentally
thanked Tom for a wonderful job while slashing the air with some practice movements with his
new sword.

Merlin smirked at the perfect balance. It wasn’t as good as his sword, Eghan’s craftsmanship was a
difficult thing to replicate, even with magic but it was the closest that he had ever wielded. He
couldn’t use his sword unless he took off the enchantments, so he had hidden it with the letters that
the Council sent to him. He very well couldn’t leave the letters appearing randomly in his desk, it
would be a very big safety issue.

He dismissed Morris and knocked at the Prince’s door. When they were on their way, the gut
feeling intensified the closer they got, so he scanned everyone till his eyes fixed on Knight Valiant,
that was looking at Arthur with a hateful glare, politely hidden behind a smile. Then Uther started
speaking.

“My honourable guests, I give you Prince Arthur, your champion.” There was pride in the face of
the King, but it returned to its neutral stance almost immediately while the court applauded the

“My Lady.” Arthur smiled at Morgana, and she returned the favour.

“My champion.” Morgana seemed distracted, and it didn’t take an expert to know why. The
constant glances towards Gwen gave it away.

Meanwhile Arthur had his own set of problems. He frowned internally, Merlin hadn’t moved his
eyes from Knight Valiant the second he entered the room, even when he was supposed to be turned
around. He was distracted from his thoughts by Morgana’s words.

“I’m worried about Gwen; she hasn’t been herself lately.” Arthur’s eyes widened, Morgana had to
be at the end of the rope if she admitted something like that. “She just closed off…”

Merlin was behind Arthur and he listened to all the conversation while maintaining an eye on
Valiant. It was a simple task, he was used to do that, and the feast hadn’t changed much.
Then his thoughts took another turn. Gwen was worried about something, but he didn’t know her enough to try and talk to her. He decided to wait and see how it evolved. After all, it was going to be easy, her being the Lady Morgana’s handmaiden.

His attention was moved to Knight Valiant, that was looking at Arthur with a dangerous glint in his eyes and with longing at the Lady. Merlin did calculations of how desperate Valiant could be based on his fighting style and he didn’t like it one bit.

When the feast was almost finished, Merlin looked around for Valiant, but ended up locating Leon. They chatted a little about inconsequential things a couple of metres away from the Prince and the Lady, and soon Gwen approached them with the excuse of serving some wine. Leon turned into a (polite) blundering mess and Merlin hid his amusement behind his goblet. This wine was nowhere as strong as the druidic wine, so he couldn’t get drunk even if he tried.

Merlin passed the rest of the feast observing people and cataloguing them into different groups. He instantly marked Valiant as “danger”, Gaius as “healer, honest”, Sir Leon as “loyal, hardworking, noble, brave”, Lady Morgana as “intelligent, cunning, dangerous if angered” and so on. He finished with the people in the room and sighed. He wanted to go confront the Prince and send Eghan’s letter.

And I thought that my feasts were boring, they don’t hold a candle to these ones in the boredom department. Merlin kept scanning the crowd, eyes posing on Knight Valiant every few seconds, without noticing the furtive glances that the Prince was shooting him.

When the Prince finally approached his father to retire himself, Merlin saw Knight Valiant on his peripheral vision leaving the feast, and his gut feeling intensified. Merlin didn’t say a thing in the walk between the feast and the Prince’s chambers, even though he wanted to. He preferred staying alert to locate Valiant. The first sign was Thomas crumbling on the ground with a loud gasp. Merlin didn’t lose time and unsheathed his sword just in time, because a second later and the Knight would have killed the Prince. Merlin used the knowledge of Valiant’s style and defeated him without much fuss. When the knight was a heap on the floor, Merlin checked in Thomas, that had only a gash on the side.

Arthur, for his part, was lost in his thoughts, so he didn’t see Valiant raising his sword behind him. Luckily, Merlin had, and with a loud sound both blades clashed. Arthur jumped and watched knight Valiant get his ass beaten by his bodyguard. When Arthur’s heart returned to normal, Knight Valiant laid dead on the floor, and Merlin crouched above Thomas and signalling Morris to escort his manservant to Gaius.

Then Arthur looked with worry that Merlin clutched his shoulder in pain while maintaining a neutral face. He went behinds him and helped him get up, and took control of the situation. Told the guards to take the body, and a servant to clean the mess. He tried to check Merlin’s shoulder, but the man refused, and only told him that the sooner he was in his room the sooner his shoulder would rest. The rest of the path was made in silence, thoughts swirling in both of their minds but too scared to express them out loud.

When both of them were on their respective rooms Arthur punched the wall in frustration and almost cursed out loud. He couldn’t keep going like this. He almost got killed, by God’s sake! Then he remembered the ruthlessness that Merlin emanated while fighting Valiant and shuddered at the determination in his eyes. His behaviour was horrible and he knew it, but he didn’t want Merlin to end up in the pyre, like so many nannies did until he was old enough to put a mask in front of his father and the Lords.

He made up his mind, he was going to tell Merlin, and if he wanted to hate him he could, but at
least he would be honest with him. He knocked on the door, thanking his father for putting his bodyguard close to him and breathed deeply when a muffled ‘enter’ sounded.

He opened the door and the sight that received him made him hot under the collar. Merlin was on his nightclothes sitting at his desk penning a letter, but left it unfinished when he saw the Prince.

“I thought you didn’t want anything to do with me” The bitter tone left no discussion at what the younger man was feeling. Arthur decided to start on a safe topic.

“How’s your shoulder?” Arthur thanked Leon, who was the one to convince him to talk with Merlin before it was too late.

“Healing” The tone was curt but with an undercurrent of irritation. Arthur could understand that, and knew he didn’t have much time before Merlin ended fed up with him, so he tried to start explaining, but Merlin beat him to it.

“I knew how important the Tournament is to you, but now I can finally ask:” Merlin started ranting, and Arthur had the distinct feeling that he was about to get shouted at. “What is your problem with me?! One moment you treat me normally and the next you’re behaving like a prat!” Arthur was about to open his mouth to debate a point when he decided not to, Merlin’s face was someone who he didn’t want to cross more than he already did.

“I have seen the real you, the one that jokes around and is a better person that the shadow that you portray to the world! So they only question I have is: why? Why did you think you had to fake with me?” Merlin’s voice was barely a whisper at the end and his expression was full of heartbreak. Arthur couldn’t stand seeing that he had hurt him to that degree and had the desire to give him a hug, but instead he approached slowly, trying not to spook him into a defensive position. He knew that if they started exchanging blows no one could stop them, and when they finished Merlin could very well go to the dungeons.

Merlin saw how the Prince approached and moved a chair to be in front of him, but didn’t comment anything. He waited a little more and the Prince hadn’t moved, and he looked up from his papers.

“Can I sit down?” Merlin blinked at the uncharacteristically hesitant tone but nodded. When they were both comfortable he waited, he already said his part. Arthur sighed, he wanted to tell him the truth, he really did, but he didn’t think it was a good moment, so instead of getting out the big guns, he decanted for the second most important reason.

“Merlin, you have to understand that being close to me includes risks” Arthur didn’t know how to put it, so he settled with the whole truth. Merlin saw the hidden anguish of the Prince, and his bitterness mellowed a little, but he was a little annoyed.

“If I start behaving off and being close to someone that isn’t the knights my Father would think I was enchanted and would be suspicious. You could end up in the dungeons, or worse, in the pyre!” Arthur looked up at Merlin, the whole rant made with his head buried in his hands, and only saw understanding in his eyes. “Sorry of behaving like a…”

“Clotpole” Merlin smirked and Arthur spluttered, but he saw the mirth in those blue eyes, and flashed him a real smile. Merlin controlled his blush successfully and they both talked a little more till Morris appeared to help Merlin into his nightclothes. Merlin redirected him to Arthur’s room, and he threw himself at the bed, hiding his head on the pillow. He reluctantly got up and changed into his nightclothes, falling sleep almost instantly.
He never saw the letter meant for Eghan on the table waiting to be sent.
The grace that I give (or when Eghan understands the dynamic of the coin)

Chapter Summary

Set in "The Mark of Nimueh", but starts in Gwen's POV in "Valiant".

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gwen was worried, she knew that her brother was dead but she couldn’t understand why it was happening the same to her. She remembered the fear of discovery when her brother’s eyes would glow gold and something would fix itself or burn down. When it started getting stronger and more noticeable (so much that a then-squire Leon was looking at Elyan with suspicion) her brother was almost ten years old and her mother tried to smuggle him to the druids in the middle of the night. When she was eleven she lost her mother and brother. Her mother’s remains were found, but her brothers were supposedly eaten by a wild animal because they weren’t found.

But that didn’t explain why she was the one having problems controlling her magic now. Normally it would be dormant, she could feel it was there but never spiked or got out of control. And it scared her that for the first time in forever it did.

The first time was when the Lady Morgana was gossiping with her about the new man and the window was opened suddenly with a gust of wind. The second incident was when she was washing the Lady’s dress, a stain didn’t budge and she was getting a little frustrated when suddenly she felt her eyes glow gold and the dress was stain free. She looked around wildly, but she was alone and no one had seen it.

At the feast after the first day of the tournament she was trying to not to be noticed. She was looking at everyone with a terrified look, she couldn’t help it. She caught Leon’s eye and smiled a little at her friend, he was the one that was responsible for his current job after all. She knew him since forever and they were friends (not that anyone needed to know that with the different social classes).

Then, when the King was presenting the Lady to Knight Valiant she noticed Merlin behind the Prince, and she blushed at how handsome he was. A light breeze went through the room, and she was paralyzed. She knew that only a slip would see her in the dungeons waiting for the pyre. The rest of the feast she had frayed nerves thanks to Sir Leon watching her every movement.

Then, the last day of the Tournament dawned sunny, but it was so hot that she prayed for some clouds. She didn’t realize her mistake until it was too late and her eyes glowed gold again. The Lady sighed in relief at the shade and smiled kindly commenting about the clouds.

When the Tournament finished and Knight Valiant tried to kill the Prince while he was walking to his rooms, Lady Morgana looked ready to run to see if the Prince was hurt, but she waited for the news that he was in perfect health. The King was murderous, but when he was told that only a servant was hurt he relaxed a little.

The next day she thought she felt some magic, but she ignored it. What she didn’t know was that Merlin sent all the letters to the Council via the secret room that aisled magic, but he forgot to
close the door completely.

In another part of the castle a couple of minutes earlier, Merlin was looking intently at Eghan’s letter. He made up his mind and opened it, writing all the truth, only leaving out how good friends he was with the Prince. To his Council he had omitted a couple of not important things, but Eghan deserved the whole truth, at least the truth that he admitted to himself.

Days passed with normalcy, and turned into weeks. Gwen tried to relax, but when she tried to repress her magic something far worse happened, drawing the attention of the people. What she didn’t know was that in a cave far away from Camelot, a High Priestess was concocting a plan to harm Camelot.

The High Priestess in question was placing a magic egg containing an afanc into the water. “Berbay odothay arisan yeldo”

When the egg entered the waterways, the woman was watching from her water basin. “Diegol cnytte, gewitte me yst, aliese hine, to Camelot he cymþ”

And the egg hatched.

The next day after the afanc arrived in Camelot, Gwen was about to go to work, but she stopped to give her father a sandwich.

“Dad, here's your sandwich.” Gwen showed the sandwich to his father and he smiled kindly to her.

“Mmm, what's in it?” Tom asked while putting on his cloak.

“It's smoked pigeon. But I'd say there's more smoke than pigeon.” Gwen blushed a little while she gave the food to him. “And I’ve done you some watercress soup tonight.”

“Don't tell me, with more water in it than cress?” The teasing tone made Gwen smile and laugh. She gave him a hug and she picked up some flowers. They said their goodbyes and they parted ways.

On her way to the Lady Morgana’s Chambers she watched Merlin and Gaius wheel something heavy to the Castle and she stopped to chat with them, not knowing about the dead body.

“Hello, what are you doing?” Gaius jumped a little while Merlin only smiled gently to her. She blushed a little, but felt something wrong that came from the thing in the wheelbarrow.

“Gwen!” Merlin smiled again and bowed his head a little, while Gaius smiled to the clearly flustered girl. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you Merlin.” Gwen smiled and played slightly with the purple flowers. “Shouldn’t you be with the Prince?”

“Gaius asked for my help at carrying this, the Prince knows and has given me permission” Merlin smiled at the memory of the obviously unhappy Prince and the mirth in Gaius’ eyes at the Prince’s inner tantrum. Then he focused on the flowers. “Ohhh, someone has an admirer”

Gwen blushed under the teasing tone and he smiled. She giggled again. “No! They’re mine. Would you like one? Purple suits you.”

Merlin nodded and accepted the flower with grace, and put it in the front pocket of his shirt. Gwen smiled and went to Lady Morgana’s Chambers, knocking at the door and entering.
“You look happy.” Morgana said while she walked up to her.

“I picked these for you.” Gwen showed the purple flowers and Morgana beamed.

“Oh, that’s so sweet.” Morgana smiled and Gwen beamed at her in return.

“Something to cheer you up. I know you’re not sleeping well.” Gwen didn’t catch the way Morgana’s eyes shone a little.

“You cheer me up.” They smiled at each other again and time seemed to stop for a moment, but it resumed normally when Gwen said:

“Would you like me to put them in water for you?” The Lady gave a nod and they went to start their day.

In the Physician’s quarters, Gaius sighed and kept looking to the dead body that was facing the table for any causes that could kill with the symptoms displayed in front of him. Merlin watched from a corner, frowning at the feel of dark magic that emanated from the corpse and decided to play clueless.

“Aren’t you scared?” Merlin asked with a curious voice.

“Of what?” Gaius said absentmindedly, still focused on the body.

“That you might catch whatever it is.” Merlin sounded repulsed because he felt another death at the hands of the magic. Now that he knew the magic signature he couldn’t help but to notice everything the magic infected, and now he had killed someone inside the castle.

“I'm the court physician, Merlin. This is part of my job. Most of the time there's nothing really to be scared of.” Gaius answered, still curiously peering with the magnifying glass. “Help me turn it over. “

“You were saying?” Merlin sarcastically asked, seeing the corpse’s white skin and the white eyes.

“People mustn't know of this. They will panic.” Gaius stated and covered the body with a white sheet and went over to his papers. “I haven’t seen anything like this before.”

“Do you think it could be some kind of plague?” Merlin asked, wanting answers to stop whatever this was before the situation spiralled out of control.

“No. I fear that something like this could never come from nature. But who has this kind of power?” Gaius asked gravely to the air, not noticing Merlin’s narrowed eyes. He hated sorcerers bent on revenge, but no one was in Camelot, he would have sensed them creating the cause of the plague.

“You think it's caused by magic?” Merlin asked again, praying to the Triple Goddess that his answer would be no, he didn’t need another witch hunt in his hands. He resolved to ask his Council if they had felt anything, but he was distracted by the Prince calling him.

“Merlin!” Arthur opened the door in a rush, and Merlin thanked Magic for having shielded the body from view. He focused on Arthur’s frown and noticed that the flower was still in his pocket in full view.

“Gwen gave it to me” Merlin answered the unasked question and smiled dazzlingly. Too dazzling, in the Prince’s opinion, that got lost in the bodyguard’s eyes. When he returned to the present he
told Gaius that his father wanted to see him and followed the physician, Merlin on tow.

They arrived at the Council Chambers and the King signalled to the body lying on the floor, one of the Royal Court servant. Merlin pursed his lips when no one was looking, sensing that the illness was the same. Then the King started talking.

“What's happened to him?” The authoritative tone of voice left no tone to question him, not that normally someone would do that.

“I don't know, Sire. It's the second case I've seen today.” Gaius said with a resigned look, and Merlin closed his eyes painfully, so he didn’t see the Prince tensing his frame.

“Why didn't you report it to me?” Uther’s tone was masked as a question, but everyone knew the true feelings.

“I was attempting to find the cause.” The physician kept revising the body and finding the same symptoms.

“What did you conclude?” The King said with more force than necessary.

“I don't think it's time to hurry to conclusions. The scientific process is a long one.” Gaius tried to evade the questions, but Uther knew his long-time friend well.

“What are you concealing from me?” The King’s voice turned dangerously low, and everyone shivered.

“Sire, I have seen nothing like it. The victims are dying in 24 hours, and it's spreading fast.” Gaius tried to evade again, but the King didn’t buy it.

“What is the cause?” The King was a man that didn’t like to repeat himself, so his patience was wearing thin.

“I think you should say that the cause, the most likely cause, is sorcery.” Gaius dropped the bombshell, and everyone present held their breath, but the King’s reaction wasn’t explosive. The Prince closed his eyes at the news, but he returned to his passive mask less than a millisecond later. Merlin cursed Gaius in his mind and resolved to write to the Council the second he had the time.

While Merlin was mentally making a draft for his letter, Uther pulled Arthur aside and talked with him in hushed voices. Merlin saw the Prince’s shoulders tense and nod with determination. Merlin’s stomach plummeted to the ground, knowing that the letter would have to wait.

“We must find who did this.” Uther’s conversation with Arthur started demanding, and Arthur nodded, shoulders tense again.

“I will, Father.” The tone was determinate, he knew that the worse type of sorcerers were the ones that tried to get revenge on him or his father and the kind of damage they would cause.

“Conduct door to door searches. Increase your presence in the town. Double the guards on all the gates. And lend the physician your bodyguard.” Arthur understood every single point, being logical and all that, except the last one, he didn’t want to lose sight of Merlin till the sorcerer was caught. He didn’t want him falling ill. Maiden have Mercy if something happens to him.

“Merlin? But...” He knew it was futile, but he had to try, and from his Father’s face knew that he wouldn’t budge in his stance.
“We need Gaius to find a cure. He needs all the help we can give him. If Gaius is right, believe me, this city will be wiped out. This is the kind of magic that undermines our authority, challenges all we've done. If we cannot control this plague, people will turn to magic for a cure. We have to find this sorcerer, and quickly.” Arthur had some choice words for the all we’ve done part because he knew that he didn’t have anything to do with the eradication of his kind, them disappearing when he was about eight years old. But the thing he agreed was that the sorcerer must be found for the sake of Camelot. There was only one response to that.

“Yes, Father.” He bowed and went to tell Merlin the news, which turned not to be the headache that he feared it would be.

“Okay, I’ll go to change to something more comfortable than my armour and I’ll go to help him” Merlin practically ran out of the room, trying to reach his chamber’s as quickly as possible. He opened the door and fund Morris cleaning the room. He cursed internally, but had an idea. He sent him with a message to Gaius that he was changing clothes and closed the door and locked it with a sigh for getting him out of the way.

He sighed, leaning towards the door for a couple of seconds, organizing his ideas. The first thing he did was to open his secret room and magically changed himself into comfortable clothes, transporting the armour to the floor of his room for Morris to clean. Not wasting an instant, he started penning the letter, ignoring the two that laid on his desk, being for three days before and thus not containing any information about the illness.

He sent the letter just in time, for there was a knock on the door. Merlin exited his secret room quickly and opened the door. In the threshold stood Arthur and two guards, that started searching for something suspicious. Arthur, for his part apologized to Merlin.

“Sorry Merlin, but we need to search everywhere.” He looked worried, and Merlin smiled slightly, stressed as he was it was a difficult feat.

“Hopefully the plague will stop soon…” He left the thought on the air, and a couple of seconds later a guard almost dropped a vase.

“Careful with that or it will come out of your paycheck!” Arthur shouted looking positively murderous, and Merlin smiled slightly at the face of the guard. The Prince calmed down slightly and continued whispering to Merlin “Sorry again. I told them to be careful and to not break anything, but they don’t listen… I better not bring them to Gaius, he will kill them the second they so much as touch the wrong vial”

“Then you better wait for new guards or you will be subjected to the Eyebrow of Doom” Arthur and Merlin chuckled, but sobered up almost immediately and went to their duties.

In Gaius’ Chambers, the physician in question was waiting for Merlin to arrive to go investigating in the Lower Town. Merlin saw a sick person and signalled to Gaius, but the old man just shook his head sadly.

“I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for him.” The resignation in the man’s voice was palpable, so Merlin just kept walking a little slower. “We don't know what a disease is, we can’t cure him. Science will lead us to the source of the disease.”

