For the Love of Camelot

by RocknVaughn

Summary

Set in Late Series Four, but prior to 4x12/13.

When the newly crowned King Lot of Essetir comes to Camelot with the intention of making peace, Arthur and Merlin are hopeful that this is just one more step in their bid to peacefully unite all of Albion.

They couldn't have been more wrong.

Soon, Merlin finds himself in a situation that will test the limits of what he would do and how far he would go...for the love of Camelot.

Notes

Happy Merlin Holidays, Lullabylily! I tried very hard to work several of your favourites into one of your prompts. I hope you enjoy the result!

My many thanks to C and P for their respective beta/britpick and cheerleading superabilities. Love both you guys! And also many thanks to the Merlin Holidays Mods for going above and beyond in letting me finish and post this story. <3

This story is set late in Series 4, post Gwen's departure but before Morgana's second takeover attempt with Helios. For no reason other than I find him extremely annoying, I chose to omit
Glorious. He was glorious. Merlin couldn’t take his eyes off him.

Of course, Arthur didn’t play fair. When it came to things like this, he rarely did. After all, who could resist such temptation when the king looked like this: a swath of linen barely draped across his hips after his ablutions, rivulets of water meandering down his golden-haired, battle-scarred chest, his muscles flexing and tensing as he rubbed the towel vigorously through his flaxen hair to dry it.

Granted, Merlin had always been attracted to Arthur in one way, shape, or form. In hindsight, even their first meeting had been full of the tension that hung between them still. They’d been drawn together like lodestone to iron; meant to be...fated, even then. (Merlin hadn’t needed Kilgarrah to work that one out.) And, as is the way of such things, their mutually instant and vehement dislike of the other could only be disguising something deeper, something more.

Merlin hadn’t understood that more right away, but he’d felt the first stirrings of it when he was still a green sapling of a man, staring into the blue, blue eyes of his prince. Arthur had declared that he believed Merlin about the snake in Valiant’s shield even though he was but a servant, and there, right then, was the start of it all.
The admiration, the affection, and most of all, the love.

To deny that Merlin loved Arthur would have been an abomination, for Merlin had long since harboured that particular emotion for his king. Arthur might be a prat of the highest order, but he was still noble and giving, gentle and kind, selfless and big-hearted. His soul was as bright and as golden as the sun, and, like the sun, Arthur’s brilliance blinded Merlin to all else. Merlin had no greater wish than to make Arthur happy, even if that meant giving up his own claim on the king’s affections; even if it meant giving him to another entirely.

Merlin had long ago resigned himself to putting Gwen forth—another dear friend and wonderfully sweet human being—to ensure Arthur’s happiness. But in the months since Gwen had been banished from Camelot, Merlin had started to doubt the wisdom of that choice. He knew that they had truly loved each other but, what if he’d been wrong? What if Gwen was not the person who was meant to be at Arthur’s side during the Golden Age of Albion? What if she had already served her purpose in Arthur’s life? After all, feeling love for one person did not exclude feeling love for another, did it?

Gwen’s absence had brought forth another unforeseen consequence; a resurgence of Merlin’s more inappropriate feelings toward his king. The yearning that he thought he’d quashed long ago had returned with a vengeance and a fervour most disturbing to Merlin’s state of mind. As Arthur leaned on him more and more, so had the friendly smiles and elbow nudges, the meaningful glances and gentle brushes increased. Merlin wasn’t even sure if Arthur had noticed the upswing of his manhandling of his manservant and closest friend, but Merlin had noticed. Boy, how he’d noticed. It was hard not to notice when every glancing touch made Merlin feel feverish, as if his skin was too tight to house his body (in some places more than others).

Honestly, it was a miracle that Merlin was still sane with the constant state of semi-arousal he lived in these days and…

“—erlin!”

Merlin startled visibly and shook his head as if waking from a deep sleep. “Huh?” he asked, mentally cringing his lack of ability to form coherent words at that moment.

Judging by the thundercloud of a frown Arthur was sporting, it hadn’t been the first time the king had called his name. “Honestly, what has got into you lately?” Arthur demanded to know. A second later, the words were followed by the damp drying towel hitting Merlin squarely in the face. He had to force himself not to breathe in a deep lungful of Arthur’s scent that had clung to the fabric. By the time he’d been able to control that urge and drop the towel into the clothes basket, Arthur had already moved behind the changing screen.
“I know you have a tendency toward being a dollophead…”

“Still my word,” Merlin interrupted indignantly.

“And it still fits you perfectly,” Arthur finished. “And due to your near-constant wool-gathering, you have reached new and heretofore unimagined levels of incompetency. So what’s going on?” Arthur poked his head out around the screen to glare meaningfully at Merlin.

“Uh…nothing,” Merlin hedged, feeling his cheeks heat up, yet helpless to stop it.

Arthur let out a beleaguered sigh and rolled his eyes. “You really are the world’s worst liar, Merlin.” He made an impatient waving motion with his hand and Merlin stepped forward to set Arthur’s fire-warmed sleeping shift over the top of the screen.

As Arthur slipped back behind the screen and pulled the shift down over his side of the barrier, Merlin could easily imagine Arthur sliding the nightshirt over his head and down over all that fresh, golden skin…

Merlin bit his lip hard and groaned at his own lack of self-control. “Look,” he added snappishly, “I’m fine, all right? Just a bit tired lately.”

“And why are you so tired?” Arthur prompted from behind the screen.

*Because thoughts of you are keeping me up nights,* Merlin wanted to say but knew he couldn’t. “I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately, that’s all.”

Now covered in the shift, Arthur walked out from behind the screen and sat on the turned-down bed. “Huh. That’s surprising,” he mused.

“What, that I’d have something on my mind?”

“No, that you actually have a mind…”
Merlin rolled his eyes dramatically, but wisely did not retort. “Will that be all, Sire?” he replied instead, in that specific tone he had that simultaneously oozed civility and insolence.

Arthur had the gall to not even be surprised by his outburst, let alone insulted. He calmly and blithely tucked his bare legs between his sheets and pulled the blankets up around him. “No, actually. There is something I wish to speak to you about.”

“Yes?”

“You know that the delegation from Essetir arrives tomorrow.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“Including King Lot.”

Merlin nodded.

“Once Lot arrives, I am going to offer your services to him as manservant.”

Merlin’s eyes widened, horrified. “What? No, Arthur…please, you know I hate it when you…”

Arthur raised a staying hand and Merlin fell silent. “I know you do. And, after what happened during Alined’s last visit, I swore to myself I’d never ask you to do it again.”

The thought of that weaselly man, his hands skimming over Merlin’s arse suggestively as he described in detail the perverse ways that he expected to be “serviced” still made Merlin shudder, even though it had happened several months before Arthur became king.

In a softer, more comforting tone, he continued, “I wouldn’t ask it of you now if I didn’t feel it was of the utmost importance.”
“Important how?” Merlin asked.

“As you know, Lot has publicly declared a break from his distant cousin Cenred’s beliefs and policies and has requested this visit as the means of establishing peace between our kingdoms. A treaty with Essetir had never been obtained during my father’s time and would be extremely beneficial to our goal of eventually uniting all of Albion.”

Merlin nodded.

“It is customary in these cases that I offer a servant of my own into the visiting king’s care as a show of faith. Therefore, offering my very own manservant is the highest compliment I can offer…your service notwithstanding, of course,” Arthur teased with a quirk of one eyebrow.

Merlin pursed his lips and gave the king a reproving glance.

Arthur’s face quickly sobered. “Though he has been in power for more than a year, we have little to no intelligence about Essetir’s new ruler. I have no idea whether he means what he says or if this is meant to be yet another subterfuge. I hope for the former, but cannot rule out the latter.”

“Therefore, I need someone who can keep an eye on his activities unobtrusively, someone who will report back to me if they see or hear anything amiss, someone who would not be easily swayed by offers of money or power in exchange for news about me or Camelot.”

“To put it plainly, I need someone in there that I can trust. I need you.”

This declaration left Merlin momentarily speechless. A slow grin of understanding bloomed on his face as he deduced, “You want me to spy on him for you.”

Arthur nodded. “Exactly.”

“You play the part of the bumbling fool well, even to me,” Arthur said with a hint of a fond smile, “and therefore Lot won’t take you seriously. His underestimation of you will be to our benefit. With your help, I’ll know the lay of the land before any treaty negotiations are made.”
Arthur leaned forward and rested his elbows on his pulled up knees. “Now, I would never force you to do this, Merlin, but it would really—”

Merlin cut him off. “I’ll do it,” he said firmly, because of course he would if Arthur asked it of him, even if it meant he couldn’t be stuck to the king’s side to protect him in the way that he preferred.

The king’s eyes glowed with relief and happiness that was almost palpable. “Good, good.”

Their eyes locked and Merlin could almost swear that the blue of Arthur’s eyes darkened a shade as they dipped momentarily to stare at Merlin’s lips. Merlin licked at them self-consciously, and then felt a familiar spark of arousal in the pit of his stomach as the king’s eyes tracked his tongue’s movement.

Merlin steeled himself against the temptation of Arthur’s tender look and the vee of bare chest that his open-necked shift exposed, skin glowing almost golden in the candlelit room. Shoving back the rising tide of want and need, Merlin’s voice was noticeably gravelly even to his own ears as he asked, “Will there be anything else, Sire?”

Arthur cleared his throat awkwardly and replied with a strained voice of his own, “No, Merlin. That will be all for tonight.”

And as Merlin extinguished the candles and left the room, he refused to think on Arthur’s wistful tone or what it meant, and whether or not the king wished his answer could have been yes.

It was almost midday before King Lot and his entourage arrived. As was customary, Arthur was in his ceremonial armour and crown while all the knights of the Round Table stood in silent attendance on the steps, a resplendent sea of red. As the king’s manservant, Merlin stood in the front row just to the right of Arthur and next to Gaius.
Surprisingly, the king’s party was small: a half-dozen royal guard, a few advisors, and Lot himself. While anyone else looking on would not have noticed, Merlin had become an expert over the years at reading Arthur’s minute tells. Right now, the slight pursing of Arthur’s lips and the featherlight creasing of his forehead indicated that he was trying to determine the reason for such a small retinue. It could be meant to indicate comfort and trust…or it could be a subterfuge meant to make Arthur believe it to be true.

As King Lot’s horse came to a stop and squires rushed forward to assist in his dismount, Merlin’s eyes narrowed. He hadn’t known what he had been expecting, but it wasn’t this.

Lot stepped forward with an arm outstretched, a wide, personable smile curving his generous mouth.

“Arthur Pendragon,” King Lot said, and his voice had a dark, smooth quality to it, like a warm mug of drinking chocolate. “It is a pleasure to meet you at last.”

Arthur reached forward and clasped Lot’s forearm. “And I you. Welcome to Camelot.”

Lot was young, Merlin mused, but not too young; perhaps a few years older than Arthur at best. His chestnut hair fell in waves that would rival even Gwaine’s and glinted with flashes of copper where the sun touched it. His eyes were bright green like Morgana’s, but were infused with a warmth and humour that Arthur’s sister’s did not possess. Lot was not as broad chested as Arthur nor as slight as Merlin, but still very pleasing in form all around. Merlin could imagine a great many women in his court (and perhaps many of the men as well) fawning all over this handsome new leader.