Merlin dropped his head a little feeling miserable. He could heal all of them, but he knew that unless the cause was found and destroyed the townspeople would still get sick and die. It was not the time to be using magic to cure the people but to find the cause, and he knew how to do it. “And if Gaius lets me breathe” He thought ruefully.
They returned to Gaius’ Chambers and the man put Merlin to help make some medicines, so the man couldn’t go and run to his secret room to see if there was an answer there. He finished his job and watched Gaius heat a vial of liquid.

“What are you doing?” Merlin asked with curiosity.

“I’m examining the contents of that man’s stomach.” Gaius stated in a matter of fact tone, ignoring the raised eyebrow of his ward.

“Will that tell you who did it?” Gaius sighed but answered nonetheless.

“No, but it might tell us how it’s spread.” Merlin nodded, but he wanted the cause. “One thing I do know; this is magic of the darkest kind.”

Merlin almost rolled his eyes, he already knew that, but he wanted to know the spell, the charm, the creature, anything! But he played clueless again.

“Why would someone use magic like that?” The apparent innocence in that question astounded even himself, but kept quiet.

“Magic corrupts. People use it for their own ends.” Merlin hid his sorrowful look. He already knew that Gaius had been a sorcerer, but the way he turned his back to it hurt him deeply. Maybe because he didn’t trust him because of the high position he had in the Royal Household, or simply because he left magic behind.

“But not all magic is bad, is it?” He had asked that to give Gaius something to repellent himself and he took it.

“It's neither good nor bad. It's how you use it.” Merlin smiled at that and nodded, making a point of ignoring Gaius’ slip, which was easy, as Arthur and two guards burst in the laboratory. Merlin was up and pointing them with his sword before he made sense of the situation, but when he realized that it was only the Prince he relaxed.

”Over there.” Arthur signalled one of the guards to the other end of the room. Then he turned to Gaius a little sheepishly, knowing that the physician didn’t like interruptions. “Sorry Gaius, we're searching every room in town.”

“What for?” The sarcasm in the man could be overlooked if one didn’t know him very well. Merlin, who had been with him almost all his free time (read as: when the Prince is in a Council meeting) chocked back a laugh, and Arthur frowned but chose to ignore the tone for he was like a father to him, and gave him a direct answer.

“The sorcerer.” Gaius raised an eyebrow at him and chose not to notice that way the Prince flinched a little.

“But why would he be here?” Gaius almost smiled at the way his Ward was trying not to laugh and complimented him mentally for his efforts.

“I'm just doing my job.” The flat tone only meant one thing, that he found the particular order ridiculous, only the bit about searching Gaius’ Quarters, knowing that he was trying to find a cure.

“We've nothing to hide. Go on, then. Search, but if you excuse me, I'll go and see no one breaks anything” The way in which he said it and the purpose of his steps towards an unsuspecting guard that was moving some vials made Arthur very glad to have heeded Merlin’s advice.
“Thanks” Merlin almost missed it with all the ruckus that the guards were making, but blushed a little and nodded accepting the thanks.

“I see you took my advice to heart and took another two guards. I hope they are more competent than the ones that turned my chamber upside down. Morris is going to have a hard job ahead” Merlin said while drinking some water to hydrate himself.

“Yes, I did. I hate the way in which Gaius makes it look like you are three years old” They chuckled and Merlin blushed again. “I searched three rooms first to make sure they wouldn’t break anything” They gazed at each other and smiled in sync.

They oversaw (and internally laughed) at the poor guards who were being subjected to Gaius’ Eyebrow of Doom, trying to trade with care and delicacy. When the old man sent them a look they both decided to move and make it look like they were doing something.

“What's all these books and papers?” Arthur chose to ruffle some papers, with care not to untidy them, not wanting to end up dead thanks to the physician.

“My life’s work, dedicated to the understanding of science. You are quite welcome to read through them if you wish.” The words of Gaius reached even with him in the other part of the room. Then Arthur’s attention was attracted to a door.

“What’s this room up here?” Arthur asked with curiosity.

“It was supposed to be mine before the King gave me the one opposite to yours.” Merlin decided to answer before Gaius, knowing that the old man had not moved the bed out of the room and it would be suspicious. Arthur reaches the room and opens the door to find a really small room.

“You were going to sleep in here?” Arthur couldn’t fathom that and thanked whatever gods were looking over them that his friend had a proper room for himself. In another dimension, Magic smiled at the young Pendragon’s thanks and smiled again, this time to his child and continued listening to the conversation.

“How long do you think it may be before you find a cure?” Arthur asked to Gaius back in the laboratory.

“It depends on how many interruptions I get.” Gaius’ tone was biting, which meant that he was displeased, and Merlin did his utmost effort not to laugh out loud behind him.

“Of course, I’m sorry.” Arthur said and he smiled to Merlin. Then, in a more authoritative voice told the guards “We're finished here.”

Merlin smiled at the obviously relieved sigh that the guards made, his control about to snap. Thankfully Gaius changed the subject.

“How long till the cure?” Merlin was curious about the time. If he couldn’t help the victims he was sure that he would fake a remedy, but it was too risky.

“Patience is a virtue, Merlin.” Gaius said, returning to his job.

“Sit by and doing nothing, that’s a virtue?” Merlin understood, but he had to maintain a front of an impulsive boy in front of Gaius.

“It's no good just saving one person. We have to discover how this illness is spreading.” Gaius armed himself with patience to deal with his ward.
“Arthur is out there right now looking for the sorcerer! I could be helping him!” Merlin made some fuss, but not so much that the physician would lose concentration.

“A sorcerer who's powerful enough to do this will never be found searching the town.” Gaius stated flatly, resigned to the fact that they won’t find the cause.

“So what can we do?” Merlin asked gloomily, trying to behave like a sixteen-year-old boy.

“Hope that science can find the answer before it kills us all.” Gaius answered in a defeated tone.

“Well, aren’t you a ray of sunshine. Alator is more optimistic than you, and that’s saying something.” Merlin sighed again and returned to work. He was going to sleep in the room that Gaius prepared for him and it had a very uncomfortable bed, so he prayed to Magic that this would be over soon.

Meanwhile, a woman was watching the afanc in a stone basin. She watched how a woman drew water from the spout in the Lower Town, and then the image changed to covered bodies lines up in the courtyard. The image changed again, and it showed the Council Chambers, where the Prince just entered the room, where the King was waiting.

“We searched everywhere, the entire city.” The frustration was palpable in the Prince’s voice.

“Nothing?” The disappointment mixed with anger was plain as day, and Arthur tensed, knowing it would be a hard conversation.

“I don’t know where else to look” Arthur was tired; he knew that if he couldn’t sense a powerful sorcerer then he knew how to hide very well. The only thing he wanted to do was go and see if Merlin had discovered something, but the plan was thwarted by Morris, telling him that Merlin was going to sleep in the room next to the physician’s chambers.

“I want you to impose a curfew. No one is to be allowed onto the streets after the great bell” Uther ordered “And cordon off the Lower Town.”


“Because that’s where most of the victims are. Let's isolate it, stop this disease from spreading.” Uther tried to get out of the room, but a question from his son stopped him in his tracks.

“What about the people who live there?” Uther sighed at his son’s stubbornness, but answered nonetheless.

"Don't you think I haven't considered it? What else can I do? I have to protect the rest of the city.” Uther left with purpose, his son bowing after him and standing in the middle of the room, frowning at the decisions that his father had taken.

Arthur rubbed the bridge of his nose. He knew that the plague was magical in nature, but he was concerned. If his father heard someone pointing a finger at an innocent person, he would be forced to arrest him and watch him burn at the pyre.

He thanked heavens that Leon was on patrol duty in the Northern Plains and wouldn’t return in two weeks, he was sure that he didn’t want to see his Knight’s face when someone burned ever again, knowing quite well that he saw the Prince instead of the prisoner. He sighed hoping against all hope that something would be done to finish this madness.

The next day dawned cloudy like an omen and Merlin woke up with a binding headache but he
didn’t think it was important, so he went to help Gaius, stumbling into the room and almost tripping over a stool. Gaius frowned at the clumsiness of his ward, normally much less pronounced, almost impossible to spot if you didn’t spend hours upon hours watching him.

Morris arrived with Merlin’s breakfast who picked at it without any appetite. The physician looked worriedly at the man again, it was not like him not eating anything, but he put the issue in the back of his mind when he started working on the new body that arrived this morning.

“What’s different about this victim?” Gaius asked, trying to catch Merlin’s attention. The man in question approached the table and frowned.

“Eh… she’s a woman?” Merlin answered while rubbing his temples and Gaius threw discretion to the wind and asked the question that was eating him.

“Are you sure you are all right?” Merlin nodded his head a little but stopped just in time with a wince.

“Yeah, I’m fine” Merlin knew that his tone was not convincing, but he had an epiphany (at least in his pained state looked like it) “She’s a courtier, and they seldom go to the Lower Town, so the disease is not spread by contact or food.”

“Very good Merlin, anything else that can help us?” Gaius asked the question so Merlin could feel useful, at least when with such a headache.

“They only share the water” The paling of his face while saying those words were ignored by Gaius, too preoccupied in finding a bucket to go to the well.

“You stay here Merlin, you look horrible. Better take a nap and maybe your headache will recede.” Gaius said over his shoulder trying to sound reassuring and failing spectacularly.

When the old man left, Merlin collapsed on the nearest chair and coughed until his throat was sore. He could feel the magic trying to make him sick and in normal conditions he would have healed himself, but he had blocked his magic, that was at 1% right now, the necessary to keep him alive and to deal with emergencies, nothing more. Wonderful.

In Gwen’s house, the morning routine was stopped short too. Gwen was tying her cloak while calling for her father, worried because he normally woke up early.

“It’s time to get up, Dad!” Gwen approached him. “Dad?”

She turned him around while he muttered a weak “Gwen”. She panicked, for her father had the illness and ran to the castle crying. She passed Gaius without seeing him, who was returning from the well. He tried to call for her but she didn’t listen, too wrapped up in the depressing thoughts.

Gaius walked at a brisk pace, but broke into a run when he heard the woman scream in a shrill voice when she reached his quarters. When he entered the room he almost fell over. Merlin was looking pale as a corpse, collapsed on a chair, and all the signals that were there since this morning made sense.

Gaius enlisted Gwen’s help to move Merlin to the room he had prepared for him and he felt like all his energy had been drained at seeing his ward in the brink of death.

“Gaius, is there any way…” When they were outside, the handmaiden collapsed and started sobbing again.
“No Gwen, I have no cure. The remedy is beyond what I can achieve.” Gaius shook his head sadly while glancing towards the room in which Merlin was to stay in his final hours.

“My father is also sick…” Gwen cried a bit more, but she thanked Gaius nonetheless and left the laboratory. Gaius sat down heavily in a chair and put his head in his hands. A hand on his shoulder made him jump, and when he looked at the person he was left speechless.

“Merlin! You should rest!” Gaius was a mix between physician and concerned parent, and Merlin had enough sense to know that it was better not to antagonize him.

“Who was here?” He asked while he sat on a chair, curious at the answer.

“Gwen. Her father has the sickness.” Gaius said gravely. “But I have to make some experiments so you’re staying here.” Merlin nodded and started the charade of reading a book while he decided the merits of a new idea.

In another part of the castle, Lady Morgana was having a usual morning, but the illusion of normalcy was to be shattered by her handmaiden entering with her breakfast visibly upset. She was worried, still not having forgotten the skittishness that Gwen had shown the last few weeks.

“Gwen, are you all right?” Morgana was frowning a little, trying to guess what was wrong with her closest friend.

“My father has the sickness.” Gwen could feel her voice trembling, and the Lady hugged her firmly. Then she gave the other news. “There’s more, Milady… Merlin has caught the sickness too.”

Gwen had to stabilize Morgana, who had to grab her handmaiden’s arm to prevent falling. The Lady had stricken a close friendship with the bodyguard and she was quite taken with his personality and with the fact that he hadn’t tried to woo her. They both stayed in silence when Lady Morgana ate her breakfast, mulling their thoughts.

Suddenly, the Lady stood up and called another servant to clean breakfast and she signalled Gwen to follow her. They went through some corridors, Morgana walking in a brisk pace, almost running. She hadn’t forgotten the conversation he had with Arthur about Merlin, and odds were that the Prince was ignorant about the current situation.

She stormed into the Prince’s Chambers and checked that he was decent. Then she started speaking before the Prince could retain his bearings. Gwen closed the door behind her and she waited for the eventual explosion, now understanding her Lady’s plan.

“Arthur, normally I wouldn’t barge in like this, but I have news that could upset you very much and it’s better if you hear it before you have to go to do your rounds, you still have an hour.” Arthur looked ready to shout at her but something in Morgana’s face made him rethink the whole ordeal.

“Out with it Morgana” Arthur’s tone was severe, but with an undercurrent of anxiousness. “Now.”

“Merlin has the sickness” Morgana closed her eyes, having seen the realization on Arthur’s face and his horror and heartbreak. She expected a lot of things thrown to the walls, but what she didn’t expect was the blur she saw exiting the room going in the direction of the Physician’s Chambers.

The ladies found themselves alone in the Prince’s Chambers, and glanced at each other with doubt and sadness in their eyes. Merlin had fit in Camelot so flawlessly and effortlessly that life without him seemed to be unthinkable. The fact that made Arthur a better person wasn’t slept on.
In Arthur’s head only was denial. It was impossible that his friend would have the sickness, it couldn’t be true… it just couldn’t. He begged to the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone to not be real, but when he barged into the physician’s chambers (startling Gaius, mind you) the physician’s face told him everything.

“Gaius…” he had to stop to catch his breath, for he hadn’t stopped running, his mind too concentrated on the fact that Merlin was ill for making sense of anything else. “Tell me it isn’t true…”

“I can’t” The sadness and impotence in which Gaius spoke made it impossible to refute what he didn’t want to hear. The physician put a couple of flowers in the water and he sighed.

“At least you know what is causing it?” Arthur couldn’t help to latch onto every little possibility. He couldn’t heal him with magic, it would be too suspicious, so maybe if they found the cause they would find the cure.

“I suspect, but nothing is certain, sire.” Arthur nodded and approached Merlin’s room but he turned at the last moment.

“There must be something we can do!” He didn’t mean to shout, but the amount of pain that came for imagining a life without Merlin was immense. His mind played the idea of healing him, but that would see an innocent in the pyre, and he couldn’t do that to anyone.

“My best. Let’s hope that this can provide some answers.” Gaius answered on autopilot, trying new brews nonstop.

“But that’ll be too late for Merlin.” The pain that exuded the Prince was nothing he had ever felt, and he wondered why was this even happening.

“I fear you may be right.” The resignation that accompanied those words shook the Prince more that he wished to admit, so he decided not to keep interrupting Gaius’ job. He went to Merlin’s current room and knocked. A weak “enter” later he was sitting on a chair while holding Merlin’s hand. Merlin looked terrible, his face pale like he was already one step in his tomb and the thought of that made Arthur’s stomach churn.

“Hey” Arthur tried to keep the conversation light, but failed spectacularly. “How are you feeling?”

“Hey” Merlin smiled in a tired way and Arthur, who had only seen him with an energetic smile, felt like he had been punched in the gut. “I’m feeling tired and I have a killer headache, but apart from that not much.”

“Well, I hope we find the cure soon. Gaius is working as hard as he can.” Arthur tried to be supportive but failed again, so he steered to safe topics for the remainder of the hour before a knight came to find him to start the searches again. He went out of the room, not noticing the shadow in the ceiling that was and had overheard everything and knew what he had to do, but before he could put his plan into action Morris appeared with some light soup from the kitchens and he passed next to the shadow without noticing anything.

When the manservant left the room to return to the kitchen, the shadow ensured again that the physician was working, too busy to pay attention to him and slipped into the room undetected.

Merlin had almost fallen asleep, the pain and the full stomach making the decision for him. Suddenly, he felt someone touching his forehead gently. He jumped and tried to grab his sword, but a familiar voice stopped him in his tracks.
“You told me you didn’t need a bodyguard. You liar.” At the jesting tone Merlin relaxed in his bed while he opened his eyes to see Eghan. He went to grab his hand automatically and the man smiled wistfully. “What happened?”

“I drank the water.” Eghan worriedly bit his lip, he had never seen Merlin sound like this, so defeated. The hope in his Lord’s voice in the next words made his grip a little more forceful. “I didn’t expect you to come here.”

“Well, we felt the magic and have found the cause, but you didn’t answer the letters, so the Council sent me to tell you the news. And I felt that you were sick.” Eghan tried to keep his voice neutral and succeeded for a little while, caressing his tattoo. “Don’t forget we’re connected.”

“I’m glad to have you here, Eghan” Merlin smiled gently and Eghan’s heart sped up, but Merlin had a sudden coughing fit that made the bodyguard even more worried. “What’s the cause?”

“There’s an afanc in the water supply.” Eghan decided to be truthful, not wanting Merlin to worry, but not wanting him to be uninformed either. “The High Priestess Nimueh has created it from water and earth so th-”

“The only way to defeat it is with fire and air” Realization dawned on Merlin, who tried to get up but Eghan stopped him in his tracks.

“You can’t, you’re sick and you need to rest until you get better” Eghan squeezed his hand in support. “The Council is going to be alert if Nimueh’s magical signature is sensed, but we don’t know if we’re going to be successful. I’ll take care of the Afanc.”

“No, I’ll manage to kill the creature.” Merlin held up his hand and Eghan stopped his protest to listen to him. “I need your help for something else, something more important.”

They planned all morning, stopping when Gaius came to check on his ward, Eghan hiding behind the boxes. When they finished the planning they started talking about what was happening in Sanctuary and how was everyone. All the afternoon was spent between laughs and smiles, just enjoying the other’s presence. When Gaius fell asleep they started the plan.

Eghan channelled the healing spell to Merlin, and with his magic exponentially strengthening the spell the sick man was immediately restored to full health. Then they both went out of the castle and went in different directions.

Eghan put an invisibility spell over himself, but was too busy thinking about Merlin and the Prince’s dynamic to pay attention to not being caught by guards, but thankfully he was walking on the rooftops and stopped on a side of the Lower Town. On the other hand, Merlin went to Tom and Gwen’s house, making sure that the spell was directed mainly at Tom.

“I’m ready” Eghan’s voice reached him and they both connected their magic. They said the spell at the same time, making sure that it didn’t wake up Gaius, the only one with first-hand knowledge of magic.

“þu fornimst adl fram guman”

It was instantaneous, a wave of benevolent magic washed over Camelot, stopping the innocent from dying, but Merlin knew that not everyone could survive, so he directed the magic away from a little more than a half of the sick, making sure that there wasn’t any children or pregnant women there.

The wave of magic woke Gwen up, that saw how her father made a full recovery, and thanked...
whoever risked being caught for healing innocent people. At the same time, Lady Morgana woke up feeling refreshed, not knowing that Eghan felt her distress and sent a calming wave of magic to her.

In the Royal Chambers, Arthur woke up and went for his sword, but then relaxed at the magic’s familiarity and goodness. He knew without a doubt that tomorrow some people would be healed, and he prayed that Merlin would be one of those lucky ones. He wanted to run to his friend’s room, but it was impossible without a good explanation.

The next day Nimueh watched with unhidden glee that Aredian, the Witchfinder, had succumbed to the sickness, and was covered and laid out in the Town Square. Her attention was caught by a grieving family covering a blonde female. Nimueh smiled at the grief of the family. They were crying and muttering the girl’s name.

“Eira, what an unfortunate name” Nimueh pitied the girl’s name. She would have never forgiven her parents if they would have given a horrible name like that. Well, now it wouldn’t be a problem for the dead girl.

In the Council Chambers, no one could ignore the Prince’s tense shoulders except the King, because he was leaning next to the throne and couldn’t see him. Gaius entered and Arthur’s eyes were drawn to him, but the physician went directly to the King and showed him a glass vial with the flower.

Arthur walked towards the physician and reached towards the vial, but Gaius took a step backwards, shaking his head.

“Don't touch it. I had this in the water for no more than a few hours.” Gaius approached the King to allow him a better view of the flowers.

“Where’s the water from?” Uther asked seriously.

“The pump from where the people take their daily supply”. The silence was deafening, the King was thinking, but Arthur opened his mouth.

“We may stop the people from using it.” Arthur started spinning ideas to do exactly that, but was stopped by Gaius.

“The city cannot survive without water” The physician cut the Prince’s planning short and only served to anger his Father.

“We have to find this sorcerer!” The shout made Arthur flinch unconsciously, thanking the Mother that no one noticed it. Well, that wasn’t so true, because hidden in the rafters, Eghan was doing one part of his job, watching over the Prince. He felt nostalgic being in Camelot, after all, he lived here before Sanctuary. He wanted to see his sister or maybe his friend that would be a knight now, but his common sense and sense of duty made him stay where his Lord had ordered him. There would be more occasions.

He thanked Merlin for making him follow the Prince, because he was going to have the opportunity to see the man’s true colours. For now, the Prince had his respect for not wanting to condemn a sorcerer. He saw the Prince breathe deeply and find the courage to speak.

“I don’t believe that they’re inside Camelot” The Prince held his breath and hoped against hope that his Father would focus the Knights strength on finding the cure, but no such luck.

“The extend the search to the villages!” He had never heard his father sound so manic before
except in the search of sorcery, and that scared him. He knew he could end up in the pyre if he made a minimum mistake. He had to stop the madness, but he had to do it in a way that his father wouldn’t suspect.

“We’ve started, but I can’t search the entire kingdom.” Arthur tried to convince his father to see reason, but he wasn’t very successful.

“And I can’t stand by and watch our people dying.” Arthur nodded, bowed and exited the Council Chambers, stopping in front of Gaius, who only smiled with joy.

Gwen was woken up by her father, that was healed completely. The subsequent crying was unavoidable, and Tom did his best to console his daughter that he wasn’t going to abandon her anytime soon. They separated and Gwen had to go to work, and she barged with the Lady Morgana’s breakfast. She couldn’t refrain herself and she hugged Lady Morgana as hard as she could.

“Gwen… are you alright?” Morgana’s words were tinted with worry for his friend, but her handmaiden’s tears were not of sadness, but happiness.

“My father… he is alive and fine!” Morgana’s heart soared hearing the happiness in her friend’s voice and couldn’t contain a little squeal. “And some people of the Lower Town got healed overnight!”

They both heard a commotion coming from the corridor and they went to investigate. They were surprised at seeing the Prince run at a fast pace for the second time in less than two days. They glanced at each other and there was only one conclusion possible, for good or bad: Merlin.

Arthur’s heart was beating a mile per minute while he ran all the way towards the Physician’s room, not stopping for anyone, including Lady Morgana, who was startled to see him running like he was being chased by a horde of bandits. The path felt like it lasted forever, but when he stood in front of the door he discovered that he couldn’t move.

That served Eghan wonderfully, for even he had trouble catching up with the Prince, and he had years of experience up his belt in the running business. He finally got at the same level and smiled in a bittersweet way. He could feel the love pouring from him in waves, and when his Lord talked about him he knew he felt the same. After all, once upon a time, he was looked in a similar way too.

Arthur was still paralyzed when Eghan got lost in his thoughts, but the two possible outcomes terrified him and made him hesitate. When he got the courage to open the door, he saw something he didn’t think he would ever see again and his pulse raced even more.

Merlin was pouring over some books like his life depended on it. He was obviously healed, he no longer had the deathly pale face, and his eyes were back to their sparkling blue that he was so enamoured with. When he realized that the Prince was in the room he quickly got up, but Arthur grabbed him and made sure he was comfortable in the chair.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better” Arthur smiled and was sure that his feelings would be all over a place if not for his training. “Please, don’t drink any more water while we find what’s causing the disease.”

Merlin had the nerve to laugh and smile brightly in a way that, in Arthur’s opinion, made him adorable. He was sure that if Merlin got wind of his thoughts he would be screwed, but he was fairly certain of the privacy of his own mind. They chatter for a little and Arthur ordered him to
rest for the rest of the day at least. He mentioned he had to open an investigation to see how many people were sick and now were healed, but he had to go. Then Merlin had to go and drop the bombshell.

“I think I know what creature is causing the disease.” Merlin’s serious face left no room for doubt. “I’ll call for you if I have a confirmation and a way to defeat it.

“Be careful, I almost lost you once. I really wouldn’t like it to happen twice”. Merlin smiled at him and his stomach started making backflips. He took that as the cue to go and reminded his bodyguard not to move.

Merlin reviewed the books and left those that mentioned afancs on the table, along with some books about elements. He was fairly sure that Gaius was going to drag him to the water supply and the afanc was going to appear, so he didn’t want to start the tedious task of looking through all the books, so he made a head-start. And if Gaius didn’t find the answer, well, it would be a good day to visit the Great Dragon for answers.

In the Lower Town, in front of the Blacksmith’s shop, Arthur approached Tom, who was working on a sword. People were watching the healed villagers in a hawk-like manner, and Arthur shuddered internally, reminded of wolves. He decided that he would start asking question and then reassuring that the illness wasn’t always fatal later.

“The story is you were sick.” Arthur started talking, knowing that Tom was a good man and wouldn’t lie to him.

“Not anymore, and not only me, many people were sick and they recovered just like me.” Tom stopped working and bowed to the Prince and answered his questions.

“Perhaps they were suffering from some other ailment?” Arthur asked, knowing full well that they were not, but he had to ask for the sake of the audience.

“Oh, you're joking. I felt like death itself, not enough strength in me to stir the air.” Tom told them seriously. “And besides, all the people who were feeling sick and healed were diagnosed by Gaius.”

“Then... what happened?” Arthur knew that it was the wave of magic, but he had to play clueless.

“Oh, I don't know. Suddenly it was gone. I'm fitter than I was before. Everyone would tell you the same story.” He signalled at some other people that were also sick and were healed now, who nodded.

“That's remarkable. Was anybody with you when all this happened?” Arthur was getting tired of all the questions and hoped that no one was so desperate to leave some magical trinket out in the open.

“Just my daughter, Gwen. Every sick person was with his family, so I don’t think much about it.” Arthur nodded and told that he wants a list of the healed, because he needed to search all the houses.

While the Prince was preoccupied with not encountering any magical objects (and if it was the case turning a blind eye if possible), Gaius had (as Merlin had predicted he would) dragged him to the water cavern, opening the door with the key. Gaius didn’t know that Nimueh was looking at them from the stone basin, but Merlin had known the whole time, this time he was prepared to use magic if the situation spiralled out of control.

“The water from here supplies the whole town. Take a sample.” Gaius signalled for Merlin to
crouch down and put the bottle in the water.

“Let's take it back and examine it.” Gaius was starting to get out of the room when the afanc reared out of the water, startling the old physician and exasperating Merlin, who had located the creature’s magical signature the second he entered, being only a little different to the High Priestess.

“What the hell was that?” Merlin shouted and Gaius shushed him, grabbing the boy’s arm to leave. Nimueh watched smiling as the Physician, the traitor to his kind, was afraid for his ward.

When Gaius and the warlock arrived at the first’s Chamber, Gaius started looking through the books that Merlin left on the table, signalling Merlin to help him. Merlin congratulated himself for foretelling this situation and putting the book that Gaius was looking for in front of the pile.

He ruffled through some books, trying to seem interested, but Gaius had picked up the book about afancs sooner that Merlin expected, so he waited a little bit, surreptitiously moving the books about elements to the front.

“Here. It was an Afanc.” Merlin smiled at hearing that, he finally had an excuse to visit the Great Dragon if Gaius didn’t know the answer.

“An... a what?” Merlin hated that he had to appear ignorant, but a couple more months reading Gaius’ library he could have an excuse of being so knowledgeable.

“A beast born of clay, and conjured up only by the most powerful sorcerer. Now we have to find a way to defeat it. But where?” Gaius looked hopelessly to the bookshelves that were filled to the brim of books.

“That could take days. The plague would have killed hundreds.” Merlin looked dismayed at that.

“Have you got a better idea?” Gaius asked a little irritated.

“Actually yes, give me less than an hour and I will learn the answer” Merlin didn’t give Gaius the time to protest, for he was out of the room in a second, running at the opportunity of learning more of the Great Dragon.

And what was the Great Dragon doing during all of this? Well, at first he was hoping that Uther would get sick, but the news that the young warlock was sick raised every warning bell in his head. He tried to contact the druids, some sorcerers, someone that could heal him. His prayers were answered when he felt the wave of magic engulf all of Camelot.

“Oh, hello?” The hesitant voice of the young warlock made the Great Dragon smile, noting that he was in perfect health, but was cautious and desperate for his help. Wonderful.

“Oh, hello.” He flew down, watching the young boy for signs of the illness and found none. “The great warlock returns, as I knew he would.”

“I need to know how to defeat an Afanc.” Merlin schooled his features in a mask of distress, and the Great Dragon puffed his chest.

“Yes, I suppose you do.” Merlin wanted to rub the bridge of his nose but refrained, trying to portray a scared sixteen-year-old, not an exasperated man who had been forced to grow up too soon.

“Will you help me?” The winged lizard smirked at the hope in the boy’s voice.
“Trust the elements that are at your command.” The Great Dragon proved to be useless in the fight against the Afanc with his cryptic answers.

“Elements? But what is it I have to do?” Merlin was about to give up and give the bird to the Dragon, leaving him chained there till he found the Last Dragonlord, who was very good at covering his tracks, evading even his best tracker, but continued the pointless conversation.

“You cannot do this alone. You are but one side of a coin. Arthur is the other.” Merlin almost pulled his hair in exasperation, he already knew what he had to do, but he needed to know the Dragon’s agenda and what meant for him before he decided anything. In the meantime, he had to appear clueless and ignorant about the magical world.

“I, I don't understand. Just tell me what it is I have to do.” Merlin tried one last time for clarification that didn’t come, for the Dragon flew off. Merlin was tired of the unhelpfulness and decided to give the Great Dragon a little headache.

“No! Please, help me!” Merlin started begging to the abyss, and didn’t stop for three quarters of hour. At the half an hour cue, the Dragon shouted an exasperated “I have” in return in hopes of shutting Merlin up. Merlin smirked at that and when he decided that it was enough, deep down in the cave the Great Dragon was cursing his luck at having Emrys as a pedantic child that didn’t know how to understand a dismissal. He concentrated on hearing what was happening on the Council Chambers, where the Prince had just entered to talk with the King.

“Have you found anything?” The King’s frown was in full force, and Arthur sighed internally, while his shadow snorted quietly, for Merlin was sending him his conversation with the Dragon and his petty revenge.

“I've tried. I can keep looking. Merlin and Gaius are following a veracious lead.” Eghan muffled his laughter at the ‘veracious lead’ thinking of a certain dragon, but at the same time smiling at the trust that the Golden Prince was showing to his Lord.

“It’s the only lead we have, so I expect you to help them” The order was final, so Arthur bowed and left the room, trying to dodge Morgana, who was outside waiting for him.

“Have you found something?” The worry for the citizens was hard to suppress, but Arthur knew her since she was little and sighed.

“Where’s your handmaiden?” He tried to divert the topic and was successful for a limited time, and didn’t say Gwen’s name because there were some old Lords overhearing them.

"I gave her the day off, his father is the only family she has left.” Arthur nodded agreeing with her and tried to continue towards his destination, but the Lady was stubborn.

“Where are you going?” Arthur surpassed her easily, but the Lady quickened her pace to walk alongside the blond prince.

“Wait, I want to help you!” Arthur wanted to shrug her off, but he rationalized that if more people were looking for an answer they would spend less time among dusty old books and more time focusing on killing or subduing the creature in question. Leon was the one who read about the creatures, not him!

They both reached the open door that lead to the Physician’s room and stopped, Morgana’s eyes were shining, but for once Arthur didn’t tease her, because he was too busy staring at Merlin pouring over books like his life depended on it. He looked handsome without his armour, the
The Lady smirked when she noticed the way the Prince watched Merlin’s every move, and the expression screamed that he was whipped. Oh, she was going to enjoy rubbing it in his face when all of this finished.

“What can we do to help?” Arthur smiled at the way Gaius jumped for being startled, but he didn’t smile because of that. The Maiden knew that he considered Gaius his father. No, he smiled because Merlin’s laugh resonated through the room. It was a mesmerizing sound, and Morgana had to cough for him to stop staring at the way Merlin’s face lighted up.

“Well, my Prince, the creature is an afanc, a creature made of clay”, Gaius stated while he tried to search something in the books.

“How did you discovered that? Impressive.” Morgana seemed impressed, and Merlin gave one of his smiles, that had Arthur grit his teeth and swallow the jealousy, because he was also impressive.

“Well, Gaius and I had a little run in with the creature when we were in the water caver trying to take a sample of water. The creature jumped through the water.” Merlin said nonchalantly, trying to shuffle some papers that were already revised to the other table that already had a decent pile of books on it.

“Wait, I’ll carry them, you were sick yesterday and I don’t want you to make big efforts” Arthur grabbed the papers and put them in the other table, ignoring Merlin’s protests that he was perfectly fine and Morgana’s knowing smirk with a practiced ease.

“This… afanc, how we defeat him?” Morgana asked with determination in her voice. She sat on a chair and started thumbing a thick book.

“We are searching for the solution, Milady.” Gaius answered while reading a thick book.

An idea sparked on the Prince’s mind, an afternoon with Leon in the secret chamber in the library. The knight was telling him of an afanc, that could only be defeated by the opposite elements it was created from.

“Gaius, what’s the afanc conjured from?” The Prince took heed in having a book about elements at hand, and curiously he didn’t have to go far, he had one in front of him.

“The afanc was created from water and earth, sire. That's two of the four base elements.” Merlin moved his head so fast that the Prince feared he would end up with neck pain, but it was worth it at seeing the way he launched himself to grab a book and started turning pages as quick as he could, and with a cry of victory signalled something.

“Then we have to defeat it with wind and fire! Amazing!” Merlin couldn’t even fathom that they would spend so little time hitting the books thanks to the Prince. Arthur, for his part, tried not to blush at the adoring look that Merlin was throwing him.

“Morgana, go and tell my father. Gaius, go and try a cure preparing for the worst.” Arthur used his commanding voice. “Merlin and I will go and defeat the afanc.”

Arthur belted the keys to the water supply tunnels and signalled Merlin to follow him. He curses at the lack of choices of partner. Not having Leon here with him was a disadvantage, if he would have been here Arthur just would conjure wind and fire and problem solved, but with Merlin present it had to be the normal way.
Arthur and Merlin (and an invisible Eghan) walked into the Square, where Arthur drew his sword and nodded to Merlin to open the door, but his bodyguard only looked at him with an incredulous impression and a little amusement. Arthur ransacked his head trying to remember why his bodyguard was laughing at him, and he sighed. If he were Leon this would have never happened, he forgot to light the torch. It really wasn’t his fault, he was remembering the wind spell that he had refreshed for this occasion.

“I really hope this is not a faulty one.” Merlin laughed, and Arthur winced a little at Leon’s lie, good as it may it opened a can of worms that he wasn’t ready to deal with. Not now nor ever.

When they entered the tunnel, a shadow behind them made both men turn around brandishing their swords. Merlin thanked The Maiden, The Mother and the Crone that he had gone to his room and put on his armour and grabbed his magical sword, putting a glamour on it. Desperate times, desperate measures.

Eghan laughed silently, sending Merlin the image of the Lady Morgana following them, and Merlin could only shake his head. Of course she would not obey Arthur and tell his Father.

“When goes there?” Arthur said in authoritative voice, to sigh when the Lady came out of the shadows. “You are not coming, Morgana.”

“I’m coming with you!” Morgana’s voice was the calm before the storm and everyone knew the signs. “Scared I’ll show you up?”

“Father would slam us both in chains if he knew I’d endangered you!” Merlin frowned at Uther’s treatment of his son and ward, making a mental note to have an eye on Morgana at all times, knowing how well the Lady could hold a grudge.

“Well good thing he doesn’t know about it then.” Morgana raised his chin in the air and surpassed both men.

“I’m telling you, Morgana, turn back. You could get hurt” Arthur’s expression was hard, but Morgana didn’t budge.

“You could too… if you don’t get out of my way.” Merlin choked back a laugh at that and Arthur rolled his eyes at the air, expecting the answer from the Lady.

“Now that this issue is resolved; how are going to find it?” Morgana brandished her own torch and the men nodded in approval at her choice in weapon.

“I just hope we do before it finds us.” Merlin’s sombre mood contaminated the others, even though he would be the only one knowing where it was, not counting that he knew that Eghan was a backup.

“Well, aren’t you a ray of sunshine.” Arthur couldn’t contain himself and the quip left his mouth before his brain could make sense of it.

Merlin sensed the afanc behind them but, as they had reached the water source, Arthur ordered to spread out.

”Eghan, go with Arthur, he is the closest to the afanc.” Merlin approached Morgana, knowing that she was the second nearest. Ergo he was the farthest, typical.

The Afanc charged at Arthur growling, and he very well could have dies if not for his reflexes (an Eghan’s). It disappeared, and Morgana rushed to see if he was alright, checking him over for
injuries.

“Did you see it?” Merlin had a knot in his stomach and cursed not being capable of using magic in front of the royals.

“Yes, I did. It’s quick, very quick.” Arthur tried to control his breathing, succeeding, and he returned to the search.

A couple of minutes passed with frayed nerves for everyone, and then Eghan sensed movement in front of the Lady and prepared himself to jump to protect her. She screamed at seeing the creature, which lunged at her, swiping away her torch. The Prince came to the rescue, losing his sword in the process and battling it with the flames.

“Where is it?” Arthur wasn’t proud to say that he shouted while looking frantically around, but he knew that he needed something else to defeat it, but with Merlin and Morgana it was impossible.

“I think he went through there.” Merlin signalled at a dark corner and Arthur cursed his luck ten times over but walking towards it nonetheless.

The afanc lunged again, but this time they were ready. Merlin turned away from where the High Priestess was looking, effectively turning his back to her.

“Arthur, use the torch!” Merlin shouted at the Prince, who swung the torch at the creature, without hearing Merlin’s muttered spell.

"Lyfte ic þe in balwen ac forhienan.” The spell made Arthur’s hair stand on end, but smiled at the flames blown into the afanc, incinerating it.

In Nimueh’s Cave, the woman in question splashed the water in anger, swearing revenge on the new player that had foiled his plan finding the cure.

In the Council Chambers, Uther was talking with his advisors over some parchment when Gaius appeared, quieting the room, for everyone wanted to know what the royal physician would say.

“Good news, Sire. There are no new deaths, and those that are sick are recovering.” Gaius smiled at the good news, and the King’s mood seemed lighter than in years.

“Good. Strange, I’ve never heard of an Afanc before.” Uther frowned a little, trying not to let his mood be fouled.

“It's conjured from clay by powerful magic. The type that can only be invoked by an ancient sorcerer. One that has the power to mirror the spirit of life. I found this at the water source.” Gaius explained with care, knowing that the next news would be badly received. He showed him a cracked eggshell, that the King didn’t recognize nor gave it importance right away.

“It bears the mark of Nimueh. We must be vigilant, Sire.” Gaius looked physically pained at having to deliver the news.

“Will I never be rid of her?” The King had a pained expression that mutated in a sombre one. “Leave me!”

In the Prince’s Chambers, Merlin and Arthur were having dinner and talking about nothing in particular, just having a good time with one another. They joked and laughed trying to forget the near death experience.
“This fish didn’t come from the water, did it?” Merlin asked cautiously, moving it around his plate with his fork.

“Well, where else is it going to come from? The water’s fine now thanks to us.” Arthur laughed a little, but sobered at the thought that Merlin wouldn’t have been here if not for the mysterious sorcerer that healed half of the sick villagers. He learned that Aredian had died, and felt a vindictiveness that he didn’t know he possessed.

“You killed the afanc, it’s your victory.” Merlin smiled at the Prince proudly and Arthur had to drink some wine to hide a blush.

“If you hadn’t discovered that it was an afanc and the way to kill it we would have never saved Camelot.” Arthur was looking at Merlin in such an earnest way that the man almost choked on a bite of food.

“But you were the one who killed it.” Merlin pointed out, making emphasis by pointing him with a fork.

“Well then, a toast!” Arthur smiled brightly, and Merlin’s stomach filled with butterflies. “To us!”

“To us!” Merlin smiled, repeating the toast and drinking some more wine. He was smiling and consciously ignoring that Nimueh was watching over them and probably was swearing revenge.

When he returned to his room, he sent Morris with a letter meant for his mother, explaining again his adventure, glossing over his sickness. When he was sure that no one would be interrupting he started to undress himself to change into his nightclothes.