But whether all that charisma was used for good or ill was yet to be seen.

As the kings ended their greeting, a gaggle of servants and grooms surrounded the group, helping to unload baggage and lead horses away to the royal stables.

Arthur raised his voice to encompass the whole of Lot’s entourage. “Come,” he called jovially. “Allow my servants to show you to your quarters so that you may settle in.” To the king, Arthur said, “And this is my personal manservant, Merlin. He will be happy to direct you to your chambers.”

Lot gave Merlin one long glance from head to toe and then nodded as if he’d decided something. “Merlin,” he said in acknowledgment, “lead the way, if you please.”
Merlin bowed solemnly and said formally, “Of course. This way, my lord.”

Arthur had decided to impress King Lot by housing him in the most spacious apartments available in the castle…the ones that used to belong to Uther. While technically the King of Camelot was supposed to reside there, due to the pervasive sadness that permeated that space for Arthur, he had never been able to bring himself to move in.

As Merlin opened the double doors into the chamber and hurried over to the windows to draw open the drapes, Lot stood in the middle of the room and turned in a small circle. He let out a low whistle that made Merlin startle and look at him curiously.

“Very impressive,” Lot said with a disarming smile. “Your master certainly knows how to make a man feel welcome.”

“Yes, my lord,” Merlin replied before indicating to the approaching servants where to put the king’s trunks.

Lot leaned against a stone column and watched the flurry of workers enter and exit until at last he and Merlin were again alone. Merlin opened the first trunk and then looked to the king for direction. “Do you have any preference as to where I store your things, my lord?”

Instead of answering, Lot pushed himself away from the column and walked up to Merlin, tilting his head to the side as if to study the servant.

“My lord?” Merlin repeated, trying desperately not to fidget under Lot’s assessing stare.
“You’re not from here, are you?” Lot said at last.

“Pardon?”

“From Camelot,” Lot went on conversationally. “Originally. The accent is not quite right.”

“Oh,” Merlin said, taken aback by the question. “You are correct, Sire.”

Lot nodded once and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You sound more like you are from Essetir, Merlin. Am I correct?”

“Y-yes, my lord,” Merlin stammered, uncomfortable with this line of questioning for no reason he could put his finger on.

“Really? What part?”

Merlin struggled to keep his growing sense of panic from showing. Still, his voice was much quieter and more hesitant than his norm. “I…from one of the border towns,” he admitted reluctantly. “I would rather not say which.”

Merlin cringed, waiting for the king to angrily demand the proper answer, but instead Lot tilted his head back and laughed heartily.

Giving Merlin a consolatory pat on the back, Lot replied, “I see that reports I’ve heard were not exaggerated.”

Merlin goggled a bit and asked, gobsmacked, “Reports? About me?”

“Yes,” Lot replied, still chuckling. “Queen Annis had much to say about the noble King Arthur and his brave but foolish manservant.”

Before Merlin could even form a reply to that, Lot went on, “But not to worry, Merlin…I shall not turn you away. In fact, I believe I will find your version of servitude quite amusing on the whole.”
Thoroughly unsettled now, Merlin folded his arms behind his back to hide the way his hands were shaking. “Thank you, my lord,” he said, but due to the rising intonation of his voice, the words came out more like a question than a statement.

Lot’s mouth twitched, as if he knew just how much he had unsettled Merlin and found it diverting. Pointing toward the cupboard, he said, “Tunics, coats, and cloaks in there.” Indicating a chest of drawers, he continued, “Trousers, britches and smalls there, and—” Lot pointed toward the empty gabled window alcove, “—my footwear there, if you please.”

The sudden answer being supplied to Merlin’s original question many minutes ago once again left Merlin feeling wrong-footed. “I…of course, my lord.”

Merlin had only just open the first clothing trunk when the king continued, “In the meantime, I believe I shall retire to the Great Hall for midday repast.”

“Oh, I—” Merlin looked between the linen shift in his hands and the door to the room in an almost comical fashion.

Lot huffed out a good-natured laugh. “Don’t worry, Merlin. I shall see myself out. I’m sure it will be no trouble to find another servant to assist me with directions. You go ahead and finish the unpacking.”

“As you wish, my lord,” Merlin answered, lifting the shift to shake out the wrinkles.

Lot crossed the room, but then turned back once he’d opened the door. “Oh, and Merlin?”

“Yes?”

“We do me the favour of setting out my ceremonial clothes for tonight’s feast. They are in the top of that trunk over there.” The king indicated a smaller trunk that had been deposited nearest to the bed.

Merlin glanced in that direction and nodded. “Of course, my lord.”
“Once you are finished here you are free to do as you wish until the feast. After all,” Lot said with a knowing grin and a wink, “you’ll want to have plenty of time to report all you’ve learned about me to your master, won’t you?”

Merlin was still staring at the closed door with the king’s forgotten shift pooled around his ankles long after Lot had left the room.

A scant hour later saw Merlin pacing the length of Arthur’s room in obvious agitation. “Arthur, it was really creepy the way he knew where I was from, how he knew what we were planning.”

Arthur leaned his back against his chair and shrugged. “What it tells me is that Lot is uncommonly intelligent. That doesn’t make him creepy.”

“But—”

“But nothing. Despite the years you’ve spent in Camelot, some of your native accent survives. It is not surprising that another native of your country could distinguish it. And he is well aware of how little we know of him. It is only natural that I would ask you to impart anything you might learn. It is what any good king would do.”

Merlin crossed his arms across his chest and huffed, “I still don’t like it. Besides, he…made me uncomfortable.”
Arthur leaned forward with narrowed eyes, suddenly giving the discussion his full attention. “Uncomfortable in what way?”

“Well, I…” Merlin hedged, because he couldn’t explain what it was that made him uneasy about Lot. He just did.

“Was he cruel to you? Did he beat you or threaten to?”

“No.”

“Did he proposition you or ask you to perform other services of that nature?”

“No.”

“Did he call you incompetent or dismiss you from his service?”

Merlin looked down and scuffed his boot against the wood flooring. “Well, he did call me an idiot,” he admitted grumpily.

“Well, now I know Lot’s intelligent, seeing as he picked up on that gem straight away,” Arthur teased.

Merlin was not amused. “Only because Queen Annis said it,” he harrumphed.

“Well, now I know Lot’s intelligent, seeing as he picked up on that gem straight away,” Arthur teased.

Merlin was not amused. “Only because Queen Annis said it,” he harrumphed.

“And Gods know she has no reason to think that of you, does she Merlin?”

Feeling insulted, Merlin glared at him. “Look, if you’re just going to make fun of me, too, I’m sure I can find better things to do with my time…like cleaning out Gaius’ leech tank.”

Arthur snorted. “As if…’
“Fine. You can dress yourself for this stupid feast then…” Merlin huffed.

Arthur rolled his eyes as if unimpressed. “Every time we have visiting dignitaries you get all doom-and-gloom on me, convinced that every single person that steps foot in Camelot is out to get me.”

“That’s because they usually are…” Merlin muttered as he turned away to gather Arthur’s dress clothes from the cupboard.


“Nothing…” Merlin muttered, shutting the cupboard door harder than was strictly necessary.

Arthur nodded once in satisfaction. “That’s what I thought you said. Now, help me get dressed. I don’t want to be late to my own banquet.”

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Merlin was seething.

As was customary, Arthur sat at the center of the head table at the feast with King Lot at his side, the honoured guard for each ruler a pop of colour as they intermingled with the other elite guests at tables that ran down the hall.

Merlin was to be personal server for King Lot, while George had stepped in to fulfill the role for Arthur.

Merlin had never quite forgiven Arthur for being forced to shadow the obsequious little toad for two whole weeks after the fomorroh incident.

Granted, he understood that Arthur believed that he had gone on a two-day bender at the tavern, and therefore the punishment was supposed to be unpleasant; a deterrent against a repetition of the unwanted behaviour. But really, a fortnight of listening to George’s tutelage—not to mention his
plethora of brass jokes—was cruel and unusual punishment.

So, having that grasping, slimy bootlicker as Merlin’s fill-in was just too much.

They were only through two courses about ready to serve the third, but Merlin already felt as if he were going insane. Really, the way George could fall all over Arthur whilst serving him and then stand so completely still and silent at Arthur’s shoulder when he wasn’t…well, it just wasn’t natural. It made Merlin nervous. And uneasy. And quite possibly murderous.

While suppressing yet another urge to poke George with a serving fork, Merlin sloshed the tiniest amount of wine out of the pitcher onto the floor at his feet. Somehow, the minuscule movement still drew Arthur’s narrow-eyed gaze, and the slight crinkling of his brow as much as broadcasted, If you don’t stop fidgeting this instant, I’m going to put you in the stocks for a week!

Adding insult to injury, King Lot glanced over his shoulder and regarded him with a bemused smirk. Under both men’s gaze, Merlin could feel the mortifying blush as it crept hotly up his neck and encompassed his ears.

Lot leaned in closer to Arthur and said quietly, “Don’t be so hard on the boy, my lord. I’m sure it’s just the excitement of such a grand feast getting to him.”

Arthur nodded politely and said, “Yes, of course. That must be it,” although the look he aimed back in Merlin’s direction clearly gave lie to the words.

Tactfully changing the subject, Lot said, “Camelot certainly knows how to put on a feast, my lord. Everything so far has exceeded my expectations.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“Also, I must thank you for your kindness in sharing your personal servant with me. I’m sure it must be a hardship for you.”

“It is nothing,” Arthur demurred politely.
“I must say that I am well pleased with his service.” Lot looked back at Merlin with a flirtatious smile…and then winked.

Small talk close to the high table faltered awkwardly as a few curious heads turned in Merlin’s direction. While the words themselves were innocent, the implication King Lot had made was anything but. Merlin blanched and bit at his lower lip, frustrated by not being able to defend himself in such a setting, especially where the accusation was only innuendo and could easily be denied. Thus, being both shamed and stymied, Merlin’s eyes darted toward Arthur’s suddenly ramrod-straight back with apprehension.

“Indeed,” was Arthur’s stilted reply. “I am gratified to learn you enjoy Camelot so well.”

“Yes,” Lot went on, his voice a shade too innocent to be genuine, “I believe my stay here will be quite…pleasurable.”

And if that wasn’t meant to be a damning statement, Merlin didn’t know what was. This time, Arthur turned in his chair to stare at him. Under such intense scrutiny, Merlin could not stop another horrified flush burning his skin, even knowing it would brand him in everyone’s eyes as guilty of Lot’s slander. Unable to stand the judgment in Arthur’s eyes, Merlin stared at the floor and prayed for it to open up and swallow him whole.

“Yes, well, I believe it’s time for the next course,” Arthur said stiffly once he’d recovered himself, motioning with a hand toward the steward to move the feast along.

Two excruciating hours later, the meal was finally over and the feast was winding down.