He only took off his cloak, smiling to himself for more reasons than having dined with the Prince. He didn’t even bother to turn around, having known the shadow was in the corner of the ceiling for the start.

“I know you’re there, Eghan.” Merlin smiled at the sigh that sounded through the room, along with the dull thud that his bodyguard made dropping to the ground in a crouch.

“My Lord.” The bodyguard fell to his knees smirking at the uncomfortable feeling that Merlin always emanated when he did that. He raised when he was told to, and approached his lover, hugging him properly since what felt a lifetime ago.

Merlin relaxed a little, not daring to do that since he arrived knowing that Eghan would protect him from whatever happened. He buried his head in Eghan’s neck, enjoying the familiarity of the action.

“I missed you so much…” Merlin’s voice was different, more vulnerable that he had ever let himself be in Camelot, the stress of his position finally getting to him. “It’s been so stressful here… I can’t have a moment to myself, and if I have I never let myself relax for fear my magic might start acting up…”

Eghan frowned, noting the tense shoulders of his lover, so he turned him around and started massaging him, easing the tension. Merlin watched Eghan’s every movement through hooded eyes and gave an appreciative groan that went straight to the heat that was pooling in Eghan’s insides at being so close to his lover in over a month.

“Why don’t you let me take care of you?” Eghan purred, changing the massage for delicate caresses shoulders, going lower with each one. “Relax for me, my love. You’re safe with me, no one can hurt you with me in here…”
Merlin smiled, and finally let himself in the other’s hands, not forgetting to put a silencing ward to muffle whatever sounds they would make. They kissed gently, slowly, enjoying every moment of it, knowing that tomorrow Eghan would have to leave before dawn. Eghan pushed Merlin towards the bed, and they fell on it. They tangled themselves in the sheets, kissing every part of skin that they could reach.

Eghan smiled sadly knowing that it would be the last time that he would be with Merlin like this, that he would wake up with him at his side and swore that he would make the most of it. He had seen the way Arthur and Merlin looked at each other and didn’t want to be in their way, but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t make the most of what he had now.

Chapter End Notes

If you liked the chapter don't forget to give kudos and comments.
Don't die while I'm away (or when two knights managed to outsmart the High Priestess in her own game)

Chapter Summary

Set in "The Poisoned Chalice"

It was a normal day in Sanctuary, everyone was doing their duties. In Lord Emrys’ tent, Eghan was fighting against the bane of many good men: paperwork. He was playing with the necklace that Merlin gave him the last time they saw each other, meant for his mother but he hadn’t had time to give it to her. She knew him because, when Alator was training Lord Emrys with a sword, he was there as Alator’s ward, a complete lie, but necessary if someone were to find that they knew each other. Suddenly, a druid boy, no more than ten, rushed into the tent without knocking. Eghan smiled at the breathless boy and signalled him to sit down in a chair. The boy nodded in thanks, but started speaking between breaths.

“Lord Eghan, the Seer Lorelei has Seen something important, and Clan Leader Iseldir has sensed a great power surge. They’re in the Clearing.” The boy collapsed in a chair and tried to regain his breath.

The Clearing was where the Council had its meetings, because the non-humans couldn’t enter the houses in the villages and preferred to be outside. Normally it was a space where children played, adults relaxed and elderly walked leisurely, but during meetings it was impossible to enter. Eghan rushed to the Clearing, almost forgetting his black cape in his rush.

He had to dodge some children, jump over a fence and made two of his old teachers fall in the river by ‘mistake’, he didn’t do it on purpose, of course not. He caught Aliana’s eye, in her grey Council Member cloak and smirked at her. The capes were only for the humans and human shaped creatures. Creatures that were uncomfortable were not obligated to wear them. Everyone wore a grey cloak, except Emrys that wore white and himself that wore black.

They were sitting in their respective places (or in the griffins’ and centaur’s cases laying down or standing up respectively), and Lorelei, the youngest member of the Council and niece of Aliana, started speaking.

“I Saw a Knight of Camelot talking with Alator with his sword sheathed. Alator had his staff in a non-threatening position.” Eghan’s eyebrow raised on its own. The sole meaning in the vision was overwhelming, but Lorelei continued. “They were next to a collapsed cave in the Forest of Balor, and Alator had something in his hand, but I didn’t identify it.”

“Very well, thank you Lorelei.” Eghan nodded to the Lady, being in charge of the mediator position in Merlin’s absence. He directed his attention to Alator, who was staring at nothing in particular, thinking about the implications. Iseldir started speaking without turn, knowing that even though the Seer had preference by an unsaid rule, his news were also very important.

“I have dire news, my fellow members.” He stood up, drawing every single person’s attention to himself, knowing that when Iseldir was like this no good news were going to be received. “I have felt a surge in magic and after analysing it, I have come to the conclusion that the High Priestess
Nimueh is the source. We must find what is she planning and discover if it has any correlation with Lady Lorelei’s visions. We must warn our Lord.”

“I will.” Eghan reflected on the sombre mood of the Council, knowing that the news were worrying, the High Priestess was known for her ruthlessness against Uther. He had heard tales of when magic was still allowed, everyone had, but she had turned bitter after Uther caused her to flee and killed most of their kind. She wanted revenge, that’s why Sanctuary didn’t accept her, even though they could travel to the Isle of the Blessed from here and had entrance to the shore of the Lake of Avalon (it was reserved for Emrys, though).

Eghan rubbed his face, not even a whole month since the plague and Nimueh attacked Camelot again, and just in the week that Lord Bayard of Mercia was going to be in the Castle singing the peace treaty. And he still had to give Hunith the necklace. Merlin should give him a pay raise.

An hour earlier, Nimueh chanted a spell and dropped a flower petal into the water in a stone basin while watching Merlin on it. She retrieved the petal, that became transparent, and put it in a silver goblet. Nimueh glared at the distorted image of the man and whispered his name with a hate filled vengeance that didn’t augur nothing good for Merlin, ignoring the wave of magic.

Merlin didn’t know about Nimueh’s quest to get him, but he felt a shiver run through magic that had an evil intent, and he stopped in his tracks just when he was reaching the door to start his duties. He tried to sense the cause, but he couldn’t locate it, so there was only one conclusion: A High Priestess.

He resolved to be alert and tell his Council later, but he received a message via telepathy from Iseldir.

“Lord Emrys, the High Priestess Nimueh is travelling to Camelot in Lord Bayard’s entourage. Also, the Seer Lorelei has Seen that Alator will speak civilly with a knight of Camelot.”

Merlin was disbelieving at first, but when he was sent the vision, he was surprised (but not very) that it was Sir Leon. Merlin smiled, and told Alator of his interactions with the Knight. He refused the aid of extra people, not wanting to put his people in danger. Being in the heart of Camelot himself was dangerous enough.

Then, Eghan contacted him and hugged him mentally. Merlin felt himself melt in it but returned to reality at his bodyguard’s words. His mother had received the necklace with joy at hearing from Eghan, for he hadn’t visited in more than a year, and she was saddened to hear that he had started travelling alone, and offered a home in Ealdor if he ever needed one.

Merlin smiled at his mother’s thoughtfulness and calmed down knowing that the gut feeling had nothing to do with her. He felt warm all over thinking that if life had been different, he would be living with Eghan in Ealdor, not living in a place where magic users were persecuted and prosecuted. The only upside was that he found friends in Leon, Morgana, Gwen and Arthur, and another father figure in Gaius.

Arthur, for his part, had also felt the evil intent, and he almost hit Thomas in the head from his involuntary jump. He had a gut feeling that the negotiations with Lord Bayard were going to be interrupted by an evil sorcerer again and most probably he would be the intended target. He needed to tell Leon, they needed to be alert for they couldn’t afford one mistake. They needed the treaty.

When the Prince was dressed, he went to meet Lord Bayard in the Throne Room, and arrived at the door at the same time as his bodyguard, who had the most case of just-out-of-bed hair that he had ever seen. He looked cute like that, and he thought in passing what would it be to wake up next to
him and kiss him. No, not happening. It would only put him in an even more dangerous position, even without taking my magic into account, people could target him to reach me, and my Father wouldn’t save him, or no-one, for that matter except Morgana.”

Be as it may, it wasn’t proper to welcome a Lord to Camelot with that hair, no matter the cuteness levels, or heavens forbid, to grab the attention of other Lords. He smiled at Merlin in greeting and tried to tame his hair into a more formal mess, and Merlin just laughed at him. Arthur got lost in the sound, and his thoughts started flying to when he would become King and then they could…

He was distracted by Sir Leon’s cough and the pointed look that he threw to the doors. He nodded to his knight and cleared his throat before entering, Merlin and Leon on each side. They went to their places just in time, for Bayard and his men entered a second later. Arthur did his best to ignore his Father’s glare at his tardiness and instead focused on the gut feeling that was warning him that there was danger close. He ignored his father, who had started welcoming the entourage.

“Camelot welcomes you, Lord Bayard of Mercia. The treaty we sign today marks an end to war and a beginning to a new friendship between our people.” The King of Camelot grasped arms with Lord Bayard and both parties applauded. Arthur noticed a maid staring unashamed at Merlin and he cursed, no one was allowed to look at him that way!

Nimueh was looking intently at Merlin and had put a short-lasting spell that would make Merlin ignore her till she was in the corridors, but she didn’t see the glare that Gwen was giving her, too occupied analysing him to notice her jealous stare.

Leon was looking at the scene unfolding with amusement, Arthur throwing glares at the handmaiden, Gwen doing the same for looking at Merlin, the handmaiden not noticing and Merlin being oblivious watching Arthur. Well, I’m no better than them. He watched Gwen with care and shook his head at the way things were unfolding. When Lord Bayard went to rest he escorted the Prince to his rooms, for Merlin had to help Gaius, and left to patrol.

Meanwhile, Merlin had managed to have five minutes for himself and had written some letters, most of them for his Council, but for his mother he had to be more detailed than that.

Dear Mother:

I miss you more and more every day, but my job demands me to be next to the Prince all the time he is not in his Chambers, so I don’t have much free time, only when he is signing documents all morning once a week, and even then I have been roped into helping Gaius, so my free time is nonexistent.

I am glad you had news on Eghan, I was getting worried about him. Did you tell him where to direct his letters now? I’m sure the necklace he has gifted you is beautiful, as all his gifts are. Please, if you see him again tell him that I agree completely, Ealdor is always open for him. Did the other villagers give him a hard time? I know he isn’t very well liked between the older generations and the younger ones ignore him.

Here things are quiet since the plague, and I fear that writing this would cause something to happen, but we have an envoy from Mercia here, and they want peace as we do, but there still are people who would gladly sabotage this to see both kingdoms go at war.

I’m not writing this to worry you, but to warn you that I may not be able to write, for I have to be even more vigilant than normal so I may not have time to write this week.

Love, your son
Merlin finished and called Morris to send the letter. Merlin smiled at the white lie he had weaved in there. It was true that the Prince spent one full morning in his Chambers signing things and Merlin had the morning free, but normally he spent that time managing all the Council matters that required his immediate attention, but there weren’t a lot of them thanks to the fact that when he was little he couldn’t be in Sanctuary all the time, he only went there twice or thrice a month more or less so as not arouse suspicion in Ealdor, so he spent that time resting.

He stopped daydreaming and he all but ran all the way to Gaius’ Chambers, having forgotten that he had told the elderly physician that he would help him before the feast. That was also true, he had become Gaius’ errand boy.

When he reached the physician’s rooms he startled Gaius when he barged in, and Merlin rubbed the back of his head bashfully. Gaius rolled his eyes upwards in exasperation but sent him to Sir Owen’s room with a month worth of medicine. Merlin gulped at the heavy box’s appearance but squared his shoulders and lifted it with effort.

The walk between Gaius’ Chambers and Sir Owen’s room was the longest he could ever remember being, even longer than the first one when he just arrived in Camelot and got lost for two hours. Merlin was relieved when he saw Gwen walking in the direction he was going, so he called her to wait. She did so blushing a little, and seeing his predicament made small talk with him.

“Is Gaius relegating all the donkey work to you?” Gwen was amused at his plight, and Merlin swore that she was never this forward with him, only a stuttering mess. Well, progress was progress no matter what.

“Yeah, my arms will be a foot longer by the time I get this to Sir Owen as he is going to travel to his state for the birth of his grandchild, a pity he is blind…” Merlin laughed at the first part, but he didn’t mention that he had enchanted the potions for the old man’s eyesight to get better so he could see the new-born.

Nimueh was searching for Merlin, and when he found him she waited for the perfect moment to strike conversation, but he didn’t look like he was going to stop conversing with the serving girl anytime soon. She decided that she was going to take an extreme measure, knowing that her time was limited.

She purposefully collided with the serving girl and dropped her pillows. The serving girl didn’t drop anything, probably used to it by now, but the sorceress saw that Merlin had stabilized her, not caring about his own box.

“Sorry” Nimueh picked up her pillow and hugged it against her chest in a nervous way that Gwen mistook it as nervousness for romantic interest towards Merlin.

“It’s alright.” Merlin looked startled at the clipped tone in which Gwen said the words, but thanked heavens that she didn’t like Nimueh. Less chance to be dragged into her schemes. He had recognized her magic the second she had tripped, but he couldn’t do anything in a corridor full of people.

“Excuse me, I’m very clumsy.” Merlin rolled his eyes at the obvious lie but played along not wanting to alert Nimueh and plastered a fake smile. “Don’t worry, it happens to the best of us.” Gwen was glaring daggers at the girl, who wasn’t noticing a thing, for her whole focus was in Merlin.
“I’m Cara. You’re Prince Arthur’s bodyguard.” Nimueh smiled sweetly at the man. She was sure she was going to enchant him with the appearance of her glamour, but a little ego boost was always good. “That must be such an honour, you must be really skilled with a sword.”

“Oh, yeah. It is. The honour part, I mean.” Merlin chuckled awkwardly, trying to appear flustered and, by the questioning and jealous looks he was receiving via Gwen, he was succeeding. “Someone’s got to keep the Prince safe.”

“I need to get back to work, see you around, Merlin.” The High Priestess smirked at the servant girl, and resolved asking around for her name. She needed it for her new plan to come into fruition.

“I never told you my name, how do you know it?” Merlin almost laughed at the face of the High Priestess, for it was priceless. You really can’t blame him; she gave him the opportunity in a silver platter.

“I heard it from another servant.” Nimueh sighed in relief when he dropped the matter, but she had one more goal for this conversation. Nimueh put her hear behind her ear several times in fake nervousness. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name earlier.”

“Yeah, you were probably busy undressing Merlin with your eyes.” Gwen thought with vindictiveness, but answered without letting anyone know her feelings of this situation. “My name is Gwen, nice meeting you too.”

You’re going to be my little pawn. I didn’t count Merlin sitting on the table alongside the nobles, so I will get to him through you. Instead of her thoughts, she smiled in a sweet way. “It was my pleasure. Excuse me, but I really must get going.”

Gwen watched how that girl went on her way, and she saw the focused stare that Merlin was giving her. The nasty green dragon of jealousy roared even more, and without meaning to she made Cara trip down the stairs.

Merlin, for his part, was distracted telling his Council the news of Nimueh, and he missed the way Gwen’s eyes flashed gold. However, he did not miss the High Priestess being defeated by stairs. He sent the images to the Council, and he swore that the normally composed Alator had left the council because of a laughing fit.

Merlin returned to reality with a question from Gwen, that had a self-satisfied smirk on her face. “Shouldn’t you be busy shadowing the Prince?” The tone was light, but he noted the undercurrent of pride.

“Yeah, I should, but I think he can survive five minutes without me, I still need to get this to Sir Owen” He signalled the box that he was carrying earlier, but at the middle of the conversation he had put it on the ground.

Gwen went on her way, and Merlin saw Sir Leon and signalled him over while thanking the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone that Nimueh had tripped down the stairs, that would slow her down.

“Leon, can you go with the Prince? I need to deliver this to Sir Owen.” Leon nodded without saying anything, but paying attention to the marks under Merlin’s eyes and the way his shoulders hunched.

Merlin went down the stairs and told the nearest serving boy to give the box to Sir Owen, then he put an invisibility spell on himself and ran all the way to where he could sense Nimueh’s magic.
When he finally saw her it was in front of Lord Bayard’s guest chambers, so he was cautious as to not be noticed and he observed as she looked both sides of the corridor to reassure herself and muttered a spell.

*Alysan dura ronne.* Merlin sensed powerful magic at work, but it was twisted. He looked sadly at the woman, only alive for avenging her people. He knew because he had contacted her when Sanctuary was built, but she refused, calling him a traitor to his kin for wanting peace.

She had threatened innocent people in her quests, and Merlin couldn’t ignore that, and now he wanted to kill Uther and/or Prince Arthur, and that was something that Merlin couldn’t let continue. Uther couldn’t die by the hands of magic, for then Arthur would be swept in the vicious circle in which Uther was already in.

Nimueh entered the room, followed by the warlock, and opened a box that was in the place of honour. The box contained two silver goblets, and Merlin watched while she exchanged the smallest, meant for the Prince, for one that was hidden in her pillow. Merlin reeled backwards, sensing the magical poison inside.

He barely acknowledged that the High Priestess was leaving, too preoccupied trying to identify the mixture. He thanked the Mother for his prevision of putting a silencing charm on himself, and let himself curse all he wanted. The poison was from the Mortaeus flower and it would kill a slow death in four days. To make matters worse the efficacy of the poison skyrocketed when using magic, and the antidote needed to be prepared using magic, so two days at most.

He started thinking options, he couldn’t just make the goblet disappear, the treaty would be up in an instant if Bayard accused someone of the royal household of stealing it. He couldn’t make a copy, that was Eghan’s specialty, for metals moulded at his whim. He was left with option C, one that he didn’t think it was a good one, mainly because the poison didn’t disappear. He started chanting and neutralized most of the poison, but a drop was still lethal, and Nimueh had put a lot.

He kept his mind in the task at hand, trying not to think if Arthur or Gwen would be the ones poisoned, and started siphoning magic towards the goblet. At least he would be told when the Prince would be drinking, and the lethality went down to a more manageable level if the person had magic.

When he finished he cursed, for he knew he needed help. He didn’t bother to write a letter, this was urgent, and directly told them the news. He ordered Alator and his people to pick up a couple flowers, but he didn’t tell his plan of drinking the poison if things went out of control. He also ordered Aliana and Alice to brew the antidote, preparing for the worst.

In another part of the castle, two men were doing the same. Arthur had a bad feeling since Bayard’s entourage had arrived, sensing something/someone powerful that wasn’t bothering to hide his power. He had tried to follow the magic, but something was off, he had a bad gut feeling about this whole thing. He needed more time to analyse the magic.

He didn’t waste time calling Leon, for he appeared instead off Merlin, and they both made contingency plans. They didn’t know the threat, so they only could be together and pray that the enemy wasn’t too powerful. They ended up changing topic when Thomas entered, and Leon took advantage of the situation by telling the Prince about Merlin’s tired state.

“How bad was it?” The Prince pursed his lips, but refrained making a comment.

“As if he hadn’t slept in two days. He had shadows under his eyes, and was carrying something big and heavy.” Leon recalled easily, for he was worried for his friend’s health.
There was a knock on the door, and Thomas went and opened it, letting Merlin enter. Arthur automatically smiled at him and ignored with practiced ease the sigh that Leon did, but then he focused on his appearance, he really looked in need of more sleep and decided to intervene.

“Where were you before? I mean, before receiving Lord Bayard.” Arthur wanted to know, for usually they had breakfast together, and Thomas had woken him up and told him that Merlin was already awake and had breakfast. He waited for an answer, but Merlin was almost asleep by that point, so he called for him. “Merlin.”

“Helping Gaius, he needed me to collect some herbs, and now I had to deliver some medicine to Sir Owen.” Merlin sat down, and after a second of consideration he relaxed and closed his eyes for a second. Now Arthur could see where his Knight was coming from, he looked horrible.

“Why are you still helping him?” Arthur couldn’t keep the worry out of his voice, for Merlin was looking more tired by the day.

“Because he is old and he can’t do a lot of things alone.” Merlin answered in a neutral tone without opening his eyes. “And he asked me to help him.”

“Then why doesn’t he take an apprentice, or ask the king for a servant? He would not be denied the request.” Leon asked this time, curiosity entering his voice, normally neutral, for he was warming up to Merlin pretty quickly in the month that he knew him.

“Because I was supposed to be that apprentice, so now apart from my job I have extras from Gaius.” He seemed really tired and resigned. Arthur crossed looks with Leon. They had never seen him like that.

“If you ever need help, more time to rest, eat or something just ask me, I will let you, you can come to me for that kind of things.” Arthur was worried, what if Merlin wasn’t telling him this because he thought that he would be denied? “You can send Morris to help Gaius when you are with me.”

“Thank you, Arthur.” Merlin opened his eyes, and Arthur saw the sincerity in them, accompanied with a small tired smile. “I really appreciate it.”

Arthur couldn’t do more than smile, and Merlin focused on the pendant that the Prince was wearing. It was a prism, red as blood. It was around his neck by a simple but sturdy string, but for some reason it attracted Merlin’s attention. He was about to analyse it but Thomas set down something down.

On closer inspection, they were Arthur’s clothes for the feast, and Merlin would have reeled backwards if he had the energy.

“When's the last time these were cleaned?” He said weakly, still tired.

“Last year some time. Before the Feast of Beltane.” Arthur eyed Merlin worriedly while Thomas helped Arthur to put the jacket.

“Did it end in a food fight?” Merlin joked, trying to appear awake but no one bought it.

“Don't all feasts?” Arthur smiled besotted at him, even tired he still was handsome, while Leon smiled at both of them.

“I wouldn't know. The airs and graces of the court are a mystery to me.” Merlin smiled at Arthur, and the Leon rolled his eyes at the obvious lie, for Merlin behaved as a Lord.
“Not after tonight they won’t be.” Arthur smiled, pointedly not thinking at the disaster that was the Tournament feast with Knight Valiant.

“I’m going to be at the banquet?” Merlin only sighed at more things to do.

“Merlin, you don’t h-” Leon started.

“If I have to sit through Bayard’s boring speeches, I don't see why you should get out of it. You’re going to sit next to Gaius, so you’re not going to have much excitement.” Arthur said smiling but he was still worried. “And hopefully the gut feeling is not about you.”

Merlin groaned, he needed sleep, but he had to watch Arthur for the gut feeling, and he almost thanked him for force him to go, but then he thought about his Council speeches and the times he also fell asleep.

“Be sure to polish the buttons.” Arthur told Thomas, and then his attention went back to Merlin. “Do you want to see what you'll be wearing tonight?”

“Won't this do?” Merlin felt a sense of apprehension at that, and he answered. “If you make me wear the heavy armour I’ll fight a duel with you and I will not hold back.”

“I could take you apart with one blow.” Arthur was amused, finally Merlin was showing a little bit of fire, even if he looked too tired to properly stand. The snarky response didn’t make itself wait.

“I could take you apart with less than that.” Leon chocked on his drink at the innuendo (although the idiots didn’t realize it. They were hopeless), and Thomas made a hasty exit, trying to prevent being in the path of the imminent explosion.

“Maybe later.” Arthur smiled at Merlin. “But in the meantime go and sleep. It’s an order. Tonight you'll be wearing the official clothing of the bodyguards of Camelot, including the official armour.”

Merlin groaned and only had one thing to say.

“I’d never had a friend that could be such an ass.” He smiled and went stumbling to his room, not bothering to take off his clothes. Morris was there cleaning the room, but he stopped to take off Merlin’s boots and exited the room to clean them. He could clean the room after his master had slept. He smiled, for he had heard of the Prince’s order and he agreed completely. Merlin didn’t get enough sleep busy as he was running after him and Gaius.

In the Prince’s Chambers, Arthur was petrified, trying to come to terms of what Merlin had told him. Leon watched from the corner of his eye, trying to gauge any reaction, but the Prince just stood there.

After a couple of minutes, Leon approached with caution, and the Prince’s face broke into a smile. Leon stopped in his tracks, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

“Sire?” Arthur kept smiling through Leon’s hesitant call. “Are you o-”

“He considers me a friend.” Arthur was in a daze, he never had any friends other than Leon, and now he had one that he didn’t care he was a prince and could insult him without batting an eye. “Leon, he considers me a friend!”

Leon only watched in exasperation how Arthur fell a little bit more for Merlin, and prayed that they would have a happy ending.
In the evening the Hall of Ceremonies was decorated for the occasion. The Feast was about to start and Prince Arthur searched for his bodyguard. He found him entering through a servant’s passageway, and that made him angry, and at first he couldn’t pinpoint the cause, but when Merlin stopped behind him, next to Leon, he finally understood. He was not mad at him for being late, he was angry because he had to use the servant passage. He should have never had to use it; he should be next to him.

Apart from that, Merlin seemed more awake and the circles under his eyes were less pronounced, so Arthur smiled, that was a good thing. He smiled at Merlin, but his attention was forced to the front as King Bayard signed the treaty, but that didn’t impede to glance backwards to smile at him again.

Leon chuckled softly at Merlin’s obvious discomfort, Merlin smiled at his friend while listening the procedures with only one ear.

“Nice armour.” Leon broke the boredom with small talk for the first time, finally considering himself close enough to do that.

“Thanks. I don’t know how you knights wear this all the time, even though it builds muscle.” Merlin smiled and signalled at the obvious muscles that the Knights had in contrast with his slim figure. “And of course it’s nice, Gwen’s father, Tom, made it.”

“Merlin, please do me a favour.” Leon put his neutral mask, and Merlin just smirked mischievously knowing the cause. “Don’t mention Gwen in formal functions.”

“Why? You were looking at her since the feast started.” Merlin teased Leon, who did his utmost effort to not blush. Merlin smiled at the knight, who returned the smile. Morris and Thomas looked at the scene and whispered to each other, sharing amused glances.

“I did not!” Leon shout-whispered quietly, thanking the gods that Arthur had approached Lord Bayard. Merlin smiled knowingly, but caught Nimueh’s eye and almost incinerated her on the spot. Thankfully, Leon only saw the fury in his eyes.

“What did that handmaiden do to you?” Leon frowned worriedly, for he had never seen that particular emotion in the man’s face. He also made a mental note to not lose sight of the woman, for Merlin’s gut feelings were normally on point, that was confirmed with the next words.

“Not what she did, it’s what she will do.” The certainty in the bodyguard’s tone made Leon’s hair stand on end.

“I won’t let her out of my sight.” Leon clasped Merlin’s shoulder in a farewell, for King Uther had finished signing the treaty and was grasping Lord Bayard’s arm. While the crowd applauded, Merlin moved himself to the seat next to Gaius.

Unnoticed by everyone, Thomas and Morris had heard the conversation, and nodded furtively. Morris was going to follow Cara and find what she had planned, for neither servant had forgotten what happened last time that Merlin had one of his gut feelings. Thomas had a scar at his side and it could have been much worse if Merlin hadn’t intervened. Bayard started speaking, and Morris took advantage of that and moved towards Merlin.

“People of Camelot, for a great many years we have been mortal enemies, and the blood of our men stains the ground from the walls of Camelot to the gates of Mercia. And though we remember those who have died, we must not allow any more to join them.” Lord Bayard signalled at a serving girl, who brought a box with the goblets.
“As a symbol of our goodwill, and of our newfound friendship, I present these ceremonial goblets to you, Uther, and to your son, Arthur, in the hope that our friendship may last.” Nimueh smirked, careful of not being seen by Merlin, and prepared herself for her act. She approached Gwen, failing at what she had taken for granted, that no one notices servants until they are staring in the face.

Leon frowned as Cara approached Gwen nervously, and his stomach rose to his throat. Merlin didn’t even try to be subtle, knowing that it wouldn’t matter in the long run. Arthur frowned, Merlin wasn’t normally this focused on someone, and the last time that had happened… Arthur’s blood went cold. Valiant. Something was very wrong. Morris and Thomas exchanged glances when they noticed the Prince’s tightening hand on the goblet. Then they weren’t the only ones that had noticed that something was wrong…

“Gwen.” Nimueh noticed Merlin’s stare on the back of her neck, but ignored him. “Gwen, I need to speak to you.”

“What is it?” Gwen deliberately spoke coldly to Cara, and the High Priestess winced internally, she was going to be a tough one to convince. Bayard kept droning in the background and she cursed, at this pace she wasn’t going to reach Merlin in time, although not for Bayard’s speech length, that was for sure. Then Gwen decided to extract her revenge, so she smiled sweetly. “Are you sure you should be here? I heard you fell down the stairs.”

“Not here, please. I don’t know who else to tell.” Gwen bit her lip, she was indecisive and she didn’t like the feeling one bit. She accepted and followed the girl out of the banquet hall, not noticing the eyes of Leon, Gaius and Merlin on her.

Merlin swallowed and got up without drawing attention to himself, but not before nodding to Leon, mouthing “I can get away with it.” Well, he could, he was the Prince’s bodyguard and he could move whenever and wherever he liked if he felt the Prince was in danger. As predicted, no one batted an eye except Arthur, who almost broke his goblet with the force he was doing.

Merlin ran, hoping that Gwen wouldn’t end up hurt because of him. He didn’t think that Nimueh would lose the chance of seeing the demise of the Pendragons, but Gwen was in more immediate danger, not even taking into consideration Bayard never-ending speeches that would buy him fifteen minutes more. Thomas and Morris exchanged alarmed glances but they couldn’t move, they were called to serve wine to the other side of the room.

“Tonight we toast a new beginning for our peoples. We look towards a future free from the toils of war.” Bayard kept speaking, and Arthur couldn’t help but marvel at the irony, a new beginning it may be, but it rested in Merlin’s hands.

Nimueh all but dragged Gwen to a side corridor and acted nervous, she needed her to tell everything to Merlin if her plan were to come to fruition. The only obstacle in place was the girl in front of him, so she put all her acting skills into use.

“It wasn't until I saw him give the goblet to Arthur that I realised…” Nimueh twisted her hands, walking in circles, trying to convey anxiousness.

“Whoa, slow down. Start from the beginning.” Gwen raised her eyebrow sceptically. Nimueh realised that she was going to have to try harder.

“Today I was bringing Bayard his evening meal. We're supposed to knock. He didn't expect me to walk in, even more so because I fell down the stairs…” Gwen’s interest was piqued, for she hadn’t forgotten what Cara had said, Arthur’s goblet had something to do with this and she didn’t like it.
“So what are you trying to say?” Gwen cut Nimueh, something in her gut told her that it was going to be bad.

“If he knows I said anything, he will kill me.” Gwen nodded, still sceptic. Neither girl noticed that Merlin had arrived and was hidden in an alcove with an invisibility spell.

“Then why you risk telling me?” Gwen raised her eyebrow in what she hoped was a copy of Gaius’.

“Bayard is no friend of Camelot. He craves the kingdom for himself, and also Lady Morgana.” Merlin sighed, what a way to distract Gwen, saying that Bayard wanted to bed the Lady. She was cunning, he had to give her that.

“Cara...Tell me. What has Bayard done with the goblet?” The anxiousness was pouring off Gwen in waves, and Nimueh turned around and smiled smugly right in Merlin’s face. The man wanted nothing else than to gut the High Priestess, but she couldn’t be killed with a normal blade, so he cursed for not carrying the sword that Eghan made for him.

“He believes that if he kills Arthur, Uther’s spirit will be broken and Camelot will fall.” Merlin smirked, for Camelot would be protected for everyone who wished it harm, he would make sure of it.

“What has he done with the goblet?” Always practical, Gwen went with the most urgent matter.

“I saw Bayard putting something in it.” Gwen looked ready to run back to the feast and interrupt the speech and the toast, but Nimueh’s words stopped her. “You should tell Merlin; he is the bodyguard.”

“Why shou-” Gwen was interrupted by the very man they were talking about, who had abandoned the invisibility spell and chose to barrel into the corridor, no signs of stopping, almost making Nimueh fall.

“Bayard put something in the Prince’s goblet?”

Nimueh nodded, still faking to be scared, not being successful because Merlin was searching something in her face for a second, but then he ran back in to the Hall of Ceremonies, Gwen hot on his heels. Nimueh stood alone and her eyes glowed gold creepily in the dimly lit corridor when she transported herself to a door that lead to the feast. Normally she would walk, but she was still hurt from her tumbling down the stairs.

Nimueh entered while Bayard was still giving his speech. She rolled her eyes, having counted on that for her plan, but she wanted the drama now, not three hours from thank you very much.

“And may the differences from our past remain there. To your health, Uther.” Everyone stood to toast, but Arthur watched the crowd intently, trying to gauge their reactions, but he didn’t see anyone looking at him. He frowned, but then he saw a handmaiden enter through a servant door and smirk at him. The very same handmaiden that had dragged Gwen away and Merlin had followed.

Arthur made a split second decision and expanded his magic a little, making sure his magical signature was hidden, and tried to sense her. He had his results, almost immediately and bit the inside of his cheek instead of doing anything rash. It was the same person who had conjured the afanc. Who had tried to destroy Camelot.
“Arthur.” Lord Bayard kept droning, ignoring the internal fight of the Golden Prince, who pretended to drink. Arthur kept a calm façade, but he was trying to identify where the trap was hidden. It could be poison and she was trying to frame Bayard, but his amulet didn’t heat up, so it was not the wine. Then he had an epiphany. The Goblet.

He swallowed and decided to scan for poison, and then to try and identify it. Sadly, he couldn’t and the only thing he could say was that it was lethal and magical. He concluded that the person who tried to attack Camelot wanted to kill him and his father by starting a war with Mercia. This morning’s gut feeling was coming to pass. He caught Sir Leon’s eye, that was already tense, and glanced pointedly to his goblet and then to the maid.

Leon understood that the Prince’s goblet was poisoned and when he saw the maid that Merlin went to follow his blood turned to ice. He nodded, making the Prince understand that he would be vigilant, but the Prince’s hand around his amulet made him close his eyes slowly. Of course she would be a sorceress and wanted to kill the royal family. Then he paled, Merlin and Gwen were with her!

“The Lady Morgana” Bayard kept talking, and Morgana nodded. Arthur and Leon tensed even more, because they saw Nimueh anticipating something, looking at the doors with glee. “The people of Camelot.”

“And to the fallen warriors on both sides.” Uther finished for Bayard, and they all started to drink. Arthur closed his eyes with the chalice between his lips to vanish the wine, but luck was not on his side tonight, for Merlin rushed inside shouting ‘stop’, with Gwen following him. Gwen went to her place behind Lady Morgana, but Merlin ran up to Arthur and took his goblet.

Arthur’s stomach plummeted to the floor, Merlin somehow had figured that the wine is poisoned and was putting himself at risk. The gut feeling that had been growing during the feast now reached his peak. Merlin was in danger, and he couldn’t do anything.

“It’s poisoned! Don’t drink it!” Merlin’s posture was calm, but his eyes roamed the room, as if trying to search the person who did it. Then his gaze stopped at the serving girl, and his eyes narrowed. He was about to say something but the Blood King interrupted him.

“What is the meaning of this?!?” The vein in Uther’s head seemed about to pop, and Merlin low-key wished it did, but that was another matter entirely.

“Merlin, what are you doing?” Arthur prayed that Merlin would stop, because he would find himself in (more) hot water, but it was not the case of his idiot bodyguard, that apparently he didn’t have self-preservation.

“The Prince’s goblet is laced with poison.” Merlin talked with certainty, and most of the people present believed him, after all he was known for his devotion for protecting the Prince and his honesty.

“This is an outrage!” Bayard and his men drew their swords, and the knights of Camelot followed suit.

“Order your men to put down their swords.” Uther’s voice was dangerously low, a contrast with the noise that Camelot guards made in their entrance. “You’re outnumbered.”

“I will not allow this insult to go unchallenged!” Bayard was livid and Arthur was paling by the second, knowing that it was going to end badly. He watched Gaius out of the corner of his eye, and the old man seemed to be terrified of the fate of his ward. Then Merlin spoke, and Arthur’s anxiety
receded a little, after all, Merlin raised a good point.

“It’s not an insult, I did not, in any way or form insinuate that you or any of your men had been the
ones that poisoned the goblet.” It was clear that Bayard wanted to interrupt, but Merlin had a
quality that made him listen to him even when he was not raising his voice, so everyone stood in
silence. “I merely stated that the goblet is poisoned. I could be a lot of options here, but the most
likely is that someone tried to frame you, King Bayard, but I’m not pointing any fingers. I’m doing
my job, that is taking care of the Prince’s health, assassination attempts included, so I’m just stating
a fact, one that could potentially save the Prince’s life.”

“On what grounds do you base this accusation?” Uther was seeing things more logically, but he
still had his doubts. Arthur was impressed, Merlin had covered his back expertly, and he couldn’t
be more proud of him, but he decided to take matters into his own hands.

“I’ll handle this, Father.” Arthur skirted around the table till he was next to Merlin, but not before
glancing at the servant girl, who was glaring at Merlin’s head, as if he wanted him to get
poisoned…

“How do you know?” Arthur whispered to Merlin, who just smiled cynically and let Arthur take
the goblet out of his hand, not liking the implications.

“I overheard one of Bayard’s maids telling Gwen that Bayard was the one that poisoned the wine.”
Arthur glanced at Cara again, and this time he wasn’t surprised at seeing her in Bayard’s
entourage. His vision turned red, but Merlin’s voice returned his to the task at hand. “It doesn’t
make sense, because I know that this is a set up to frame Bayard. So why would the actual assassin
tell Gwen, who she knows that I’m close to, with the words: ‘you should tell Merlin, he is the
bodyguard’?”

“That would mean…” Arthur paled, and he was sure that his eyes bulged out for a second before
he composed himself.

“That would mean that I’m the target. That she knows that I would protect you with my life and
wants me gone.” Arthur was taken aback at the sincerity of those blue eyes, and couldn’t breathe
for a second, he was willing to die for him… The phrase stuck a chord inside him, and tried to
imagine a life without Merlin, and the result was appalling. He didn’t have time to think it through
because his father interrupted their conversation.

“Unless you want to be strung up, you will tell me why you think it’s poisoned, now.” Uther was
frowning the whole time, be it for the fact that someone tried to kill his son or that the peace treaty
was compromised that was to be seen.

“There is an easy way to prove it, give the poison to an animal, it would make the same effect that
to a human.” Merlin smiled at Arthur, hoping against hope that it would be enough. “Or maybe a
plant.”

“I won’t listen to this anymore!” Bayard was fuming, but no one except Uther paid him any mind.

“Pass me the goblet.” Arthur did as his father told him and handed the offending object to him.
Uther the turned to Bayard. “If you’re telling the truth…”

“I am.” Bayard didn’t hesitate, and Merlin cursed, he knew that his suggestion was going to be
ignored. Well, at least his people had the antidote…

“Then you have nothing to fear, do you?” Uther said. Bayard sheathed his sword and reached for
the goblet, but Uther doesn’t hand it to him. “No. if this does prove to be poisoned, I want the pleasure of killing you myself.”

Bayard snorted, and Arthur paled, knowing instinctually what his father was going to say.

“He’ll drink it.” Uther held the goblet to Merlin and the man approached and accepted it, knowing of the deadly liquid inside.

“But if it’s poisoned, he’ll die!” Arthur shouted, not wanting Merlin to drink the mix, knowing of the danger that posed. Leon tensed, and Gwen almost fainted, but Morgana held her steady, far too nervous to do anything else. The Lady was worried, for Merlin was a dear friend and an excellent conversationalist.

“Then we’ll know he was telling the truth.” Uther stated, but most of the court was frowning, everyone knowing of the honest hardworking man, and liking him even though he was a peasant.

“And what if he lives?” Bayard had his intentions written in his face, and no one liked them one bit.

“Then you have my apologies, and you can do with him as you will.” Uther smiled satisfied, not paying attention to his ward’s face, nor his son’s or his court physician’s. He didn’t even think to watch Sir Leon, but everything wasn’t as important as the relationship with Mercia. But that didn’t mean that they were going to stay silent, especially Lady Morgana, because Arthur was thinking contingency plan after contingency plan if this blew up in their faces (which, realistically, it was going to.)

“Uther, please! He is just doing his duty!” Morgana said, indignation rolling of her in waves.

“Then he will die knowing that he has served us well.” The King’s words were final, and the silent indignation ran rampant through the hall. Merlin, for his part, was seething. He had proposed alternatives that didn’t include risking a person’s life, even if he was not advocate of risking an animal either, but the lack of respect of the King to his subjects was appalling. Merlin hated a little more for that, because if Gwen would have been the one to stop the toast… He didn’t want to think about it, and for the looks of it Leon neither did he.