Arthur looked as if he couldn’t escape from the feasting hall fast enough. He leaned toward Lot and murmured, “There’s no reason to stand on ceremony, you know. I’m sure you must be tired after
your journey. You’re welcome to retire at an early hour. No one would hold it against you.”

There was a long pause where Lot turned toward Arthur and stared, as if he were studying Arthur; assessing him. The intensity of his gaze was enough to force a nervous ramble from the King of Camelot. “I mean, the sooner we leave, the sooner the men can get on with the job of drinking themselves and each other under the table, right?”

“You are quite right. How very thoughtful of you, my lord,” Lot replied at last. “I believe I shall take you up on that offer.” He pushed his chair back and stood up. All along the left side of the hall, chairs scraped as Lot’s elite guard stood and bowed. “Stand down, stand down,” he said indulgently with a wave of his hand. “Stay, and enjoy Camelot’s hospitality. I am off to bed.”

Almost reluctantly, Lot’s knights took their seats. Lot dipped his head politely and said, “I believe I shall retire.” Without even looking around to address him, Lot said, “Merlin, if you would lead the way.”

“Yes, my lord,” came Merlin’s almost whispered reply. He set his wine pitcher onto the table and stepped back with his arms behind his back.

“Pleasant dreams, my Lord Arthur,” Lot said and followed Merlin out of the hall.

Merlin couldn’t decide whether he was more appalled or incensed. How dare King Lot infer that Merlin granted sexual favours? That he and Merlin were already involved?

Once they reached Uther’s chambers, Merlin made quick work of lighting the candles and setting a fire in the grate. He kept his tongue silent…but only just. The burning, hurtful words he wanted to shout at this man nearly overwhelmed his good sense. But he knew that this treaty was important to Arthur; important to their dream of a united Albion, and so he said nothing.
Lot slouched in a fur-covered chair at the dining table and propped his feet up onto it. He grabbed an apple out of the bowl of fruit in front of him and munched as he watched Merlin work. As Merlin crouched at the hearth, setting the heating bricks near the fire to warm, Lot finally addressed him. “I must admit that I am surprised to find you so remarkably efficient.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Merlin responded coolly, the polite words nearly choking him.

“I don’t believe you approve of me, Merlin,” Lot mused as he took another crunching bite of his apple.

Merlin could feel Lot’s eyes upon him almost as if they were hands, and it disquieted him. Still, he refused to be baited into a heated response. “It is not for me to approve or disapprove, my lord. That is for Arthur to decide.”

“Arthur…” Lot’s voice curled around the word in obvious amusement. “Not ‘His Highness’ or ‘Sire’. Interesting. Very interesting. But…a slip of the tongue, I’m sure. After all, you’ve been the king’s personal manservant for some time now. I’m sure you’ve had many an occasion to use his given name.”

Merlin felt the boiling rage as it stiffened his spine, as it filled his blood until it rushed in his ears. He turned and stood, crossing the room to tower over Essetir’s king before he’d even realised he’d moved. “How dare you insinuate such a vile thing!” he hissed. “His Highness,” Merlin emphasised the title as if to prove to Lot that he did indeed use it, “would never presume to take advantage of his servant in any way. Especially not in that way.”

If anything, Lot’s smile only grew. “So now the little bird unsheaths his claws…not in defense of himself, but for his master. How curiously loyal you are.”

Merlin stubbornly lifted his chin but said nothing.

“And it’s not taking advantage if the servant is willing…” Lot added.

“Arthur Pendragon is my king and I would thank you not to slander him so,” Merlin declared, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. “He deserves my respect…and yours.”
“Technically speaking, Merlin, I am your king, as you hail from Essetir. But I shall endeavour to not feel offended by the slight.”

“Perhaps you would garner more respect if you tried earning it,” Merlin snapped, his patience gone at last.

“Ah! So that’s the lay of the land…so to speak,” Lot baited, clearly enjoying himself now that he’d got a reaction from Merlin. “He’s earned your respect; through what, I wonder?”

Exasperated, Merlin threw up his hands. “Duty or no, I will not stand by and listen to this malicious slander a moment longer! Arthur will just have to find another servant to put up with you.”

Merlin had only taken three steps toward the door when King Lot’s voice stopped him in his tracks. “I’m sorry, Merlin,” he said quietly, and he at least sounded penitent. “It’s just that the two of you seemed so…close that physical intimacy seemed a foregone conclusion. I did not mean to offend you or your king. Please forgive my obvious error in judgment.”

Merlin’s shoulders slumped as the fight bled out of him. On a long sigh, he turned around and faced Lot. The man appeared genuine enough. “Fine,” he acquiesced. “Apology accepted. But, for the record, I do not provide that kind of service for anyone…even visiting kings.”

“Right, well that’s clear enough.” Lot put the apple core down on the trencher in front of him and rubbed his hands together briskly. “Then perhaps now that we understand each other better, you wouldn’t mind setting my shift out by the fire and warming the bed with the heating bricks?”

“Of course, my lord,” Merlin replied politely and set to work.
Merlin had just pulled the covers back up over the warming bricks when Lot spoke again. “You know, I have riddled out your secret, Merlin,” the king said conversationally from his chair in front of the fire. He was dressed only in his shift.

“I have no secrets,” Merlin demurred, smoothing out creases from the coverlet.

To Merlin’s consternation, Lot laughed, a loud and boisterous noise in the otherwise quiet chamber. “Now I know you’re lying, Merlin, for there isn’t a man alive that does not hide something.”

Merlin tried to breathe through the wave of panic that swelled within him. *There wasn’t any way the man could have found out about his magic, was there?* “Well then, I doubt I would be hiding anything that would be of interest to you, my lord,” Merlin amended.

“Oh, yes…of course you don’t,” Lot said, his voice heavy with sarcastic agreement. “Such a thing would be unseemly, would it not?”
Merlin forced himself to breathe and continued preparing the bed.

“You don’t have to worry,” Lot went on as if he’d never expected a response from Merlin. “I don’t think he’d ever guess. In fact, he seems quite ignorant of your feelings, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t,” Merlin pointed out.

“Still…” Lot continued, “it must be difficult; putting yourself out there day after day, hoping and praying he’ll notice…”

“It is not like that,” Merlin protested.

“Then what is it like?” Lot pressed.

Merlin snorted. “I wouldn’t expect someone like you to understand…my lord.” Merlin used his most frigid, haughtiest tone; the one that made “My Lord” sound suspiciously like “arsehole”.

But yet again, his insolence only served to amuse Essetir’s king. “I’d ask you what kind of person you think I am, except I’m quite sure you’d tell me.”

Merlin turned his head to glare daggers at the man while he violently flung back the blankets to remove the warming stones.

“Well, that was certainly clear enough,” Lot admitted with a sly smile.

Merlin took care to walk to the opposite side of the hearth to deposit the now-lukewarm stones. “Your bed has been prepared, my lord,” he intoned flatly, stubbornly refusing to give Lot the respect or satisfaction of looking him in the eye. “Will there be anything else?”

“I believe that will be all for the evening,” the king replied formally, as if he hadn’t spent almost their entire time in this chamber embarrassing or belittling Merlin in one way or another. “However I require a wake up call one candlemark after sunrise. I have some personal business to attend to before the meeting. It would not do for me to be late to our initial treaty discussion.”
“Yes. A pity,” Merlin said, his sharp tone clearly intimating that he thought that happenstance would be anything but.

“Merlin,” Lot warned, “I’m sure your king would be quite upset with you once I informed him of your purposeful disrespect. You wouldn’t want that now, would you?”

“No,” Merlin admitted. Despite the set down of Lot being sorely needed, Merlin doubted Arthur would see it that way.

“Good. So long as we understand each other,” Lot replied.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand you at all,” Merlin exclaimed. “What good does constantly baiting me serve?”

Lot one shoulder in a devil-may-care sort of way. “Entertainment.”

“So glad I could be of service to draw you out of your terrible ennui, my lord,” Merlin gritted out, his words positively dripping with sarcasm.

“Well, you said that other forms of service were out of the question, so I have to make do somehow…”

Merlin gritted his teeth. “Would my lord also wish me to bring him breakfast?”

“And give you the opportunity to spit in it?” King Lot teased, his twitching lips barely holding back a full fledged grin. “No, thank you. I shall summon a chambermaid to bring it when I am ready.”

“Will that be all, my lord?”

Lot didn’t answer, preferring to make Merlin wait and wait until he could stand the silence no longer. “My lord?” he repeated testily.
“Have you never wondered,” Lot asked idly, again completely changing the conversation, “why your king would be jealous of you offering your attentions to another man?”

“He was not jealous,” Merlin denied hotly.

“I’ve seen plenty of jealousy in my time, Merlin, and I can assure you that he was,” Lot insisted.

“There is absolutely nothing for him to be jealous of since I did no such thing!”

“Ah, but he doesn’t know that, now does he?” Lot tapped the side of his nose as if Merlin was a willing conspirator in his little ruse.

“You’re delusional. And mad…most definitely mad.”

“Are you really that blind to Arthur’s feelings for you?” Lot asked Merlin with a condescending laugh. “But of course you are. It is no wonder two are so well-matched, what with the dual pining, yearning looks, and lingering touches…”

“Are you quite finished?”

“Yes,” Lot said, getting up from his chair and walking over to the bed. His short shift barely covered his buttocks. “I suppose I am. Until the morning then, Merlin.”

Merlin sketched a mocking bow as only he could. “My lord.”
Once he’d finally been freed of his service to King Lot for the evening, Merlin made a bee-line to Arthur’s chambers. For reasons he refused to name, he couldn’t bear the idea that Arthur would go to sleep that evening thinking that Merlin had been intimate with Essetir’s king.

As per usual, he let himself into the room without bothering to announce himself. Both occupants of the room startled at the interruption; Arthur was sitting up in his bed in his shift while George was caught in the act of pulling the blankets up for him.

“Merlin, don’t you ever knock?” Arthur asked with obvious consternation.

“Obviously not, Sire,” George chirruped as he plumped up Arthur’s pillows and tucked in the blankets around him in a move that clearly showed how honoured he was to pamper the king. “Although I promise you that I schooled him better whilst he was under my—”

“Get out,” Merlin demanded of the weaselly little man, effectively cutting him off.

“I will not!” George insisted indignantly. “It is my duty to be here whilst King Lot is in Camelot. There is still work for me to do, and—”

“Not tonight, there isn’t,” Merlin hissed, clenching his fists so hard that his fingertips went numb.

“Don’t you have some other king to service tonight?” George sneered at Merlin derisively.

Merlin took two menacing steps toward the other servant and growled, incensed, “Get the fuck out. Now. Before I remove you bodily…through the window.”

George backed away from Merlin until his back ran into the door to the servant’s entrance. His eyes were widened in obvious fear. He timidly sketched a bow in Arthur’s direction and said, “I shall be back to attend you in the morning, Sire,” before scurrying out of the room.

“All right there, Merlin?” Arthur’s voice was filled with his own particular shade of amusement, resignation, and concern.
“No, I am bloody well not all right!” Merlin insisted, spearing Arthur with a scornful look. “That damned bastard of a king slandered me in front of the whole bloody court! Why the hell do you think that I would be all right?”

“Merlin, if Lot was made King of Essetir, then I’m pretty sure his parentage was not in question.”

“And you believed him!” Merlin accused, ignoring Arthur’s barb while pointing a finger in the king’s direction. “I can’t believe you believed him.”

“So you mean to tell me that—despite what Lot inferred—nothing actually happened?”

Merlin threw himself into the chair at Arthur’s desk and crossed his arms across his chest belligerently. “I’m insulted that you even had to ask.”

At that, Arthur’s expression turned to one of confusion. “What purpose could Lot possibly have for making up such falsehoods?”

That earned the King an ‘Are you serious!?’ look from Merlin. “Lot knows I’m loyal to you, and he knows that you trust me. What better way to turn the situation to his advantage than to make me appear untrustworthy?”

Arthur tipped his head to the side once as if acquiescing the point. “I could see that, I suppose. But why in that particular way? There had to be other, more effective ways of discrediting you in my eyes.”

“But it wasn’t just your eyes he was going for. Note that Lot said it in front of the entire Council. Regardless of its validity, some things cannot be unheard. Now, every time you entrust something to me, they will wonder whether it’s only because I’ve been warming your bed.”

With a groan, Arthur flopped back against the mattress and covered his eyes with his forearm. “I think you’re right, Merlin,” he mumbled, “That King Lot is a right bastard.”

“Sadistic would also be on my list of adjectives,” Merlin agreed. “And manipulative. And quite possibly deranged.”
“Fantastic,” Arthur drawled sarcastically, his face still hidden behind his arm.

“You sure you really want to attempt a treaty with someone like that?” Merlin asked dubiously.

Arthur rolled over to face Merlin and tucked his arm under his head. “Signing a peace treaty doesn’t mean you have to like each other, Merlin. It simply means that you agree not to attack each other. And since Lot reached out to Camelot asking for this opportunity, I can’t afford to discount it. Like it or not, Essetir is still a powerful country. It would be a good ally to have and a bad enemy to make. You saw what happened when Cendred was in power. I’d rather not have a repeat of that, if I can avoid it.”

Merlin rolled his head back so that his neck was curled over the top of the chair. “I suppose I can see your point,” he said ruefully. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Nor I,” Arthur admitted, “but it’s what’s best for Camelot.”

“Yeah,” Merlin agreed on a weary sigh, lolling his head back and forth against the chair as if to massage his sore muscles.

“I gather from your earlier comments that Lot’s been giving you a bit of a hard time?”

Merlin shrugged weakly and looked away. “It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Are you sure? I can say something to him if you’d prefer.”

Merlin shook his head and shuddered in revulsion. “Don’t bother. Knowing Lot, it would only end up making things worse. Besides, I’ve put up with you for the past six years; three more days with him should be a walk in the park by comparison.”

“Oh!” Arthur protested, grasping one of the decorative pillows on his bed and chucking it at Merlin’s head in retribution. He snickered into his pillow as the soft projectile ricocheted off of Merlin’s forehead to land face down on the desk.

“Just wait and see if I report anything back to you, you clotpole,” Merlin groused, rubbing at his
forehead even though they both knew there was no way he’d actually been injured.

“You know,” Arthur said instead, giving Merlin a pointed look, “I still need my mail and ceremonial sword polished for tomorrow, and someone I know scared off the person who’d been tasked to do it…”

“Aw,” Merlin said without an ounce of actual sympathy, “am I actually depriving poor George of his favourite task? More’s the pity.”

“Well, it still needs to get done,” Arthur glanced over to the hearth, where George had left behind the objects in question.

Merlin huffed as if he’d been put upon, stood up, and walked across the room to sit down on the rug by the fire. “Well, I suppose that since you’re in such a bind, I could help out.” He bit his cheek to hold back a smile as he pulled the breastplate of Arthur’s armour into his lap and began to rub it with the polishing cloth. “Because Gods know if you’re not perfectly shiny for your meeting tomorrow, the world might come to an end.”

“Shut up, Merlin,” Arthur complained, and Merlin didn’t even have to look up to know that Arthur was smiling.

Dawn came far too early for Merlin’s liking. He rolled over in his narrow bed and groaned. *Another day waiting hand and foot on King Arsehole. Oh joy,* he thought, before forcing himself vertical and shoving off his scratchy woolen blanket. He made quick work of his ablutions and changed into his favourite tunic; his purple one, the one Arthur had given him as a gift for Yule last year. The one that branded him as the king’s own servant, as only royalty or those directly in their service were allowed to wear that colour. Perhaps when Lot began to rile him, looking at its serene shade would help him remember that he was doing this for Arthur, that he was helping Arthur, and he’d be able to keep silent.
Yeah, and perhaps pigs might fly today, too.

There was just something about the visiting king that seemed to grate against Merlin’s last nerve. But there was also something unnervingly crafty and shifty about Lot, and he wouldn’t have trusted anyone else to keep an eye on the odious man. He was much too charming and charismatic to keep most people’s heads from being turned. Of course, that was only when he wanted to be, which clearly he didn’t want to be with Merlin. But that was all right, too, as the violent distrust Lot had instilled in Merlin kept him from potentially falling under the same spell.

Upon entering Uther’s chambers, Merlin unceremoniously ripped the curtains aside, momentarily pleased by the way the man startled from his sleep and then groaned as he got a face full of early morning sun. “Morning, my lord,” Merlin chirped, his voice full of false cheer. “I trust that this is an early-enough wake up call?”

“As usual, Merlin,” Lot said dryly, his hand gravelly with sleep as he shielded his face with his hand, “you are charity itself.”

“As are you, my lord.”

Lot sat up and pulled off his sleep tunic with one swift motion, tossing the rumpled thing onto the floor near Merlin’s feet. “Take that when you do the rest of my washing,” he demanded breezily. “And let me warn you, Merlin, to not even think about damaging my clothing. No rips, stains, or otherwise “accidentally” ruining them. Is that understood?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Merlin responded dryly as he stooped to pick up the offending article of clothing.

Lot took that moment to stride past Merlin toward the washing stand. Naked. Merlin just sighed at this blatant attempt to disturb him and turned to straighten out the bed.

“What’s the matter, Merlin? I thought you liked the male form?” Lot taunted, presenting his admittedly fine rear as he leaned over the bowl to splash water on his face.

“Not yours, certainly,” Merlin replied, pulling the coverlet up and tucking it under the pillows.
“Oh, I see…” he said, patting the linen towel against his face and then draping it over one shoulder. “It’s one form in particular you like. But I would think you’ve seen Arthur naked hundreds of times, then.”

“That’s ‘King Arthur’ or ‘My Lord’ to you,” Merlin bristled.

“Put away your claws, little hawk,” Lot mock-scolded. “Save them for a fight worth winning.”

“Is there even a point to this discourse?” Merlin demanded to know as he crossed the room to root through Lot’s cupboard to give the man some damned clothes. “Or is this simply more of your ‘entertainment’?”

“Yes,” King Lot replied cryptically.

Merlin shut the cupboard door with a loud bang and marched up to the other man, thrusting a handful of clothing into his arms. “Here. You can dress your own bloody self.”

Lot raised one eyebrow and reminded him, “I believe that’s your job.”

“And I believe you can go to hell. I wouldn’t touch your body with a lancepole.”

Chuckling, Lot sat down on the edge of the bed to pull on his smalls. “You certainly are amusing, Merlin. I am amazed that you think you have the right to speak to me in this fashion.”

“And you think you have the right to speak to me the way you have?” Merlin demanded.

Lot put his legs into his trousers and stood to tie up the lacings. “Yes, actually, I do. I am a king, and you are but a servant. I can speak to you in any manner I wish.”

“And that right there is why you will never earn respect from me, or the people of Essetir, for that matter.”

“I do not need them to respect me; they only need to fear me.” Lot pulled a linen undertunic over his
head and affixed Merlin with an unsettling stare. “Be grateful that I find your insolence entertaining, Merlin, for you do not wish me for an enemy. I am quite formidable, I assure you.”

Lot pulled his dark blue overtunic over his head and while he was affixing his belt, he demanded, “Boots.” He didn’t even bother to look at Merlin, which normally would have angered him, but since he didn’t want to look at Lot either, he counted it as a small blessing.

“Boots,” Merlin repeated, handing them to the king.

“Thank you,” he replied and then sat to slide his feet into them. “I would like the blue suede studded jacket, if you please.”

No, Merlin didn’t please, but seeing as Lot was not actively antagonising him at that moment, he chose to follow instruction. He retrieved the jacket and even held it so Lot could slide his arms into it. “Much better,” Lot said to Merlin, praising him in the same tone of voice that one would use with a retriever who’d recovered a prized waterfowl. “See how nice it can be if we just work together?”

Merlin glared at the back of the king’s head but bit his tongue so that he did not say what he was thinking. “Perhaps with time you’ll come to appreciate me better,” Lot mused.

Merlin doubted that very much. He stepped back and folded his arms behind his back in a manner reminiscent of George. “Will there be anything else, my lord?” he asked, trying to keep his voice calmly neutral.

“Actually, yes. I am going out for a while. I would like you to start on my washing. And then, if you would…” Lot turned and opened a trunk at the foot of his bed. He retrieved a small chest and set it on the table. “I would like you to collect this just before the meeting and deliver it to the Council chambers. It is a gift for your master.”

Merlin looked at the oddly decorated box with poorly concealed interest. Some of it must have shown on his face because Lot warned him, “And don’t bother trying to sneak a peek. It’s locked, and I have the only key.” King Lot opened his palm to show him a small golden key attached to a long leather cord. He draped it over his neck and tucked the key under his clothing.

Nodding, Merlin agreed, “Yes, my lord. I shall be sure to deliver it on time.”
“Good, good,” Lot said, and actually gave Merlin a smile. “You know? We may just get on yet.”

As Lot turned to leave, Merlin thought bitterly, *Not bloody likely…*

Merlin had finished Lot’s laundering much earlier than expected (having magic did have its perks), and decided it was a good time to see if he could get a look inside that locked box. He waited until he saw Lot crossing the courtyard toward the wing where the Council chamber was before he hurried to the servant’s entrance to the royal wing. Once inside the room, he walked over to the table. The box was wooden with brass trim and ornately carved and decorated, although the edges were soft and worn. It was obviously quite old.

Putting his hand over the box, Merlin hissed, *“Tospringe!”*

The lock did not open.

Puzzled, Merlin tilted the box a little so the keyhole faced the light from the window. Upon closer inspection, he could see the very faint rune markings etched into the brass. *A locked box resistant to magic. Curious.*

Merlin held his hand up over the box a second time and closed his eyes. He opened his mind and tried to sense if there was any traces of magic on the item or items inside. In the end, he sighed and gave up; the traces of magic surrounding the lock kept interfering with his senses. He shrugged. If there was anything magical inside, he determined that it couldn’t be very powerful.
If he wanted to know what Lot was hiding inside the box, then there was only one way to find out. He picked it up and headed to the Council chamber.