“This is a mistake! I’ll drink it!” Arthur was panicking, he didn’t want Merlin to die, he wanted him alive and well. If he had to drink poison for him he would do it.

“No, no, no, no, no. It’s alright.” Merlin was calm, for his council had the antidote, and he was not going to die, although it would be a lie that hearing Arthur say that he would drink the poison made a pool of heat in his belly, that was replaced with cold at the implications. Arthur was willing to lie his life for him, and he understood the feeling, but it was completely unnecessary.

He toasted to Arthur, although he should have toasted to Bayard too, but the only person that mattered to him in that moment was Arthur, who was looking at his with worried eyes, as if he knew that something was wrong.

Merlin started drinking, and that’s when Arthur noticed that Cara, who was watching the whole scene with glee, had a glamour. Years of making his magic subtle paying off, he made the glamour broke only to his eyes. He glared a little, but he went to Merlin’s side, knowing he would collapse any second now.

Gwen took a few steps forward, Morgana was glaring daggers at Uther, Gaius was going to have (another) heart attack, Leon was white with his hand in the pommel of his sword, Thomas and
Morris were taking turns watching Nimueh and Merlin waiting for a time to stalk her and the Prince was paralyzed, knowing that the poison had to kick any minute now.

Merlin drank the wine and had to give credit to Nimueh, nothing was amiss with the flavour. He opened a connection to his Council and sent what had transpired in the feast. Eghan, overprotective mode turned on successfully, wanted to appear in shadows and drag Merlin to Sanctuary to administer the antidote but Merlin ordered not to, wanting to stay in Camelot. He tried to reassure his bodyguard, but he spoke out loud by accident.

“It’s fine.” Gwen sighed in relief holding Morgana’s hand and Gaius sat down heavily. None of them noticed the Prince’s raising anxiety nor Leon’s shaking hand, for he knew that the wine was poisoned.

Then Merlin choked and collapsed, unconscious before he hit the floor.

“It’s poisoned. Guards, seize him.” The guards ran towards Bayard entourage, but Arthur ignored all of that in favour of crouching over Merlin, holding his head gently. He even ignored the serving girl that poisoned Merlin, but Morris didn’t, so the servant pretended to return something to the kitchen just for abandoning it in a corner the second he was away and followed silently the culprit.

“We have to get him back to my chambers. Bring the goblet. I need to identify the poison.” Gaius tried to stay calm, but no one was buying it.

Arthur picked up Merlin bridal style and ran like his life depended on it, Gwen following him opening the doors. Leon, after a second of hesitation, grabbed the goblet and went with them.

They arrived in the physician’s chambers en masse and Gaius started giving out order. Surprisingly (or not), Arthur didn’t protest any of it.

“Lay him on the bed quickly; he’s struggling to breathe.” Arthur obeyed him without a word.

“Gwen, fetch me some water and a towel.”

Gwen obeyed him quickly, for she knew that his friend’s life was at stake. Merlin mumbled some incomprehensible words, and Arthur gently swiped the hair from his forehead.

“He’s burning up!” Arthur grew anxious, knowing that magic was needed to make the antidote, but for Merlin he would risk everything.

“You can cure him, can’t you Gaius?” Gwen rubbed nervously her hands, and Leon, who had arrived seconds after them, put a hand on her shoulder, trying to convey calmness, forgetting to go after the maid completely.

Luckily for him, Morris had followed her, and he watched in horror how the young maid turned into an older woman, who transformed herself again, turning completely different. She hopped on a horse, riding out of Camelot and smiled to herself. Soon Merlin would be dead and she would have her revenge on Uther for prosecuting her kind without meddling bodyguards getting in her way.

Yes, it had been a good feast. She laughed, thinking of the serving girl that she had tricked and that would feel guilty all her life.

She wasn’t wrong, for Gwen was blaming herself for the mess, and Leon was quick to console her, not wanting her to feel bad, because she would have found another method of reaching Merlin.

“You can cure him, can’t you Gaius?” Arthur was with his hand in Merlin’s forehead, that was full with sweat.
“I won’t know until I can identify the poison. Pass me the goblet.” He signalled to Sir Leon, who jumped and handed it to him. He examined it carefully and smiled. “Ah, there’s something stuck on the inside!”

“What is it?” Arthur and the rest were hanging from the physician’s words, all of them wanting to find the cause.

“It looks like a flower petal of some kind.” Gaius frowned, not liking the implications, but was distracted by Arthur again.

“His brow’s on fire.” Gwen had never heard the Prince like this, so worried for someone. She noticed the little things that he did, but now was not the moment to see if the Prince was interested in Merlin, this was about Merlin’s health, that was dropping quickly.

“Keep him cool; it’ll help control his fever.” Gaius went to his shelf and pulled out a book, while Gwen approached with the water and the towel. She tried to tend to Merlin, but Arthur took the items and started doing it himself.

After a couple of minutes spent worrying over the black haired man, Gaius paled and had to sit down for the second time in less than fifteen minutes. Everyone held his breath, for the face that Gaius was doing didn’t bode well.

“The petal comes from the Mortaeus flower. It says here that someone poisoned by the Mortaeus can only be saved by a potion made from the leaf of the very same flower. It can only be found in the caves deep beneath the Forest of Balor. The flower grows on the roots of the Mortaeus tree.” Gaius face grew sombre with every word uttered.

“That’s not particularly friendly.” Leon went to see the picture and just seeing the creature he cursed, recalling the information that was in the secret library.

“A cockatrice. It guards the forest. Its venom is potent. A single drop would mean certain death. Few who have crossed the Mountains of Isgaard in search of the Mortaeus flower have made it back alive.” Gaius recited.

“Sounds like fun.” Arthur and Leon glanced at each other and nodded. They were going to the caves. Leon would so like always, he would distract Uther while the Prince did whatever he needed to do.

“Arthur, is too dangerous.” It looked like Gaius caught to their plan.

“If I don’t get the antidote, what happens to Merlin?” Arthur hoped against hope that the answer changed, but hearing from Gaius’ mouth made the situation even more real.

“The Mortaeus induces a slow and painful death.” Gaius said with his head downward. Arthur swayed on his feet, not knowing that piece of information. “He may hold out for four, maybe five days, but not for much longer. Eventually, he will die.”

Gwen sobbed into her hands, so she missed the determined glint in Arthur’s eyes, but Leon expected it. It was the look he had when nothing would stand in his way, be it magical or otherwise. He would fetch the antidote for his soulmate and he would unleash his fury upon everyone that prevented the favourable outcome. Leon would help, of course, after all he needed to distract Uther from wondering about his son’s whereabouts.

Thomas entered the room with a message from the King, that wanted to see his son. Arthur nodded and got up slowly, reticent of separating himself from Merlin, but if he was going to disobey his
father they had to part in good spirits. He hesitated for a second, but kissed Merlin’s forehead while murmuring a healing spell.

He knew it wasn’t going to make any difference, but when he separated himself he swore that he was a little less pale. He followed Thomas to his father, Leon with him. Gwen and Gaius didn’t comment on the Prince’s behaviour. After all, it was the Prince’s business.

In Sanctuary, personal business, even if it was Emrys’ personal business, was never very private. Of course, only Eghan (and sometimes Alice) were informed and when something big happened they gave only the pertinent information, nothing more. It was designed to give their Lord the biggest privacy they could while still knowing important things.

That’s how Eghan found himself giving orders to the members of the Council, that were running around like headless chickens. He shouted at them, and everyone quieted, he wasn’t like Emrys, who had a calming voice, Eghan had a dangerous voice, the kind of voice that you could find in the coldest bastard on Earth, the tone that says that going against him is a mistake you pay with your life.

“You had your orders since earlier this evening, I want everyone helping, including that some people help keeping Sanctuary in the dark about this.” Eghan enumerated a list of tasks and sent Alator a message, for he was not present, to keep an eye on the Caves of Balor. “During all of this, I’ll go to Camelot and go next to our Lord and try to stabilize him You will be in charge of the antidote. If they want the Mortaeus flower, we will give it to them. Our Lord’s life is on the line, and the Prince may be the only solution for his survival.”

The Prince was walking down the Red Ribbon corridor with the King and Leon behind them. The Father and son duo was fuming, both equally stubborn, but Leon personally rooted for the Prince, because he was determined to save his soulmate. He was sure that Uther would have done the same to save Queen Ygraine.

“What’s the point of having people taste for you if you’re going to get yourself killed anyway?” Uther was speaking in an angry tone directed at his son.

“I won’t fail, no matter what you think.” Leon agreed, Arthur would not be beaten by the odds. Arthur was fierce in protecting his people, that was something his father was proud of, but now he realized that his father only wanted the publicity that came with it.

“Arthur, you are my son and heir. I can’t risk losing you for the sake of some bodyguard.” Leon winced at the tone of the words, but also for the words themselves. Arthur didn’t consider himself worth any life, that was something that he differed from Uther, that would sacrifice anything to stay in the Throne. Arthur was his son, but above anything else he was his heir, and Leon knew how much it hurt Arthur, never had any maternal or paternal support in his life. Gaius was the closest thing he had as a father, but that was before Uther found out and separated them.

“Oh, because his life is worthless?” Leon winced again, it was the only thing he could do except turning around, and he couldn’t do that before excusing himself, and that would put him in the centre of attention of the royal family. And considering the atmosphere he didn’t want to risk it.

“No, because it’s worth less than yours.” Leon had to stop for prevent him falling down, for the Prince had stopped suddenly. He wanted to get away, because he knew how high Merlin’s life was in Prince Arthur’s priorities, but the King was unconcerned about that. Leon waited for an explosion that never came. Instead, the Prince breathed deeply and continued the conversation as if nothing had happened. Leon was the only one who noticed that the skies were grey thanks to the storm clouds that were condensing. What he didn’t know was that Merlin was helping the
phenomenon.

“I can save him, let me take some men” Arthur didn’t let time for his father to say no and continued in a roll. “We’ll find the antidote and bring it back.”

“No.” Uther’s words were final, but he didn’t count on the force of nature that could be his son.

“Why not?!” Arthur threw caution and parting in good spirits with his father. It had been more and more difficult to agree with his father in certain topics now that he was expected to be more mature and build his own opinions.

“Because one day I’ll be dead and Camelot will need a king. I’m not going to let you jeopardise the future of this kingdom over some fool’s errand.” Leon could have banged his head in the nearest wall, but his composure didn’t let him.

“It’s not a fool’s errand. Gaius says that if we can get the antidot-” Arthur was interrupted by his father. Leon wondered if they would end up in blows and hoped not.

“Oh, Gaius says? That's exactly what makes it so.” Uther’s voice was mocking, and Arthur decided to ignore his father’s words or he might do something he may regret. “Including because he’s his ward?”

“Please, Father. He saved my life more than once. I can't stand by and watch him die.” Arthur retorted to beg for an opportunity, he needed Merlin to live, his magic said so, and he couldn’t fail him.

“Then don't look. This boy won't be the last to die on your behalf. You're going to be King. It's something you'll have to get used to.” Uther’s words were meant to remind his son of his duties, but it only enraged him more. Leon sighed, it was the completely wrong thing to say, but Uther didn’t know his son and he would never do. He was too late, not that he tried to know him.

“I can't accept that.” Arthur now straightened his back and faced his father with determined blue eyes, and everyone present saw a glimpse of what kind of ruler King Arthur would be, and they were not disappointed, and waited for the shoe to drop, for Uther didn’t like what he saw. A King willing to die for his people, a disgrace, because a King needed to continue the legacy as to not bring the kingdom to ruin.

“You're not going.” Uther had only one option, order his son, because he was sure that he would not disobey him. “You’re not leaving this castle tonight! And that’s the end of it!”

Thomas, who had been waiting for orders all the time, almost snorted while looking at Leon, for he knew that the Prince wouldn’t let anything stop him for getting the antidote, and Leon would gladly help him.

Arthur bowed and stormed towards his chambers, Thomas following. What the manservant didn’t know was that Arthur had told Leon to come to his chambers later, when he could move freely through the castle.

Leon bowed to Uther and went on his way, towards his room, but when he was out of eyesight changed the course and went towards the stables and ordered his horse to be saddled. He rode through the city, only one destination in mind. When he reached the place he dismounted and tied the horse in a tree. He smiled, glancing for a second to the secret entrance that was hidden in the shrubbery. He sighed, knowing that the Prince would be in a foul mood, and hoped that he wouldn’t do something rash with him missing so he could do damage control.
The first thing that Arthur when he entered his chambers was dismissing Thomas, who bowed and left with a worrying glance. When he was alone he tossed his sword onto the table and leaned over the fireplace. He was bombarded with images of Merlin, deathly pale, and his mind (the traitor) conjured images of life without Merlin. He shook his head and sat down on a chair, gaze lost in the fireplace.

Suddenly the fire started shaping into a figure that Arthur knew far too well. Merlin, laughing for something he had said, training with him and Leon with a triumphant glint in his eyes, teasing him and calling him Your Highness… everything he would miss and more.

Morgana entered, and the fire returned to normal, and Arthur caught her eye. She was livid, and he hoped it wasn’t with him, he already had enough problems as it was.

“Say what you like about the food, but you can't beat our feast for entertainment.” Morgana’s voice was neutral, but Arthur saw the truth.

“Morgana, I’m sorry, I should have made sure you were alright.” He had the impulse of hiding his head in his hand, but he was a Prince and they couldn’t do that.

“Disappointed actually. I was looking forward to clumping a couple around the head with a ladle.” Morgana sounded disappointed alright, and Arthur wanted to shout that there were more important things to worry about.

“I’m sure the guards could have handled Bayard and his men.” Arthur decanted towards a neutral statement, not wanting the headache that was talking to Morgana.

“Yeah, but why let the boys have all the fun?” Morgana’s eyes were defiant, as if she dared him to contradict her.

“Morgana, you shouldn't get involved. It's dangerous.” Arthur didn’t have the strength to say anything else, for his mind kept replaying Merlin drinking the wine.

“Spare me the lecture, I've already had it from Uther.” Morgana had her eyes clouded by anger for a second, but Arthur could relate. He hated the King, and he couldn’t wait to be in his place, he wanted to stop the injustice that his father did. He wanted the little people with magic that were alive to live in peace, for Uther had surely killed most of them.

“If it’s any consolation, you weren’t the only one.” Arthur said bitterly, knowing that he would be watched day and night to ensure that he didn’t leave the castle.

“Not that I listen to him. Sometimes you've got to do what you think is right, and damn the consequences.” Arthur smiled at his friend, knowing that he was goading him into going and saving Merlin.

“You think I should go?” Arthur asked, knowing that the Lady wouldn’t give him a straight answer.

“It doesn't matter what I think.” Morgana tried to make Arthur see that it was his choice, but he was infuriating.

“If I don't make it back, who will be the next king of Camelot? There's more than just my life at stake.” Arthur knew that she was going to make a challenge that would not see him as a Prince, but as a King, and she was not going to find him wanting.

“And what kind of king would Camelot want? One that would risk his life to save that of a lowly
peasant? Morgana drew Arthur's sword, and Arthur got up. “Or one who does what his father tells him to?”

Morgana presented Arthur with the sword, and he took it and sheathed it again. Morgana was confused when he sat down again. Morgana was about to shout at him, but Arthur stopped her with a look. It was nothing like she had seen before, it was the look of a man that knew exactly what he had to do. His next words chilled her to the bone.

“Do you think that I would leave someone who had risked his life for mine to die? Or do you believe that I would let Merlin die just because my father told me to?” Morgana’s eyes grew wide, the way he said father was full of resentment, one that she had never heard from him before.

This Arthur, she realized, was the Arthur without masks, the real Arthur, not swayed by his father. Arthur, who had to hide his opinions and had to follow his father blindly in public, but that in private he was his own person, a person she was proud to call friend. She observed the changes in Arthur’s posture, and smiled. He was not going to let Merlin die; she knew that.

She breathed deeply, what she was going to do was going to rock the foundations of the kingdom when It was known but she didn’t care. She made sure that the door was closed and bowed to Arthur a bow fit for a King. Arthur was taken aback, but before he could regain his wits she spoke.

“I, Lady Morgana, promise on my faith that I will in the future be faithful to the King, Arthur Pendragon, never cause him harm and will observe my homage to him completely against all persons in good faith and without deceit.” Arthur’s breath caught in his throat, for Morgana, unknowingly, had done the exact same thing as Leon. His magic reacted, and tethered the Lady to himself without her notice. Now she couldn’t go against that on her own free will. She bowed once more and left the future king sitting in a haze.

He sat down for a long time, till Leon knocked at the door, worried that his Prince wasn’t calling him to go to fetch the antidote. He opened and found his future sovereign looking at the fireplace sitting in a chair. He knocked again, this time louder, and finally got a response. The Prince’s eyes cleared and he got up quickly.

"Sire, I visited Merlin again and he is weak.” Leon said gravely and watched the urgency appear in the Prince’s eyes. “Gaius says that he is not going to survive for much longer, the most is three days.”

“Then we will just have to return earlier.” Arthur relegated the conversation with Morgana to the furthest part of his mind, for right now he had to concentrate in saving Merlin. “Try to distract Uther from the fact that I’m gone.”

“Bold of you to assume I’m letting you go alone.” Leon was not going to back down, not this time. “The witch is gone, so it’s possible that she will be waiting for you.”

“You’re not going, Leon.” Arthur didn’t want to fight, every second was precious for Merlin’s survival. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I’m going with you; I want to help.” Leon was going to keep talking, but Arthur interrupted him.

“Leon, I don’t need a babysitter.” Arthur said bitterly, but with an urgent tone, and then changed to an authoritative voice. “You are not going to accompany me.”

“I’m not going to be next to you, I’m going to become you.” Leon had been mulling the idea since he had returned and it was the only way. “We glamour as each other, so the sorceress thinks I’m
you. I distract her while you go after me and get the flowers."

"Its… a good idea. And if my father gets mad at me I can give Gaius the flower and make the antidote…” Arthur saw the utility and success in the plan, so he accepted. But he wasn’t going to let him go without protection, so he took off his amulet.

Leon took a step backwards while he shook his head. He knew how important was that amulet to the Prince. It had saved his life on uncountable occasions, because it had magical properties.

Apart from detecting poison, the amulet could become invisible at will, turn the wearer invisible, heal minor injuries quicker, make a shield to stop physical blows (arrows included), enhance his reflexes and his endurance. It also stopped harmful spells to reach him. He heard the Prince enchant the red gem and the blue eyes turned golden. He smiled at the familiar magic and bowed his head when the Prince helped him tie the amulet, that was subsequently hidden behind clothing.

“I have spelled it so that we can talk telepathically.” Arthur didn’t waste more time, so Leon told him where he left his horse and Arthur put a glamour over them. He also showed Leon a 3D image of the true appearance of the maid. “This is how she really looks. Be careful.”

They clasped arms and went on their way. ‘Arthur’ went directly to the stables, and ‘Leon’ took advantage of the chaos to go and visit Merlin. He passed next to his father, who was shouting orders at breakneck speed but ignored him. He went to the physician’s quarters and knocked. When he had no response he entered, and found the room’s only occupant exactly how he had left him. He didn’t sense the other new arrival, and it was a good thing, for Eghan had just arrived to the rafters thanks to being connected by the tattoo to his Lord, who lay sleeping.

Eghan saw Sir Leon approach Merlin, and his heart broke a little at seeing the knight grabbing Merlin’s hand, but the confusion entered when he noticed his Lord’s hand unconsciously gripping a little tighter. Then, the knight spoke.

“Arthur has gone for the flower to make the antidote, don’t worry, you’ll be in perfect health in no time.” It was weird referring to yourself in third person, but Arthur couldn’t risk Gaius or Gwen overhearing anything, because Leon had just passed the drawbridge. He hesitated again and decided not to speak his mind. He sighed, knowing that confessing wouldn’t so any good and spoke words laced with something that he couldn’t identify: “Just don’t die while I’m away.”

Eghan saw the fear for Merlin in the Knight’s expression and decided to see where he was going. He sensed his movements till he mounted a horse, where he rode out of the city through a hidden door in the direction of the Forest of Balor. Eghan knew that the High Priestess Nimueh was watching over the Once and Future King, but his duty was to watch for Lord Emrys’ safety and that’s what he was going to do, no matter how hard he wanted to go with him.