People were milling about, chatting in small groups about the room when Merlin arrived. Lot noticed him almost immediately. “Ah, Merlin! Right on time.” He tapped the empty spot on the table in front of where he would be seated. “Set it here; carefully, if you please.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Merlin set the small chest down gingerly and then stepped back. Arthur caught his attention with a raised eyebrow and chin bob of ‘What is that all about?’, to which Merlin responded with a tiny shoulder shrug of, ‘I don’t know. I guess we’ll find out.’

Though he didn’t dare turn his head to verify it, Merlin somehow knew that King Lot had not missed their little non-verbal exchange.

A moment later, Arthur called for people to take their places. He and Lot both sat at the head of the table. Merlin stood just behind them both.

“I hereby declare that this Council session is now open,” Arthur said in his most welcoming tone. “I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome King Lot of Essetir and his delegation and thank him for wanting to meet with us. I hope that our mutual goal of peace can be achieved and we may soon call ourselves allies.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Lot replied graciously. “It is an honour to be here in the fair city of Camelot. I too, hope that our countries will soon be aligned most advantageously.”
“Excellent,” Arthur said and pulled a sheaf of parchment toward himself. “Well then, let’s get started, shall we?”

“Actually…” Lot interrupted and then trailed off as Arthur turned to look at him.

“Yes?”

“I hope you don’t mind, but I brought this from home,” Lot caressed the top of the carved chest with one hand.

The curiosity returned to Arthur’s features. “And what is it?”

“Let me show you,” Lot answered and pulled the long cord that held the key out from under his tunic. The key turned silently in the lock and then Lot slowly opened the lid.

Merlin craned his neck forward so he could see through the space between the men’s shoulders. Inside the box lay two ornate silver goblets and two gold coins nestled into a bed of blue velvet.

“They’re beautiful,” Arthur said as he peered into the box. “Such amazing craftsmanship.”

Lot carefully lifted out the pair of goblets and set them on the table between himself and Arthur to allow the entire table to see them. There was a murmur of appreciation that ran down the length of the table.

“They are used as part of an ancient tradition in my country,” Lot explained.

“And what tradition is that?” Arthur asked politely, carefully turning one of the goblets by the stem so that he could inspect the exquisite scrollwork carved into the metal.

“Whenever two adversaries sit down at the bargaining table, we perform a short ceremony that is meant to symbolise the building of trust between the two rulers and to hopefully garner the blessing of the Gods.”
“Two identical coins are forged with one ruler’s symbol on the front and the other’s on the back.” King Lot held out one of the golden coins for Arthur to take. “In this case, as you can see, there is a dragon on one side, and a falcon on the other. One coin is placed in each goblet and then filled with wine. Each king drinks half the wine from their own cup, and then they switch glasses to drink the rest from the other man’s goblet. There can be no poison …”

“…if each man drinks from both glasses,” Arthur finished for him.

“Exactly. And thus, the meeting starts off from a place of trust.” Lot studied Arthur’s stoic expression for a long moment before asking, “So what say you?”

“Please forgive me, my lord,” Arthur replied, his voice carefully pleasant, “but I don’t believe that I’ve heard of this tradition before. Many years back, my father met with King Elhiod in a series of talks, but I don’t recall him ever mentioning it.”

Arthur craned his neck to peer at Merlin. “You grew up in Essetir. Have you heard of this tradition?”

Merlin had just opened his mouth to answer in the negative when King Lot cut him off. “Oh, I didn’t realise!” he exclaimed, turning to look at Merlin over his shoulder as well. “Why didn’t you tell me you served in my cousin’s court before you came to Camelot?”

“I…what?” Merlin stammered, his mouth hanging open stupidly.

“Well, seeing as the ritual is only performed between kings during treaty negotiations, naturally I would assume that if your master were asking for your opinion, you must have been in a position in which to have the authority to answer.”

Merlin cast his eyes downward and didn’t reply, for there was no right answer to Lot’s question and he knew it.

“I see,” Lot said, as if Merlin’s non-response was all the answer he’d needed.

“I cannot speak for our forefathers, Arthur Pendragon,” Lot went on, his voice stiff with ill-concealed disdain, “but I thought that such a gesture might bode well for our current plans for peace between our lands. Do you not feel the same?”
Merlin frowned at Lot’s words. He was forcing Arthur’s hand to where he’d have no choice but to agree to perform the ceremony if he wanted to save face in front of the foreign delegation and his own Council.

Merlin didn’t understand what Lot was playing at. Perhaps this was his way of jockeying for position? If he’d got Arthur to unwittingly insult him and his customs, then it might win him a few more points at the bargaining table? Whatever it was, Merlin very much doubted it was innocent.

Still, Merlin could find no fault or harm with the ritual itself, as much as he wanted to. He could not sense more than a lingering trace of magic from the box, and that was most likely from the clearly enchanted lock. If there was any other enchantment involved, then it was piteously weak and Merlin would have no problem breaking it, if need be.

Meanwhile, it was a very discomfited Arthur that responded with extreme caution and politeness, “Yes, of course I feel the same. Please accept my humble apology if I have unwittingly offended. Come, let us partake of your ritual so that we may begin. Merlin, if you would fetch the wine, please?”

Merlin immediately retrieved a pitcher of wine that had been left on the table with other foodstuffs for the Council to partake of during their session. He waited while Lot placed the coins into the bottom of the goblets, and then he poured the wine until the glasses were almost full.

“Thank you, Merlin,” Lot said congenially once he’d finished. Lot handed one of the goblets to Arthur and picked up his own. Holding it high, Lot said, “One is mine, the other is thine.” He lifted the glass to his lips and drank half the glass and Arthur mimicked his motion. They exchanged goblets and Lot spoke again. “Life placed in the hands of the other in trust so that both kingdoms might flourish.” Lot watched Arthur over the rim of his glass as they drained the rest of the wine. When Arthur nodded to indicate he had also finished drinking, Lot motioned for the cup to be handed back and then fished both of the gold coins out and pocketed them.

He turned in his chair and held both out to Merlin. “Please ensure these are properly cleaned, dried, and polished immediately. Be very careful; they are a priceless heirloom.”

Merlin nodded solemnly. “Of course, my lord.”

As Arthur cleared his throat and fidgeted with the stack of parchment in front of him, saying, “Let us now get down to the business of making peace,” Merlin stopped in the doorway to the servant’s exit
and looked back. Both Arthur and Lot’s heads were down-turned and close together, the light and dark hair a perfect foil for each other. Something ugly and gnawing unfurled itself in Merlin’s chest…something not unlike jealousy.

Uncannily, as if he could sense Merlin’s unrest, Lot looked up through his lashes and grinned knowingly. “Fly away now, little hawk, and do my bidding,” he mouthed and then purposely leaned even closer to Arthur, as if to read something from Arthur’s own parchment.

Merlin clenched his jaw and stalked from the room.

It was well after the supper hour when the Council session finally broke. Merlin had been responsible for arranging the meals to be served directly in the Council chamber, but had not dared make a reappearance. Arthur would surely be angry with him later, but Merlin knew that if he’d had to spend even one more moment in that odious man’s presence (not to mention George) as he sidled up to Arthur just to annoy Merlin, he would have done something awful. Quite possibly with magic…which really wasn’t the way Merlin wanted Arthur to find out the whole sorcerer business.

So instead, he’d done as he’d been told, spending time and actual elbow grease to bring the goblets back to their original luster shine. Then he’d tidied Lot’s room and done his laundry, and while he also didn’t dare go near Arthur’s chambers (because, really, cursing George was little better than cursing Lot on the “Ways for Arthur to Find Out About my Magic” list), he did cast a charm so that any bath that might be drawn for Arthur would stay pleasantly warm for as long as Arthur was in it. He was quite sure that, after a long day of negotiations, Arthur would need a nice, long soak to ease the tension.

He was just lighting the candles in Lot’s room for the evening when the man returned, carrying the closed chest under one arm. He set the box on the table next to the goblets and then crossed his arms across his chest with a sly smile.

“Well, a little sexual frustration does wonders for your productivity, Merlin. I shall have to endeavour
to make it a nearly constant state for you whilst I am here,” Lot drawled, smirking in Merlin’s direction.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Merlin replied, and his voice was so cold, he was surprised he wasn’t breathing frost.

“Oh no, of course you don’t,” Lot agreed amiably. “I forgot, it’s all professional between yourself and your golden king.” He paused for a long moment before adding, “Except for the whole, ‘in love with my master’ thing.”

Lot crossed the room, sat in the leather-backed seat near the fire, and kicked off his boots. “But, since he’s not aware of it, it’s no harm, no foul, eh, Merlin?”

Merlin gave no reply as he blew out the candle-lighting wick and tried to ignore the king’s jibes.

“And I don’t recall that my instructions to you included avoiding the Council chambers for the remainder of the day,” Lot went on, looking over his shoulder at the servant. “Arthur was rather perturbed with you, you know.”

“You don’t say,” Merlin said flatly as he retrieved the discarded boots and placed them in their proper spot across the room.

“Yes, he was quite put out, at least until I gave him a very reasonable excuse as to why you were absent.”

And why did Merlin think that he didn’t much want to know what reason Lot might have given Arthur?

“Enlighten me,” he demanded, not in much mood to play along with the sick, twisted bastard, but needing to know how much damage Lot had done to his relationship with Arthur this time.

“Oh, I told him I had sent you on an errand for me to the Lower Town…to procure some, ah, specialty items that we needed for later,” Lot replied breezily.
Merlin swallowed hard around the lump in his throat. *That fucking bastard!* “Dare I ask what kind of supplies you were in such desperate need of?” He refused to include himself in the equation, even in principle.

“Well, I must admit that the king did not find the need to pry into the matter further after that, although his face did turn a very interesting shade of puce. I feared that he might be overcome by a fit of apoplexy for a moment, but then it passed. We moved on as if you’d never been mentioned. You see? Problem solved.”

Oh yes, Merlin could see quite well, and the picture his mind drew was very, very disturbing. “Why do you persist in spreading such falsehoods? I told you that such activities were not up for discussion of any kind.”

“And I’m sure you tried valiantly to convince your master of that fact last night,” King Lot concluded. “It’s not my fault you did such a poor job of it, though now, is it?”

No, unfortunately it wasn’t; a fact that frustrated Merlin thoroughly. He’d been loyal to Arthur for six years, but yet he’d still believe this rogue king’s insinuations over his own manservant’s words?

Merlin’s mouth twisted into a grimace. “I still don’t understand what you possibly have to gain by these intrigues of yours.”

“You will,” Lot responded with a hint of a smile. “Soon enough, you will.”
The next morning brought with it a bright, cloudless sky that promised a return to warmth that Camelot hadn’t felt in weeks. Yet, Merlin’s mind as he woke was filled with an unexplained sense of foreboding. There was something about the vaguely sinister promise Essetir’s king had issued the night before that made Merlin believe it was more than just talk.

Merlin sighed deeply as he rose from his bed and washed with icy cold water from his ewer. Since yesterday’s Council session had run so late, Arthur had decreed that today’s meeting would start after the midday meal to allow Council members to catch up on other business and allow for the Essetirian delegation their rest. Which meant that, knowing the king as well as he did, Arthur would spend the morning down on the training grounds with the recruits.

Merlin desperately wanted to speak with Arthur, wanted to somehow allay any concerns his master might have regarding Merlin’s intentions with King Lot (again), but, considering the topic, he feared how such a meeting might go. And honestly, Merlin was object of enough ridicule and speculation at the minute without adding to it with a public disagreement with the king.

So instead, he dressed and trudged his way to Uther’s old chambers, briefly hesitating before taking a deep breath and shoving open the servant’s entrance door so forcefully that it banged loudly against the stone wall behind it. A deep chuckle emanating from the direction of the bed told Merlin his plan to rudely awaken the King of Essetir had been thwarted.

“Nice try, Merlin,” Lot said, humour staining his voice as he leaned back against his pillows with his arms behind his head as if at perfect leisure, “but I’m afraid you weren’t an early enough bird to catch this worm today.”

“The worm part’s right,” Merlin mumbled, not quite under his breath enough to not be overheard.

“Ah, Merlin, good for a kind word, as usual, I see.” Lot sat up in bed and pulled his shift off over his head, tossing it in Merlin’s direction. Merlin caught it out of sheer reflex. “Yesterday, I had warned you that there would come a day that I might not be so lenient or tolerant of your insolence.”

“Yes, I recall,” Merlin said dryly.

“Today is that day,” Lot declared boldly, draping himself boldly against the pillows again, his body now naked from the waist up.

“Seeing as you have done nothing to earn my respect since we last spoke, I find that highly
“I told you before, Merlin…I don’t need my people’s respect; I only need them to fear me. Starting with you.”

Merlin crossed his arms across his chest defiantly. “And what makes you think I would ever fear you?”

A slow grin spread across Lot’s face as he rose from the bed. As he was again naked, he should seem vulnerable; but instead, it was Merlin that fought his own instincts not to take a step back as Lot approached. Merlin found that his eyes were drawn to the golden pendant the man wore as it bounced and bobbed against his chest with each swaggered step.

Once King Lot had stopped in front of Merlin, he knew why; the pendant was positively *drenched* in dark magic. “What is that?” Merlin asked tremulously as he stared at the round golden pendant that had an embossed falcon on it. It looked vaguely familiar, although he couldn’t place the mark.

“That is the reason that you will fear me,” Lot smirked. He lifted the pendant higher so that Merlin might get a closer look, flipping it over so that he could see the same mark on the other side. “Does it look familiar to you?”

Merlin reluctantly reached out to touch the item, but Lot tutted and pulled it out of reach. “Looking is for eyes, not hands, Merlin.” He leaned in closer to examine the golden pendant affixed to its long silver chain…and then gasped when he recognised it. The pendant was made from the two coins used in yesterday’s ritual. They were back to back so that only the falcon sides of the coin were showing; the dragon faces were trapped in the middle. The coins were held in place by a ring of silver that, to Merlin’s magical eye, glowed and pulsed with a faint blue light. Its magical signature felt cold and slimy, like congealing porridge as it slid against his own, making Merlin shiver involuntarily.

With eyes wide, Merlin asked breathlessly, “What have you done!?”

“Through the power of an ancient ritual, your king has unwittingly transferred the power of his life and death to me. I now control his fate; whether he lives or dies is now—literally—in my hands.”

Merlin’s mouth gaped open in shock.
“Or, perhaps I should say…it is in yours.”

“Mine?” Merlin said, startled. “What do you mean?”

Lot sidled forward so that he was much too close to Merlin, so that while their bodies weren’t touching, Merlin could feel the body heat emanating from the Essetirian king. “If you care for your king the way I think you do, then you are going to do everything I say, exactly how I tell you to do it, do you understand?”

“No, I don’t,” Merlin answered stubbornly even though he was quivering on the inside. “I am an idiot, after all.”

“You might be an idiot, Merlin, but you are no fool. You know as well as I do that I am not bluffing, for I can see the fear in your eyes.” Lot tilted his head to the side and studied Merlin for a long moment before nodding as if acknowledgment of something Merlin hadn’t even said. “Very well, you wish me to give you a show of my power? Then I shall. Follow me. But don’t forget that you asked for this.” The strong muscles of Lot’s back and buttocks flexed as he walked toward the window that overlooked the training grounds. He opened one stained glass panel and swung it open on silent hinges.

“Behold your precious king,” Lot said with a sweep of his arm.

Merlin walked over to stand next to Lot and stared down at Arthur, his flaxen hair catching the light again and again and he danced and twirled, fighting against two other knights simultaneously. His breath caught and his heart thrummed in his chest at the sight.

“Watch,” Lot said simply as he enclosed the pendant within his loose fingers. As the moments passed, he tightened his grip against the pendant in slow increments. Merlin saw Arthur suddenly wave off the oncoming attack and then put one hand up, rubbing idly against his throat. Sir Leon approached him and placed a hand on his shoulder, undoubtedly asking if the king was all right. Arthur nodded, but then staggered a step into Leon’s side as Lot’s fist squeezed the amulet even tighter.

Leon’s eyes widened as he caught Arthur under the armpits with both hands, clearly supporting a great deal of the king’s weight. His face was a clear picture of distress. And still Lot squeezed, now pulling the chain around his neck taut, putting strain on the links. Arthur’s knees gave out from under him as his hand clasped his neck and his mouth gaped like a fish out of water.
Merlin’s eyes widened in growing horror. “Stop,” he demanded, but Lot gave the necklace another hard pull; Arthur fell to the ground, both hands at his neck now as his face turned beet red. His lips began to turn blue.

“Stop, stop!” Merlin cried as hot tears slid down his cheeks, “I beg you! Please stop!”

Lot’s smirk of triumph grew as he held his prize in a crushing grip. “And you will do anything I tell you? You will do as I say?”

“Yes, yes, anything you ask! Just please…spare him.”

The king nodded as if satisfied and then released the pendant. “For now,” he said slyly and let the chain swing freely against his chest once more. Merlin glanced down onto the field. Arthur was still lying on his back with several knights hovering over him, but the colour had returned to his face and he had pushed weakly up on his elbows.

“And, before you ask or assume, let me tell you how this works. This pendant is enchanted. It can only be removed by the wearer of his own volition. If I am in any way bewitched or coerced, the pendant will recognise it and kill your king. If anyone besides myself tries to remove it from me, it will kill him. If anyone tries to harm me, the same harm will be paid upon your king. Or, in other words, you cannot do harm to me that you don’t also want to befall your precious Arthur.”

“I pray you will not test me on these points, else you shall soon find your adopted homeland without an heir.”

“What is it that you want from me?” Merlin asked warily. “What good am I to your plans?”

“While I shall not force you to actually be intimate with me, you shall do everything in your power to perpetuate the rumour that you have taken me as your lover.”

“Why?” Merlin asked incredulously. “Why would that make any difference to you?”

“Because while my main goal is obviously Camelot, I believe I shall also enjoy immensely watching your king’s pain,” Lot replied with a serene smile. “And knowing you were lost to him before he had got up the nerve to claim you for himself would surely cause him much suffering.”
Pain lanced through Merlin’s own heart at the thought of distressing Arthur in any way, especially an emotional one. But it could not be helped. In emotional pain was much better off than dead, at least until Merlin could figure out a way to break this damnable enchantment.

“Fine,” Merlin spit out through clenched teeth. “What else?”

“You will make sure that your king signs that treaty.”

“Why?”

“Because I wish the transfer of power from Camelot to Essetir to be a smooth one,” Lot hissed, obviously sick of Merlin’s many questions. “There will be fewer questions asked if we are at peace. I’m sure the process will work smoothly once your king realises what is at stake.”

“If you think that Arthur is going to just sign his rights to Camelot over to you, then you clearly don’t know Arthur Pendragon very well.”

Lot patted Merlin’s cheek consolingly. “But you do. And as you don’t wish for him to die, I’m sure you’ll think of a way to convince him. Now, fetch me some clothes, little hawk, and we shall begin.”

“How’s Arthur?” Merlin demanded to know the moment Gaius had entered their shared chambers.

Gaius gave Merlin a strange look as if to ask how Merlin had known, but didn’t ask. “Better. I have put him on bed rest for the remainder of the day, but I expect I’ll only get an hour or two of actual
compliance out of him. He’ll be back at the negotiation table today come hell or high water, I’m sure.”

Gaius sat down at the dinner table and motioned for Merlin to join him. “I am probably going to regret asking this question but, how did you know that Arthur had taken ill?”

“I…saw it happen,” Merlin hedged.

“Then perhaps you can help me make sense of it,” Gaius said, his voice tinged with relief. “Arthur said the shortness of breath came out of nowhere, and my findings seem to agree with his assessment. His heart and lungs seem fine. But you and I know that there is always a cause, even if it is not always organic in nature.”

Merlin nodded morosely and then filled Gaius in on all the pertinent details of Lot’s plans to take over Camelot. He decided to leave out the part where Lot was blackmailing Merlin as well, at least for now.

“I should have known there was something fishy about that ceremony!” Merlin moaned into his hands once he’d finished his tale as he sat dejectedly across the table from his mentor. “I knew something seemed off about it, but…”

“But after the rumour that Lot spread about you at the banquet, you dared not speak out against the foreign king without proof for fear of shaming Arthur,” Gaius finished for him.

“Yes,” Merlin sighed. “Oh how I wish I still had! What’s the worst that would have happened? Arthur putting me in the stocks? I could live with that if it meant saving him from this.”

“No, I’m not sure that you could, Merlin. You were right to hold your tongue. Don’t you remember what happened when you accused Bayard of lacing that poisoned goblet? If you’d been wrong, Uther was going to hand you over to him for slaughter.”

“Arthur would never have done that to me,” Merlin insisted in disgust. “He is not his father.”

“No, he isn’t, but he is the King of Camelot, and in that way, sometimes his hands are tied. While I doubt he would have handed you over to Lot for execution, it is quite possible that Lot would have demanded some other recompense that Arthur would not have been able to refuse as easily.”
“Such as?”

“Flogging. Or perhaps cutting out your tongue.”

Merlin shivered at the thought.

“There is only so much shielding of you Arthur can do, Merlin, much as he might like to...especially now that Lot has the Council wondering about the status of your relationship with the king.”

“My ‘relationship’…” Merlin snorted. “Why not call it like it is, Gaius? They want to know whether Arthur is so lenient with me because I let him bed me. Or worse, that he lets me bed him. It’s ridiculous!”

“Not ridiculous,” Gaius corrected softly with one eyebrow raised sardonically. “Just not true.”

Merlin’s eyes narrowed as he looked askance at his mentor. “What are you implying?”

Gaius sighed with the wisdom of the ages. “Merlin, I have lived a long time and have seen a lot of things. If you think that you have ever fooled me about where your heart truly lies, then let me now disabuse you of that notion.”