Below him, Gaius entered, followed by Gwen, but Eghan wasn’t paying attention, too concentrated in siphoning magic in the air to his Lord, who seemed incapable of doing it himself. He noticed another person’s magic helping him too, but it was too faint to be traced back to the owner. Whoever the man was, he knew how to hide. Well, he was living in Camelot, he had to be good at hiding if they wanted to live. He couldn’t trace Arthur’s magic because the amulet stopped any magical search.

Gwen went to Merlin’s side and started tending to him, trying to ignore the worry she felt. She couldn’t help to caress Merlin’s face, and then she jumped in surprise.

“He’s getting hotter.” Gaius frowned and kept researching, while telling Gwen to keep cooling him.
Then Merlin started muttering, but Eghan did a quick spell to silence the words that were in the Language of the Old Religion, for Merlin was a creature of the Old Religion and knew it instinctively.

“Him. Lifrefa, wuldras wealdend, woroldare forgeaf.” Eghan didn’t listen to them, more worried on how Merlin was sending all his magic into a person, most probably the Prince.

“The fever's taken hold. His pulse is weaker.” Gaius was trying to appear nonchalant but was failing miserably. How was he going to explain this to Hunith?

“Gaius, what is this?” Gwen called the old man at seeing a large circular rash on Merlin’s arm. Gaius saw it and paled, his shoulders slumped.

“That can't be right. The rash is not supposed to appear until the final stage.” His mutterings grew a little louder while he checked the book with a magnifying glass.

“It says here that ‘once a rash appears, death will follow within two days.’” Gaius sat down, the book forgotten on the table.

“You said he had four days.” Gwen was visibly upset, and Merlin was visibly decaying.

“Something's increased the flower's potency. It warns that ‘the effect of the Mortaeus will be more rapid if an enchantment is used during the flower's preparation.’” Gaius rubbed the bridge of his nose, his ward was going to take him to an early grave.

“An enchantment? But Bayard's no sorcerer.” Gaius nodded. Gwen was confused, but tried to think of a culprit. “Then who did this?”

“It can't have been. She wouldn't dare come here. Unless...” Gaius was paling even more, and he took a colour that wasn’t healthy.

“Unless what?” Gwen prodded a little, wanting answers.

“What happened to that girl? Cara, I believe her name was.” The sudden urgency in Gaius voice startled her and made her ransacked her brain for an answer. “How did she look like?”

“She had dark hair. Very beautiful.” Gwen remembered her, for she had envied her looks.

“Find her. Quickly.” Gaius told her, and she ran towards the door, almost colliding with Morris, who was in a hurry.

“Gaius!” Morris entered and had to stop and take a few deep breaths, for he was blue for the lack of air. “The maid, the serving girl, is the one responsible of this mess. She rode out of Camelot barely an hour ago. I couldn’t tell you earlier because the Steward caught me and made me help in cleaning the Hall...”

Then he explained everything that had happened in his point of view, and that most of the people involved had known that something was going to go down. He also told him that the maid was a sorceress and her description, for she dropped her glamour to put another one. And Gaius only listened while Gwen searched the cells for a person that wasn’t there.

The person in question was watching ‘Arthur’ from the stone basin as he approached the forest. She pulled up her hood and left the room. The basin flickered from the figure of the ‘Prince’ to the Lady Morgana, who was trying to remain calm in the face of Uther’s wrath.
“I expressly ordered Arthur not to go!” Morgana almost smirked, but refrained knowing that Uther would not take it to kindly.

“I'd say it worked like a charm, too.” Morgana couldn’t resist herself.

“Not another word!” Uther was going to explode, and Morgana backtracked.

“My lips are sealed.” Morgana looked as Uther looked satisfied at that and almost scoffed. Arthur would have never fell for that.

“I should've put him under lock and key.” Uther kept ranting, and Morgana wanted to roll her eyes, for Arthur was going to be a good king, and she had heard that he had stood up to Uther and the King had seen the potential in his son. In that moment, the power dynamics had shifted ever so slightly and Morgana berated herself for missing that.

“You can't chain him up every time he disagrees with you.” Morgana knew that Arthur already resented his father, and if Uther’s behaviour would follow a patter, she was sure that Arthur would face his father in private many times after this one.

“Just you watch me! I will not be disobeyed! Especially by my own son!” Morgana wanted to pull her hair, but it was unladylike behaviour, so she went to her desk to write her thoughts on the evening and then throw them to the fireplace.

“No. Of course you won't.” Morgana rolled her eyes for real this time, because she was giving her back to Uther. She thought about that for a second and turned around, she didn’t want to do that ever again.

“You knew about this, didn't you? Morgana...don't lie to me.” Uther’s voice held barely contained rage, and Morgana shivered in fear.

“Arthur's old enough to make decisions for himself.” She held her head proud, for she was. Arthur was much more that she had given him credit for. Fooling the Royal Court was complicated, and for the Heir of the Throne even more so because all the eyes were on him.

“He's just a boy.” Uther seemed to believe it, and Morgana almost choked, but Ladies do not choke on their own saliva, so she ended up coughing.

“Have you seen your son recently?” Then she couldn’t help herself. “He will be a just king one day. You have to let him make his own mind up.”

“Even if it means letting him go to his death?” Morgana saw that Uther cared for Arthur, but he cared more for the Heir, so she didn’t feel guilty by pointing the obvious.

“Your son is more competent than that.” With that, Uther stormed off and Morgana finally relaxed, and whispered to herself: “I hope you survive, Merlin.”

Without realising it, she sent a tendril of magic to help the warlock, and Eghan felt it. He smiled and sent a calming wave of magic at the Lady. Then he concentrated in making Merlin absorb the magic. He felt in the back of his mind that the girl had returned and was talking to Gaius, but Morgana’s magic was unstable, so he had to syphon it inside Merlin in the minimum time possible.

“Let me guess, she wasn’t there.” Gaius told Gwen. “And before you ask, Morris told me, he was following Cara because he knew that something was wrong. I sent him to rest with a calming draught.”
“Who is she?” Gwen was curious. “You know who she is, don’t you?”

“Not who she claims to be. Though Cara is not her name. Not her real name, anyway.” Gaius seemingly aged twenty years in a second. “She is a powerful sorceress.”

“Well, I suddenly feel better at tripping her down the stairs.” Gwen muttered, but not low enough, for Gaius heard her and chocked on his own spit, spluttered and almost dropped the glass vial he had in his hand.

“You tripped a High Priestess?!” Gaius didn’t know what to do, if laugh or cry for this was another surreal situation that he never could have had imagined in all his years of life. “Down the stairs?!”

“Er… Yes?” Gwen blushed, not knowing how to react.

“Uther would be pleased.” Gaius said to himself and went back to mixing the antidote.

“She hates her so much?” Gaius almost snorted. Uther didn’t hate her, he loathed her, and the feeling was mutual.

“Never mind, I was taken by surprise.” Gaius returned to his normal pose, trying to forget the hilarious image that painted in his mind.

“Well, we should tell Uther. Maybe he could send riders out after her.” Gwen was hoping in vain and she knew it, for an experienced sorceress could do much harm.

“No, she’ll be long gone. It's impossible to know where, though. Oh, no.” Gwen didn’t like the tone of the old man, for it only meant bad news, and they had enough of that already. “She knows the only place an antidote can be found is the Forest of Balor. Arthur could be walking into a trap”.

The ‘Prince’ knew exactly that he was heading into a trap, at least that the sorceress was going to be waiting for him to try and make him fail. He leaded the Prince’s horse…, his horse, through the forest. The cockatrice hid under a fallen tree and ‘Arthur’ turned around because he sensed something, but his attention was drawn towards a crying noise.

He walked cautiously and saw a girl sitting on a fallen log, her fake bruises contrasting with her pale skin. She looked up minutely, and ‘Arthur’ saw something akin of success in her eyes. He swallowed and willed himself to see through the glamour, hoping that Arthur’s magic was subtle even when it wasn’t him who was using it. He almost glared when he saw the woman that poisoned Merlin under the spell, but he was distracted by the cockatrice, that roared behind him. ‘Arthur’ turned around quickly and evaded the blow, lunging at the monster to try and kill it.

He didn’t see Nimueh smiling, for he was busy rolling under the beast and made a split-second decision and threw his sword, killing the cockatrice. One less obstacle for Arthur. Now for the witch.

Nimueh grimaced, having been hoping that the Prince would have ended up dead, but she was happy if he didn’t obtain the flower. She saw the blonde retrieve his sword and turn to look at her. She faked being scared, and backed away for good measure.

“Hello, are you alright?” Leon breathed deeply, wanting nothing less than to gut her, but he didn’t know her capabilities, so option B it was. He took a calming tone of voice and started talking. "It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you. Who did that to you?”

“My master. I ran away from him, but then I got lost.” Leon looked at the bruises and sighed. He needed to get the woman away from here without seeming eager to do so, and her next words were
an engraved invitation, even more so with her desperate tone. “Please don't leave me!”

“I won't. I'm not going to.” Leon tried to present a calm façade to try and calm the woman and himself, for he was sweating bullets. She seemed to buy it, for her face became hopeful.

“You can take me away from here?” Leon wanted to kill her, but reminded himself that Merlin’s life was more important that his whims.

“Yes, let’s go, you can ride my horse.” Leon hoped that the excuse sounded realistic enough and, to be sure, laced his voice with exhaustion. “My father was right, finding the Mortaeus flower is a fruitless quest.”

It didn’t escape the knight’s notice the smirk that the woman tried to hide, but it didn’t matter, he wanted the woman far away from the Prince. When they were away from the clearing, Leon heard the woman muttering some words and he heard the cave collapse. He closed his eyes, the Prince would lose his soulmate today, all because he failed his mission. He made the way slowly, thinking how was he going to explain it to everyone.

Hidden in the shadow of the trees, Alator was looking in disbelief that the Prince abandoned the quest, not bothering to reach for the flower, even though he had already sent a couple of flowers to Sanctuary with his men. He had chosen to stay because Lorelei’s vision depicted the same place, so he had one flower with him. Alice and Aliana were mixing the antidote and were almost finished, so they only had to send it to Camelot.

It didn’t make sense to the Council Member that the Prince would abandon Lord Emrys. He could read between the lines as well as any other, and in the letters Lord Emrys had been very affectionate towards the Prince. His musings were interrupted when the cave collapsed by Nimueh’s making.

Alator was startled for a second and decided to perch himself in a tree, safe for immediate natural disasters, and waited. Barely ten minutes later, a brunet knight of Camelot appeared and stopped on his tracks at seeing the collapsed cave. Alator understood now, somehow the Prince knew that she was the one who poisoned Lord Emrys and he sent a knight, most likely his most trusted one, after himself if he somehow failed the mission. Now the cave was no more, and the flower was out of his reach. Alator waited to see what the man would do, looking at the yellow flower that he had in his hand, understanding Lorelei’s vision.

He turned this attention to the Knight for he had been distracted and almost fell of the tree he was perched in, too busy gaping at the sight. One sight that shouldn’t have been possible, at least after the Great Purge. The knight’s eyes were molten gold, and hearing his wishes, the magic was making the cave rebuild itself.

Alator was impressed, as the man had really strong magic and it would have between difficult controlling it, in Camelot, of all places! The knight was powerful, that much was clear, but the High Priestess used nature to her advantage. Alator made his decision and jumped from above, not wanting for the man to exert himself in what would have been a feat worthy of Eghan.

Arthur was startled as a bald man with a staff jumped a couple of meters next to him and tensed, preparing himself for an attack.

“No worries, young man, I mean you no harm.” Alator decided to start that way, not wanting to come to blows, after all time was on essence and put his staff in a non-threatening position.

“Who are you?” The voice was powerful, and Alator suddenly knew that he was high up in court.
He decided that it was time to bullshit his way through the questions.

“I am the Guardian of the Forest of Balor” Alator said, wanting to ask questions of his own.

“I thought that was the cockatrice?” Alator was impressed, it was not an information that was widely known. The man clearly was well-read on magical creatures. “Never mind. Why are you here?”

“What do you seek in my domain?” Alator left the question unanswered and retaliated, wanting to see his priorities. Answers or Lord Emrys.

“The Mortaeus flower.” Arthur gritted his teeth, he only wanted one flower!

“Why would you seek it?” Alator was seeing that the Knight was getting desperate and decided to speed things up.

“For a friend. He was poisoned by a sorceress.” Alator saw the care that was in the Knight’s eyes and smiled sadly, it was the same as Eghan’s, he only hoped that the young man would end up better.

“The poison was strengthened by magic, and thus the cure must be magical.” Arthur heard the warning in the man’s voice, and inclined his head, knowing that the antidote must be prepared with magic.

“That doesn’t bother me” Arthur was being truthfully. “It only bothers me that she would poison my friend. I know the enchantment to make it work.”

“Yes… such a sight is unusual” Now Alator was amused. “A Knight of Camelot having magic... quite unusual, if not unique.“

“You don’t know half of it” Arthur thought, but then he spoke out loud. “I know my situation is perilous.”

“For those words alone I can see that your magic is not common knowledge.” Alator felt sad for the boy, he had to hide his magic if he wanted to live. He was young, he would have been a toddler when his magic started manifesting and the couldn’t know about Sanctuary. “Tell me, does the King know?”

Arthur shook his head, knowing that, heir or not, he would die in the pyre if his father ever found out. Alator felt pity, something he hadn’t felt for a long time, but long ago was his everlasting companion for all of those who did not make it.

“Does the Prince? Alator was curious, and couldn’t help himself, and was surprised when the knight nodded. Alator smiled and gave him the flower, that was pocketed with utmost care. “I wish you luck in your endeavour, Sir Knight”

“Wait.” The tone was so broken, so desperate, that Alator didn’t have the heart to deny him, even when he was about to enter the trees to return home. “I thought the King killed every single magical person...”

Alator heard the despair in the man’s voice, longing for someone to be alive, for not to be alone, and felt a kingship to him. “No, we are still here, hidden by our Lord Emrys, our Leader.”

“I thought he was a legend” Arthur was awed, but deep inside was overjoyed, he was not alone, there were people like him!
“He is very real, I assure you. If you ever find yourself in need of sanctuary” Arthur frowned at the smirk that graced the man’s lips, as if in irony. “You will get it. Just go to the forest and extend your magic with a message: I need a place to stay. Everyone who has a good heart can enter, and I think you do.”

Arthur was humbled by those words from a total stranger, and was filled with hope at not being the only one who had magic, so he made his decision.

“Can you tell Lord Emrys that when the Prince becomes King he would like to make an alliance?” Alator smiled at what he already knew, that the Prince was kind-hearted.

“There’s no need for that, Lord Emrys will search for Arthur Pendragon.” Alator nodded, and this time he went to the edge of the clearing, one feet in the shadows. “But yes, we all seek peace, Lord Emrys above everyone else.”

“You make it seem as if you have people in Camelot.” Arthur was worried at that, for Uther would kill anyone that resembled sorcery. “It’s really dangerous for them to live there, the minimum rumour and they would end up in the pyre!”

“So can you. Worry not, Sir Knight, for only our most trained people can go, going voluntary to save Camelot from the sorcerers who wish her harm. We blame Uther Pendragon, but we don’t blame the innocent citizens of Camelot.” Alator looked at the man’s eyes, scared of something else. “Nor the Prince.”

“The plague! There was a magical wave that healed some people. That was your people?” Arthur’s voice was full of realization, but in the back of his mind he was incredulous at what he was hearing, they didn’t blame him. He was innocent in their eyes; he couldn’t believe it. Him, the son of the Blood King, who had hunted their… his kind didn’t blame Arthur.

“Yes, that was our people.” Arthur felt weak in the knees, he had people he could go if he was found out. It would suppose leaving Gaius, Morgana, Leon and Merlin (well, Leon would follow him), but at least it was a better alternative than being hunted through the Forest and not being safe in any kingdom.

“Our people?” Alator heard disbelief at that, but smiled at the man, it would take time for that to sink in. He saw relief in his eyes.

“You are welcome in Sanctuary with our people, no one would hold your past against you, for you were but a child when the Great Purge started.” Alator repeated the statement, but again the worry appeared in the eyes of the knight. When the man started fidgeting with the Pendragon crest he understood. “If the Prince feels threatened he can also come. He kept your secret and he would be treated the same, for we do not blame him.”

“Thank you.” Arthur’s voice broke, but he rationalized that a lot of things had happened today. First Merlin drinking the poison, the fight with Uther, Morgana swearing him loyalty, seeing the collapsed cave and now this. He couldn’t say anything more, but Alator understood.

“There is nothing to be thankful for.” Alator smiled and knew that he had an ally in this knight if ever Emrys was in danger. He waited, for he sensed that the man wanted to say something else.

“One more thing… can you not mention that I have magic? I know it’s just a rumour, but if it reaches the King…” Arthur shuddered, and wondered if his Father would send every knight to the pyre in a fit of madness.
“Don’t worry, I won’t say anything about it to anyone, not even Lord Emrys. I swear it on my honour.” Alator bowed to the man, that was far braver that he was credited for. He spelled the horse to ride double as fast and one that made the animal don’t get tired till arriving at Camelot. “Goodbye, Sir Knight. May Magic allows us to see each other again. Now ride fast, for your friend’s life is at stake, and you have already lost precious time.”

Arthur stood alone in the clearing, looking intently at the portal that had opened in front of his eyes. Beyond the man he saw peaceful families, children playing, gryphons flying around next to pegas… For a moment he wanted to go and live there. How would it be to live without fearing for one’s life? But he had a reason to stay. Merlin.

He mounted his horse and started the journey back to Camelot, thinking only of Merlin’s smile. He had a shiver run down his spine but dismissed it, not knowing that in the physician’s chambers Gwen and Gaius were getting worried, for Merlin’s fever was getting worse and the poison was setting in.

Leon was at the end of his rope, for his nerves were frayed beyond repair, or at least that’s what it felt like. Nimueh didn’t stop smirking the whole way, and he could feel her gaze at the back of his head, as if she could overcome the glamour spell with sheer force of will. She had been portraying a tired demeanour since she mounted the horse and Leon dreaded the moment when she would ask to stop.

The branches above them shook eerily and Leon shivered. That’s when Nimueh decided to fake an almost fall. She started annoying Leon to rest, and the knight kept walking, for unless they were next to a river they were not going to stop and he told her as such. The horse needed the water and Leon thought that not even a sorceress would be cruel to an innocent animal. Besides, he had the Prince’s amulet and that made him quasi-immortal.

“We’ll rest here.” Leon stated, hiding the trepidation in his eyes, and without stopping to let the woman dismount he tied the horse to a tree next to the river so that it could drink. He steeled himself and helped the sorceress dismount, and she did it with a surprising grace. Leon prepared himself for an attack and went as if he didn’t suspect anything. He lit a fire and the woman sat down near it, basking in the heat. Leon was about to sit down when the woman made his move.

Nimueh had been cackling in her mind ever since the Prince threw in the towel and was walking throw the castle in a defeated mood. Finally, when they stopped, Nimueh struck the man with a sleeping spell.

Leon felt his amulet heat below his clothes and knew the effect the spell would have. He almost raised an eyebrow, but did the sensible thing and fell ‘asleep’.

“It’s not your destiny to die at my hand. Good luck, Arthur Pendragon.” He heard the woman leaving and he frowned, and stayed like that for a prudent time before moving, after all he wanted to get to the Castle at prudent time. He mounted his horse and continued the route to Camelot.

When he was at sighting distance from Camelot, the guards spotted him from the battlements. Well, spotted Arthur, not him. He knew they were going to inform the King, so he needed to think like Arthur would, but the one that Uther knew. He would make him think that the Prince’s defiance was a one-time thing and that he had failed to bring the flower.

‘Arthur’ arrived at the drawbridge and guards blocked his way. Leon sighed internally, time to act like an arrogant ass. (Merlin’s words, not his).

“What are you doing? Let me pass!” Leon saw that he had pulled the Prince flawlessly, because
the guard had an air of apology around him.

“I’m sorry, Sire. You’re under arrest, by order of the King.” The guard wanted to make himself smaller, but Leon almost pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course, apart from my encounter with the sorceress, now they’re throwing me to the dungeons. And now I’ll have to act like Arthur so I can come out of this unscratched, most likely in front of Uther. Arthur really doesn’t pay me enough for this.

Leon was right, the second he was in the cell, the King entered. He was angry and Leon had to put himself in the Prince’s skin to stare at him. He breathed deeply for the hundredth time that day and reminded himself that Uther would have left Merlin die. That let him look at him fearlessly.

“You disobeyed me.” Uther’s voice was neutral, and Leon prayed that Arthur would come quickly, for the Prince would have said impulsive things that he didn’t like to think about in a normal day, never mind while being in the Prince’s place.

“Oh course I did, a man's life was at stake. Do not let Merlin die because of something I did.” Leon breathed out, this was going to be a little harder that he thought.

“Why do you care so much? The boy is just a peasant.” Never mind that, this was going to be easy if the only thing he was going to do was insult Merlin, for Leon respected him a lot.

“He knew the danger he was putting himself in, and he knew what would happen if he drank from that goblet, but he did it anyway. He saved my life.” Leon was breathing hard at this point of his rant, but continued, trying to prevent a war. “There's more. There was a woman at the mountain. She knew I was there for the flower. I don't think it was Bayard who tried to poison me.”

“Of course it was.” But Leon could see that he wasn’t sue either, so he counted it as a success. “You have to learn there’s a right and a wrong way of doing things. I'll see you're let out in a week. Then you can find yourself another bodyguard, Leon would do a fine job, he would never dare to disobey me.”

Leon blinked as the King exited the cell and marvelled at the irony. He was only loyal to Arthur, not to the Blood King. He had made his oath to the Prince when he saved him from a bandit attack with his magic. Right then and there he swore fealty to the Prince.

Leon returned to reality and sat down heavily, for he had failed his mission, Merlin would be dead when the Prince would return, and they would need to tell his mother of his demise.

Gaius was thinking the same, for Hunith was a formidable woman and he didn’t want to be the one to give her the news, so he held on the last ray of hope they had, because Thomas had given them the news of the Prince’s return.

“Merlin hasn’t got much longer. Has Arthur got the flower?” Right on cue Merlin groaned.

“I don’t know. Uther won’t allow anyone to see him. Is there nothing we can do to help?” Gwen was anxiously biting her lip while cooling Merlin’s forehead.

“Only the leaf of the Mortaeus flower can save him.” Gaius sat down, head between his hands, elbows propelled at the table. Gwen had never seen the man look so defeated that he did now.

“And we have to find out if Arthur has it. I could sneak into the dungeon.” Gwen proposed and Gaius raised his eyebrow, not having enough strength to point out the dangers of doing that. “I've got to. Merlin will die if I don't.”
“Be careful.” Gaius said, for Merlin started struggling to breathe. Gwen nodded and went to implement her plan. Eghan decided to follow, and if things took a bad turn he could bring the flower to Gaius.

Gwen walked down the Wrought Iron Stairway with a plate of food and approached a guard. The cook had told her that the maid who was in charge of giving the Prince his food would not do that for a quarter of an hour, so she was safe in the time department if she had to run for it.

“Food for the prisoner.” She managed a normal voice and the guard unlocked the door. ‘Arthur’ didn’t even look up, too caught up in his depressing thoughts.

“Set it down over there.” Gwen nodded and put the food down on a small table and took a step back. ‘Arthur’ is in the same position, not even acknowledging her.

Gwen turned and left, knowing that the defeated posture of the Prince was all she needed to see to form an answer. Eghan, for his part, was contacted by Alator that a knight had followed the Prince and had the flower. Hope bloomed on Eghan’s chest and he waited the girl, not wanting to leave her alone in the dungeons. He owed her all that he had done for his Lord. He wondered how much time would the knight spend, not knowing that five minutes after leaving the physician’s quarters, Gaius had been startled by Leon entering suddenly.

“How is he?” Arthur was a ball of nerves for what he was about to do.

“Has Arthur got the Mortaeus?” Gaius was pale, and his shoulders slumped. When he saw the flower the life returned to his features and smiled tiredly.

“His breathing’s much worse. We have to hurry.” Gaius took out a bowl and started crushing the flower leaf. Arthur, glamoured as Leon, sat down next to Leon’s sickbed and muttered another healing spell, and smiled at seeing Merlin’s breathing become easier. Then he noticed that Gaius had stopped, and noticed the parts of the antidote. Now was the magic part.

“Why have you stopped?” He didn’t like to sound so forceful, but Merlin’s life was on the line.

“The poison was created using magic.” Gaius said defeated. “I’ll try and make it work without it. Oh, I need some fresh water.”

‘Leon’ was handed a bowl, but Arthur didn’t buy it, after all, he knew that the antidote didn’t need water. Gaius was doing a brave front, but he knew that he wouldn’t budge.

“Sir Leon…” Gaius started, but Leon didn’t let him continue, exchanging the empty bowl for the one with the flower.

“Don’t worry Gaius, I’ll do it.” Arthur closed his eyes and centred himself. Then he thought better of it. “Sit down, Gaius.”

Gaius obeyed, and he is glad to be sitting down, for what he saw was something that never in all his years could have imagined. Sir Leon, model knight, eyes glowing gold.

“Sythan arrest wearth feasecroft funden. Denum æfter dome. Dreamleas gebad he gewinnes longsum.” Gaius sensed the power, and was amazed, for he knew that he must be powerful to be hidden in plain sight. The potion sizzled and foamed for a moment.

“What…” Gaius was still in shock, but Sir Leon poured the potion into a small cup and went to Merlin’s side. He held the unconscious man’s nose and poured the potion into his mouth.
“Swallow, Merlin. Swallow it.” Arthur was nervous, he didn’t care about anything other than Merlin. The guards could have entered and dragged him away that all that he would have thought would have been Merlin.

Luckily no guards entered, it was only Gwen with Eghan in tow. She was in tears because ‘Arthur’ didn’t have the Mortaeus.

“He's stopped breathing. What's happening? Gaius?” Gwen focused on Merlin’s chest the second she entered. Gaius put his head to Merlin’s chest and gave a verdict. Merlin’s heart had stopped.

“He’s dead?” Arthur felt like the world was devoid of all colour, he didn’t have Merlin any more. His internal rant was cut by Gaius’ denial.

“He can't be. He can't be. We gave him the antidote!” Gaius stood up and hugged Gwen, who cried in Gaius’ arms.

“It's my fault. If I'd have got here sooner. If I'd have been quicker…” Arthur was pacing like a caged animal, he shouldn’t have talked with the man so much.

“No, no. It was me. I should've looked after him better. It's my fault.” Gaius went towards his desk to write a reminder, he needed to write to Hunith. A raspy voice interrupted them.

“I don’t care whose fault it was but I thank you for it.” Merlin got up with difficulty and Gaius put some pillows to incorporate him.


“No. I'm the ghost come back to haunt you.” Eghan snorted from up the rafters, Merlin’s sass was something unique. Then he saw the girl grab Merlin’s face and kiss him.

Eghan almost fell from the rafters, seeing Gwen clearly for the first time with the added bonus of kissing his Lord made him enter a shocked state. Never in all his life did he ever think of seeing…

‘Leon’ (still in character) stood still with a heart breaking look in his eyes, that turned into relief when Merlin uttered his next two words but turned to horror in the next.

“Sorry Gwen, I already love someone…” Merlin’s brain was fuzzy, even more so for Gwen’s kiss.

“Sorry, I'm just...I thought you were dead.” Gwen blushed and stood awkwardly next to the patient’s cot.

“It's fine. It's more than fine. ...erm...what happened? The last thing I remember is drinking the wine.” Merlin smiled brightly and all of Arthur’s worries melted as they explained everything. Eghan left, knowing that his Lord was weak enough to not notice him and went to Sanctuary with the good news. After having all the facts, Gaius too knew what he had to do.

Not much later, he knocked into the Council Chambers and spoke when Uther looked at him.

“Sire, forgive the interruption, but may I speak with you?” Gaius prayed that the King would listen to him, for it was going to be tough otherwise.

“Not now.” Gaius almost pinched the bridge of his nose while Uther remained stubborn. “Word of Bayard's arrest has got back to Mercia. We're about to be attacked.”

“But, Your Highness, it is important.” Gaius insisted, knowing that they did not need a war. “I feel
that what I have to tell you may have some bearing on your plans. Please, it will only take a moment.”

Gaius and Uther step aside, the second one with a scowl at losing time to prepare for a potential war.

“I know who tried to poison Arthur.” Gaius was interrupted before he could continue.

“So do I. “ Uther’s face spoke of a rage that Gaius seldom had seen in recent times, it spoke of the lengths this man could go for the people he cared about, which did not bode well for Mercia’s king. “He’s locked in my dungeons.”

“It wasn’t Bayard. The poison was magical. And I’d recognise the hand that made it anywhere: Nimueh.” Gaius held his breath, he wasn’t a coward man, but Uther was a man he never wanted to be in the wrong end of his rage. Uther answered was disbelieving.

“I wish I was wrong, but we could have not known it was her. She can enchant the eye that beholds her. We would never knew it was her.”

“Have you any proof?” Uther started to understand the ramifications.

“The poison used against Merlin was made more potent by the use of magic.” Gaius’s rage was quiet, but dangerous nonetheless. “Bayard in innocent, Merlin called it before being poisoned, Nimueh wanted to frame him. She wanted a war to bring misery and strife to Camelot.”

“How long before Bayard's armies reach our walls?” Uther stormed towards the table, and Sir Cador was the only one brave enough to answer him.

“A day. Maybe less. We should send cavalry out to meet them.” Uther shook his head.

“Instruct your men not to leave Camelot until I give the word.” Uther’s face was devoid of all emotion.
The knights bowed and left the room.

“You are making the right decision, Sire. Do you think Arthur should be told the truth about Nimueh?” Gaius asked, knowing that it was going to be a long conversation.

Without anyone noticing, ‘Sir Leon’ wasn’t in the Council, for he was going to the dungeons. He smirked, for he had timed the prank to hit the change of guard. Arthur had about ten minutes to exchange himself with Leon.

Leon looked up and smiled at the copy of himself. He wasn’t devastated so he had found a way to fetch the flower. He watched as the Prince used a spell to open the door, and with a muttered spell they were in each other’s places, the Prince behind bars and himself free to go wherever he pleased.

Arthur arched his brow, asking an unsaid question, and Leon nodded. Arthur entered his knight’s mind and watched everything that had happened while they were swapped, and he sent everything in return.

Leon bowed and got out of the dungeons before they were caught and went to visit Merlin, shaking his head at the reckless way that the Prince told Gaius about his magic. He stopped in his tracks, almost falling down the stairs in his shock. The Prince was in his place, and that meant that he had told Gaius that he, Sir Leon, had magic! He was so done with him…
A week later, Arthur, Morgana, and Uther watched from the battlements as Bayard and his men rode away from Camelot. When they were only a speech at the distance the interrogation started.

“Okay. Let the bragging begin. How'd you manage it?” Arthur rolled his eyes but smiled nonetheless, for he had decided to bullshit his way out of the questions.

“I’m not sure. All I do know is I had help. Someone knew I was in trouble and sent a light to guide the way. “Well, not light the way literally, but the man had made a ray of hope shine over the despair he was feeling.

“Who?” Morgana was curious, but she hid it well.

“I don't know.” Arthur was being truthful; he didn’t know the man’s name. “But whoever it was, I'm only here because of them.”

“I'm glad you're back.” Arthur could hear the truth in those words and something in his chest unknotted and let himself feel loved for once in his life. He watched Morgana leave, graceful as always, but there was something different about her, like she had been carrying a burden that had disappeared suddenly. He didn’t leave himself dwell on such thoughts, for his father was approaching.

“Arthur? The woman you met in the forest, what did she tell you?” Arthur saw something frightfully similar with unease in his father’s eyes, so he told the truth.

“Not much. She was too busy trying to get me killed. It was strange, though.” Uther paled a little. “I was at her mercy. She could have finished me off, but she chose not to. She said it wasn't my destiny to die at her hand.”

“You must've been scared.” Uther talked awfully like a parent, but Arthur didn’t let himself be deceived, he knew he was only the heir to him, nothing more.

“Had its moments.” He shuddered, picturing the image of the collapsed cave. And poor Leon was scared out of his mind the whole ride. He made a mental note to give him a pay raise.

“Those who practice magic know only evil. They despise and seek to destroy goodness wherever they find it. Which is why she wanted you dead. She is evil.” Uther’s voice was full of hatred.

“Sounds as if you know her.” Arthur already saw the truth in his father’s eyes and wanted to know it.

“I do.” Uther hesitated and Arthur saw that something was fighting in his father’s eyes. “To know the heart of one sorcerer is to know them all. You did the right thing. Even though you were disobeying me. I'm proud of you, Arthur. Never forget that.”

He watched his father leaving, feeling hurt. He logically knew that he should have been used to it, but it still hurt being called evil and a monster. Before meeting the man who accepted him, knight of Camelot and all, he had disconnected. Now, being referred as one of them without even meeting the, soothed an ache that he didn’t know he had. Morgana and Leon filled a little, and Merlin too, but this was different.

He stayed a little more, till it was almost night and then went to the Physician’s Chambers. He knocked and entered the room when he heard a faint ‘enter’. Merlin was sitting down on a patient’s cot with a thin blanket wrapped up his shoulders. He made a mental note to send Thomas with a sturdier one so that Merlin didn’t freeze to death in here. For heaven’s sake, his room here didn’t even have a fireplace!
“Still alive, then?” Merlin smiled at him, a smile that made his insides melt.

“Oh. Yeah, just about. I understand I have you to thank for that. And Leon.” Merlin smiled again, this time less tired.

“Yeah, well, it was nothing. You did the same with the whole Valiant incident. We’re even now. I was only dropping by to make sure you’re alright.” Arthur smiled at him, and Merlin saw that a burden had been lifted off the Prince’s shoulders.

“It’s my job, Arthur, but I do it gladly.” The honesty rolled of Merlin in waves, and Arthur felt a knot in his throat. Too many emotions in one day. He hesitated for one second, but then he decided he had nothing to hide (except the obvious).

“You knew it was poisoned, why did you drink it? Knowing that it was meant for you.” The despair in his voice was obvious, and Merlin held his hand.

“Because you’re my friend, and I couldn’t bear to lose you.” Arthur’s vision became blurry, but Merlin was polite enough to fake ignorance. Arthur tightened his grip on the other’s hand and reluctantly turned to leave and rest. A week in the dungeons wasn’t good for anyone.

“Arthur. Thank you.” Merlin said at last, and then he laid down to rest.

“You too. Get some rest.” Arthur left, thinking at what he had to do (apart from taking a bath).

“Arthur may give you a hard time, but at heart he's a man of honour. There aren't many who'd have risk what he did for a peasant.” Gaius entered the room and Merlin hid a smile at that. His and Arthur’s relationship was complicated enough to put even more labels than ‘peasant’ and ‘royal’.

“It all would've been for nothing if you didn't know how to make the antidote.” Gaius smiled and both thought of Hunith. Gaius was going to have to have a long chat about safety with his ward.

“Eat your dinner.” Merlin smiled and continued eating the food that Morris had left earlier.

“I still don't understand why she went to all the trouble of framing Bayard. She could've just kept quiet and killed Arthur.” Merlin knew that Nimueh didn't make things just for the sake of doing them, but if he was the target the people in Sanctuary were going to be out for her blood.

“But destroying Arthur and Camelot wasn’t all she was after. She knew you would be forced to drink that wine. It was you she wanted to kill. Seems someone else knows you're destined for great things, Merlin.” Merlin frowned, but accepted the compliment as it was.” By the way, you need to stay here at least two days more so I can see there are no after effects. Then you can return to your rooms.”

Merlin groaned annoyed at the same time that Nimueh splashed the water on her stone basin to dismiss the image, mad that she was played.

In Arthur’s Chambers, Arthur and Leon were talking about nonconsequential things while Thomas finished cleaning the rooms. When he was finished, Arthur sent him to Gaius with a thick blanket and a note that summoned Gaius to his chambers.

When they were alone, Leon took the amulet from below his clothes and stared at it for a moment and made the move to take it off, but Arthur’s hand stopped him.

“Keep it, you are going to need it more than me.” Leon was about to protest, but Arthur didn’t let room from arguments. ”We are not going to be together most of the time like years past, and you
can be easily targeted. I have the advantage of actually having magic, I can defend myself. You don't have magic, and if something happened to you because you were posing as me, or covering me, I would never forgive myself.

Leon smiled at his Lord, for he cared for the people like Uther never did. He was taught to kill since birth, but he chose to heal instead. A knock interrupted his musings and Gaius entered.

The old man was directed to sit on a chair and then wait for a minute. Leon was looking at him nervously and Arthur started speaking.

“You may have been wondering why I have called you here.” Gaius nodded.

“I thought that it had something to do with Merlin, sire.” Gaius words made him remember something he had wanted to talk with the physician and, to Sir Leon’s confusion, nodded.

“Yes, it’s about Merlin.” Arthur gazed at Gaius with a serious look, and he smiled at the surprise in his eyes. “I have noticed that Merlin is very tired. At first I was confused, for I knew that following me around wasn’t too taxing, but then I talked to Morris and discovered that he also worked as your assistant.”

“Yes sire, he does.” Gaius knew where this was heading, and he felt happy that the Prince took such interest in his ward’s wellbeing. “He was supposed to be my apprentice.”

“And, while I’m not opposed to Merlin knowing how to heal, I do not approve of his health taking the brunt of it.” Arthur’s words were severe, and Gaius saw the extent of the protectiveness of the man, because he was not a boy anymore. “If my father catches wind of his state of tiredness he will fire him, and that’s something I will not consent. Have I made myself clear?”

Gaius nodded startled, and Leon sighed without any remorse, Arthur’s protectiveness was getting out of control, but then he remembered the state Merlin was the day on the feast and backtracked. He approved.

“You can ask for an apprentice; my father would not deny you that.” Arthur had given the man an option. “And in the meantime you could use Morris, he is Merlin’s servant. That doesn’t mean you can’t ask Merlin for help, but take in account his schedule when doing so.”

Gaius understood what wasn’t being said and nodded, still a little shaken at the kingly expression that was on the Prince’s face. He then remembered the information that had been repressing consciously, that Sir Leon had magic. He frowned a little, the man was far too calm to be sitting next to the son of the man who eradicated his kind. Arthur saw the glance and knew it was time to start the real reason for the man to be here.

“Now for the reason I have called you.” Gaius widened his eyes, wondering what else would the Prince want to speak with him. “I need you to swear that you would not speak of this conversation with anyone.”

“I swear it, sire.” Gaius widened his eyes again at feeling his magic react with the oath. Arthur wasn’t surprised, nor was Sir Leon. He opened his mouth to ask about it, but closed it at seeing the Prince of Camelot, son of Uther Pendragon, the Blood King, eyes glowing gold.

“I was four when I did magic for the first time.” The silence was deafening so he took it as his cue to continue. “It was winter and I was with a nanny. We were cold and she was about to move from the bed to lit the fire and my eyes glowed gold while fire sprouted from the fireplace heating the room. She went into hysteric, telling me that I couldn’t tell it to anyone if I wanted to live, most of
all my Father. She helped me control my magic, after all she had experience. His brother had fled when the Purge started.” Arthur wanted to hide his face into his hands but he knew he couldn’t. “She was caught trying to smuggle magic books into the castle for me to learn to control my magic. That’s when I started pushing people away from me, the minimum lapse in controlling my magic could end in some innocent burning.”

Leon put a hand in the Prince’s shoulder, in a silent show of support. Then Arthur kept talking about how he had saved Sir Leon from a bandit attack and how they exchanged places when going to get the Mortaeus flower. He left out finding the magical library, for they didn’t know if Gaius was going to rat them out to the King.

Gaius smiled and promised not to tell while promising help if they ever needed it. Arthur and Leon were grateful and they both kept talking even when the physician excused himself to go and check on Merlin.

Merlin was skimming over some letters from his Council, berating him of his reckless stunt when one caught his eye. The Last Dragonlord requested Sanctuary. Interesting, that could mean that he could stop the Dragon for trying to manipulate me. It’s a poor attempt, but it’s annoying.

He heard Gaius in another room and faked being asleep. Gaius went through his business and, carefully, took out his magic book from where he had hidden it twenty years prior. He returned to the Prince’s Chambers and gave it to the Prince, who had a face of incredulity but promised to take care of it.

The Great Dragon smiled, the physician had given Emrys the magic book, now he only needed to use it and become more powerful so that he could free him and could chase his dreams.

End Notes

I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, please give kudos and comment!

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