“But…I…” Merlin stopped and started a few times, but ended off trailing into nothingness, as he had no idea how he wanted to respond. Instead, he just stared across the table at the old physician in shock and distress.

Gaius reached a gnarled hand across the table to pat the back of Merlin’s consolingly. “It is nothing to be ashamed of, my boy. I can see how Arthur would be an easy man to love.”

“Yeah, once you get past the big-headed Prattishness, that is,” Merlin grumbled to himself.

Valiantly holding back a snort of laughter, Gaius replied, “Yes, that,” he agreed with mock solemnity. “But let’s talk of that no more, for now. I want to know more about this pendant Lot was
wearing. You said it looked like the coins used in the ritual?"

“No. I believe they were the coins from the ritual. There was a ring that sort of encased them into the pendant. I think his placing them into it is what activated the enchantment.” Merlin slid his long fingers through his hair restlessly and tugged at the ebony locks with frustration. “Why didn’t I sense it? How could I have not known?”

“If your hypothesis is correct, then it’s because the magic was dormant, Merlin. The enchantment was triggered by the placement of the coins into the pendant.”

“This is all my fault!”

“It is not your fault,” Gaius insisted.

“It’s my job to protect him and obviously I’m doing a crap job of it!”

“You cannot be everywhere and see everything all at once, Merlin. You are only one man.”

“What am I going to do?” Merlin asked plaintively. “We can’t let Lot harm Arthur.”

“It’s ‘What are we going to do?’, Merlin, not I. And the answer is that I’m not sure, but neither can we allow him to force Arthur into relinquishing Camelot.”

“Arthur would never do that,” Merlin insisted. “He’d rather die than give up his birthright.”

“I would rather it not come to that,” Gaius said.

“Nor I. But I have no idea how to break this spell without risking Arthur’s life.”

“It’s probably best that King Lot not be aware of your magic anyway. Who knows what he might try to get you do in the name of protecting Arthur.”
Gaius heaved himself up and shuffled over to the staircase. “Well, I shall get started on my research. While I have not heard of an enchantment quite like this before, perhaps I shall find it in one of my books.”

“Thank you, Gaius,” Merlin breathed in relief. It might not help, but at least he was no longer all alone in this bloody mess.

“Best get back to work before Lot discovers you’ve been gone,” Gaius recommended. “We don’t want any more ‘demonstrations’.”

“No,” Merlin agreed grimly, “we don’t.”

Arthur was conspicuously absent from the noonday meal. Apparently Gaius and the knights had been successful in keeping that morning’s incident on the training grounds quiet, for there seemed to be much confusion on the part of courtiers and staff alike.

One of the serving staff approached Merlin as he was helping seat Lot at the head table, leaning in to whisper, “Where is his Majesty, Merlin? I thought he was to dine in the hall for this meal?”

Merlin knew without being told what the idle glance over Lot’s shoulder meant, *Hold your tongue if you know what’s good for you and your king*…

Shrugging his shoulders, Merlin said as if unconcerned, “I don’t know, Syrelle. You would have to ask George as to his whereabouts. I have been with King Lot all morning.” Though he hated to, he stepped a little closer to Lot, as if to indicate a preference for him.

Syrelle pursed her lips, obviously dismayed by Merlin’s sudden difference in attitude. She gave him
an up and down glance with more than a hint of reproof in her eyes.

“Is there anything else?” Merlin inquired, his voice cold and his eyes snappish.

“Perhaps you best mind who’s your real master,” she hissed at him.

“And perhaps you best mind your own business,” Merlin ground out, forcing himself not to flinch as Lot reached out to affectionately caress his backside.

Syrelle’s eyes followed the movement and pursed her lips in distaste. “It seems I’ve misjudged you, Merlin.”

Merlin blinked back the prickle of angry tears and lifted his chin defiantly. “I suppose you have.”

The servant shook her head and grumbled under her breath as she walked away, but not before aiming one more nasty look at Merlin to let him know exactly what she thought of him. Merlin closed his eyes and sucked in a shuddering breath.

Before today, Merlin had been highly respected in the royal household. But now, he knew that it would only be a matter of hours before the entire castle knew of this incident. Including Arthur.

“Merlin, attend,” Lot said, his voice tinged with what would sound to others like exasperated fondness. Not unlike the tone Arthur often used…yet another damning indication to the spectators that Merlin’s loyalties had changed.

“Yes, my lord,” he replied, his voice hushed in misery.

A hint of a satisfied smile tugged at a corner of Lot’s mouth. “Fill my trencher, please,” he commanded. “You know all of my favourites.”

In fact, Merlin didn’t know any of Lot’s favourites, but of course, bringing up that fact would solve nothing. So Merlin dutifully filled the king’s plate, although he stubbornly made sure he did not serve him any of the herb-crusted capons or the baked apples, as those were what Arthur preferred.
Lot did give the apples a slightly wistful look when Merlin set the plate back down in front of him. “Did you miss something, Merlin?” he hinted politely, nodding toward the bowl.

Merlin shook his head and bit the inside of his cheek to keep a straight face. He might have to play along with Lot’s stupid mind games, but that didn’t mean he had to like it, or make it easy for him. “I don’t think so, my lord. You said only your favourites.”

Lot narrowed his eyes at Merlin but luckily did not reach for the chain hidden beneath his tunic. “So I did,” he agreed smoothly, and then said, “Pour the wine, then, and do not spill it.”

Merlin snuck Lot a mutinous look as if considering just that course of action, Yet, went he bent over to actually pour Lot added, “For I might have to punish again you if you do…” and let a hand trail down from Merlin’s hip and across the swell of one buttock, which nearly did make Merlin spill the wine.

“Of course, I am beginning to think you enjoy such activities,” Lot drawled and added a light open-handed smack to one of Merlin’s butt cheeks in emphasis. “I may have to think of other ways to discipline you.”

Merlin could feel the tips of his ears burn with shame as he stood back up and set the pitcher on the table. “Whatever you say, my lord,” he mumbled, his eyes downcast. “I wish only to serve.”

“Just so,” Lot agreed, a twinkle of satisfaction in his eye as he took his first bite.
Merlin could not contain the relief he felt when he saw Arthur already seated and waiting at the negotiating table. “It’s good to see you looking so well, Sire,” he greeted, momentarily forgetting himself and aiming a blinding smile in Arthur’s direction.

The minute flexing of his jaw and the diamond hardness in Arthur’s eyes told Merlin that the rumour concerning him and Lot had spread even faster than he’d anticipated.

Arthur did not even acknowledge that Merlin had spoken to him. Instead, he nodded formally at Lot and said, “If you are ready to begin, my lord? I believe we still have a lot to cover today.”

Lot sat down in his chair next to Arthur once Merlin had pulled it out for him. “Of course, my lord,” he responded with a kind smile.

Merlin watched as Arthur sat down next to Lot. He could tell from the slight slouch of his shoulders that the king was not nearly as well as he tried to appear. The guilt of knowing that it was due to his insistence on a demonstration was physically painful. And the waves of acute sadness and betrayal washing over him made it hard for Merlin to breathe.

Desperate to escape the untenable situation, Merlin bowed at Lot’s side and said quietly, “If there is nothing else, my lord?”

But it was clear that Lot knew what Merlin was about and was having none of it. “I realise you must be eager to prepare for this evening’s...activities,” Merlin winced as Lot emphasised the word with a smile, “but I confess I do not wish for you to be out of my sight for so long.” Lot’s eyes hardened as they fell solely on Merlin, full of warning. “Therefore, you shall stay and serve me as needed.”

“Yes, my lord,” Merlin whispered deferentialy as he stepped back to stand just to the side and behind King Lot’s chair. “As you wish.”

This comment earned Merlin a side-eyed glance from Arthur, who frowned but said nothing. “All right,” he said instead, sifting through the stack of parchment in front of him, “Where did we leave off yesterday?”
As expected, the meeting ran well into the evening hours, requiring dinner to be served in the council chambers. To Merlin’s horror and dismay, Arthur had asked George to arrange the evening’s meal and did not even acknowledge Merlin’s presence in the room. With a small, pained sigh, Merlin backed away to let George go by, very much aware of the haughty glare the other servant aimed in his direction as he passed.

Once the food had been brought in, Merlin stepped forward as he had at the noonday meal, quietly plating Lot’s food for him in the way most servants did but he had rarely done for Arthur except in his father’s presence. This earned him yet another quick but ice-cold sidelong glance from Arthur, one that stung at his conscience like a hive full of bees.

Merlin knew that all of this was a necessary evil, one intended to keep Arthur alive long enough for him to figure out how to break the spell, but Arthur’s reaction to the perceived betrayal by yet another person in his life was flaying him alive inside.

When the meeting finally broke about two hours after the evening meal, Merlin made to leave, but a firm grasp on his wrist stopped him before he could even move from his spot. “Do not forget our plans for the evening,” Lot said, as if reminding a forgetful child. “I won’t be long, so I expect you to prepare in my quarters without delay.” Lot’s grasp on Merlin’s wrist was tight, but what really pained him was the way the king’s thumb caressed the inside of his wrist like a lover in full view of Arthur.

“Yes, my lord,” he choked out past the huge lump in his throat, unfortunately aware of how gravelly his voice sounded and how that could be misconstrued as another emotion. Whatever image Lot wished to present of him to the Council aside, Merlin heard the warning in the message loud and clear; that he would tolerate no insolence, that Merlin was expected to go directly to his chambers without stopping anywhere along the way, presumably to find Arthur. Of course, Merlin’s preferred destination would have been to see Gaius, but the result would have been the same were Lot to discover his failure to follow directions.
The fire had been set and Merlin had added the warming bricks to it before Lot had arrived, but only just. As promised, Lot had not dallied in leaving the meeting. “Good to see you do know how to follow orders,” the king said with a self-satisfied air.

“I hope this is what you meant by ‘preparation,’ since this is the only kind you are entitled to,” Merlin hissed in response.

As usual, Merlin’s outburst just made Lot laugh. “Oh Merlin, you do make it such a delight to bait you.” He walked toward Merlin with all the air of a cat stalking a mouse. “Do you mean to tell me you would not whore yourself out to me in order to protect your precious king?” Lot petted at the chain around his neck menacingly.

Merlin said nothing, but the flicker of fear in his eyes as he watched the movement of Lot’s hand must have given him away. “But of course you would,” Lot answered for himself. “And that is the main reason why I have no real interest in your attentions, as comely as you are. It’s no fun when there’s no challenge.”

Lot traced a finger down the length of Merlin’s cheekbone as he said pensively, “You never know, though. Perhaps someday…”

Merlin clenched his hands into fists to keep from flinching away from the unwanted touch.

A knock at the door startled Merlin from his reply. Lot looked over his shoulder at the door and then commanded sotto-voce, “Get on your knees.”

“What?”
Lot wrapped a hand around the pendant at his neck and glared. “Do it now.”

Merlin knelt in front of Lot on the rug before the hearth, his face going hot, but not from the heat of the fire.


Merlin bit at his lip hard enough to draw blood, but did as he was told.

There was another knock at the door, slightly louder and more insistent.

Lot grasped the hair at the back of Merlin’s head and tugged, bringing his face within touching distance of Lot’s still-clothed crotch. He let out a tortured groan before commanding throatily, “Come.”

Merlin’s eyes watered as Lot’s insistent grip on his hair yanked him even closer so that his face was actually touching the front of Lot’s trousers. Once whomever was at the door had witnessed this staged scene, Merlin’s humiliation and perceived betrayal of Arthur would be complete. The thought made Merlin want to curl up in a ball and retch.

The door swung open and an achingly familiar voice said, “Lord Lot, I wished to...” Arthur’s words dropped off into horrified silence.

Lot made a show of shoving Merlin away and pretended to tie the strings to his trousers. “Yes, you wished to speak with me?” Lot replied, turning to face Arthur as if nothing had happened, as if the King of Camelot had not just walked in on what must have looked like the King of Essetir being serviced sexually by Arthur’s own manservant.

Arthur cast an uncertain glance between Lot and the place where Merlin was now crouched on all fours, hiding his face in the rug. “I had thought that perhaps we could spend some time together this evening to get to know one another better as men rather than as kings.”

“Of course, if you wish,” Lot agreed with a smile. “I am amenable. Merlin was just about done anyway, weren’t you, Merlin?”
In mortification, Merlin hid his face even deeper into the fur of the rug and whimpered.

“No,” Arthur demurred, with a monotone voice that sounded more dead than alive, “I thought you might be wishing for company…but it is clear that company is one thing you do not lack. Please excuse my interruption. I shall see you in the morning.”

“Very well,” Lot said, and his voice sounded regretful, even though Merlin knew that he was anything but. “Tomorrow then.”

Arthur’s footfalls were quiet as he backed out of the room and shut the door, and each one of them tore another strip of agony into Merlin’s heart.

After a moment, Lot began to chuckle. “I had expected it to be a servant, of course, but this! This was even better than I could have imagined. You should have seen it. His look of complete and utter horror was priceless, priceless!” he crowed.

When Merlin lifted his head, his face was awash with angry tears. “I loathe you!” he hissed, his mouth flattened into a hard thin line.

Unconcerned, Lot turned his back on Merlin and crossed the room to lay down on the bed. He leaned back and propped his hands behind his head and crossed his legs at the ankles. “I don’t care how much you hate me, little hawk. All that matters is that you love Arthur more.”
It was past midnight when Lot finally allowed Merlin to leave, no doubt to add to the lie that was their supposed affair. Merlin ached to go to Arthur, but he knew it would be a futile gesture, for he could say nothing to his king that would allay any of the pain or betrayal his actions had caused; not yet anyway.

Gaius was already asleep when Merlin entered their rooms. Merlin debated whether to wake his mentor or not, but the thought of having to hurt Arthur even one more second had Merlin shaking the old man’s shoulder.

After a moment, Gaius startled and then leaned up on his elbows peering into the dark. “Merlin?” he asked finally, his voice gravelly with sleep.

“Yes, Gaius.”

Gaius rubbed a hand against his eyes. “What time is it?”

“Late,” Merlin replied. “Very late.”

“Have you been with King Lot all this time?” Gaius asked in surprise.

“Not by choice, I assure you.”

“Contrary to current reports, then,” Gaius replied, his voice nonjudgmental.

“Obviously.” Merlin practically spit out the word.

“Then why…?” Gaius didn’t finish the question, but he didn’t have to.

“Because Lot is a sick, twisted bastard who enjoys causing pain and suffering.” Merlin shook his head as if it clear it of thoughts of the evil King of Essetir. “Did you find anything out about the spell? Any way to break it?”

Gaius sat up on his bunk and shook his head sadly. “Hand me that book on the table and my
spectacles, will you?"

Merlin crossed the room and picked up the tome and Gaius’ glasses, handed them to him and then sat down next to him on the cot. “What did you find?”

Gaius put on his spectacles and began flipping pages in the light from a nearby candle. “I found one small reference to a similar ritual…” Gaius paused as his gnarled fingers scanned down the page, “…here. It talks of trading goblets and embossed coins.”

“What does it say? Can the enchantment be broken?”

“There is no such mention of a cure, I’m afraid. Only that the one that first dons the pendant gains the power to control life and death over the other.”

“Does it mention any way to dismantle the pendant? Anything Gaius?” Merlin asked, his voice barely containing his panic.

“I’m sorry, Merlin, but there was no mention of a way to reverse the enchantment. Any attempt to damage or harm the pendant will cause harm to the victim as well.”

“Just as Lot said. Then Arthur and Camelot are doomed,” Merlin said, his voice full of anguish.

Gaius gently patted Merlin on the back. “There is always a way, and if anyone can figure out how to undo this spell, Merlin, it is you. I have faith in you, my boy.” He said it with so much strength of conviction that Merlin almost believed him.

But late into the deepest part of the night, Merlin’s doubts returned and multiplied. King Lot was indeed a formidable opponent, and right now, he was holding all the cards, and despite being the one with magic, Merlin lay in his bed terrified to sleep for fear of what tomorrow would bring.
Despite Merlin’s aversion to it, dawn still arrived. The dark grey clouds that hung ominously overhead made Merlin wonder if he’d subconsciously conjured the weather, as it perfectly matched his mood. The wet chill of the air sank into his bones, making them ache almost as much as his heart.

There had to be a way to save Arthur from that power-hungry madman. There had to be.

Desperation had Merlin padding silently into Lot’s room in the near-dark, hoping to at least get a better look at the enchanted pendant that currently controlled Arthur’s fate. He stood just inside the servant’s entrance, waiting to see if he would be noticed, but there was no movement from the bed. A faint sliver of light from between the edges of the drapes fell across the face of a pendant like a beacon.

Merlin closed his eyes and reached out with his magic again, trying to feel around for any possible weakness that he could exploit. He clenched his teeth to steel himself against the slimy coldness of its dark power and pushed a wave of his own magic against it again and again, but could find nothing. He opened his eyes and crept closer to the bare-chested king thinking, Perhaps if I could just touch it, I could find something… and then steeled himself, reaching forward with one hand.

“I was wondering when you would get around to trying to steal my pendant,” Lot’s voice echoed around the otherwise silent room.

Merlin looked up, startled only to find Lot’s beady eyes watching him with open amusement. “I… I wasn’t trying to…” Merlin hedged, trying to come up with some sort of explanation other than the obvious one.

“Don’t tell me…you’ve finally decided that I’d make a better bed partner than Pendragon and wanted to make amends? I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist my charms forever,” Lot mocked, quirking one eyebrow in challenge.
He knew that for Arthur’s sake, he shouldn’t even respond, but Merlin just couldn’t seem to help it. “I see you’ve added narcissistic to your already long list of mental afflictions,” he retorted, taking a step backward to make sure he was out of the king’s reach.

“Impressive comeback,” Lot replied with a chuckle. “Just for that, I should have let you try and take the pendant off of me after all.”

“I had no intention of trying to remove your necklace,” Merlin insisted. “I’m not that stupid. Besides, a King of Camelot that dies before he has signed your precious treaty does little to achieve your goal.”

“True,” Lot agreed with a smile, “But that doesn’t mean I’m not up to a bit of torture, now does it?”

The moment happened like it was in slow motion; Merlin moved forward as if to stop Lot (how, he knew not), but Lot had already held the chain away from his chest with one hand and flicked the coin hard with the fingers of the other. The coin spun around and around with dizzying speed, twisting the chain from the force of the motion.

Merlin halted in his tracks, eyes wide with horror. “What did you just do?”

Lot shrugged as if unconcerned and dropped the pendant back to his chest. “Who knows? But I’d say that you better hope your precious king wasn’t walking down any stairs when that happened…”

Merlin speared Lot with a scathing, hate-filled look and bolted from the room. He ran at full tilt down the hallway and skidded to a stop in front of Arthur’s door, more grateful than he could say that there were no guards posted. With the state of things between them at the moment, he didn’t dare enter, but he pressed his ear to the door and listened.

There was silence for a moment, followed by a violent bout of coughing and retching. Then Merlin heard George’s muffled voice, as soft and solicitous as he’d ever heard it, “It’s all right, Sire. Let it out. I’m sure it will pass soon.” There was another round of retching, followed by silence.

Finally, Merlin heard the timbre of Arthur’s voice, hoarse and weak, and too quiet for him to make out the words. “There now,” George said kindly, as if speaking to a frightened child rather than his king, “all better. Do not worry about the mess, my lord. I shall take care of everything. Not to worry.”
Grief and guilt overcame Merlin and he lurched away from the door, half-stumbling and half-running, in what direction, he knew not, until he finally collapsed into a shaded alcove, sobbing and gasping. It should have been him in there comforting Arthur, making him comfortable, soothing him through his illness, not George. But of course, were it not for him, Arthur wouldn’t have been ill in the first place. And, based on what Arthur thought he’d witnessed last night in Lot’s chambers, Merlin was pretty sure his presence would not be desired anyway.

More disheartened than ever, Merlin wiped at his eyes and headed toward the kitchen to start his day.

Unlike his norm, which was to sit with other servants and chat while they broke their fast, this morning Merlin grabbed a couple hunks of bread and an apple and left. He thought it best that he not subject anyone to his presence, especially since he was no longer welcome.

The cold shoulder he got from almost all the kitchen staff did not surprise him, but it did still hurt. He’d known these people for years, laughed and joked with them, cheered them when they were down, grieved for their losses. But now, it was like he was a stranger to them; a foreigner, and, he supposed, he sort of was. In their eyes, in turning away from their king, he had done something reprehensible, unforgivable, something their friend Merlin would never do. And he highly suspected that if any of them knew what the king himself thought he’d seen, he would have been chased from the kitchen with a broom.

Merlin avoided returning to Lot’s room until the last possible moment. When he arrived, Lot was already dressed and just about to leave.

“Ah,” Lot said airily, idly straightening the sleeve of his jacket, “I was wondering if you’d turn up. Your king is still alive, then?”

“As if you actually care.” Sarcasm dripped from Merlin’s every word.
“Obviously I do,” Lot replied casually, “A bit.” He looked Merlin up and down, took in how stiff and statue-like he appeared and grinned. “I had thought that perhaps you were too ashamed to face your master after the events of last evening.”

Merlin’s face flamed and his ears turned hot as the humiliation caused by the remembrance of what Lot had forced him to do—and Arthur’s pain because of it—washed over him in ever more excruciating waves. He clenched his jaw so hard that a tendon jumped in his neck and his teeth creaked from the pressure, but Merlin refused to look down or away. Even if no one else in the castle knew or would believe it anymore (including Arthur), he was still Arthur’s man through-and-through, and he was proud of it.

“Ah, the stoic stiff upper lip. You are remarkably loyal and brave, Merlin,” Lot mused. “Too bad it’s all directed at the wrong person. We could have made a formidable team, you and I.”

“Never!” Merlin spat out as if even the thought was poisonous and abhorrent.

Merlin held his breath as Lot cupped his hand in warning over the spot where the pendant was hidden. The king closed the gap between them and trailed the fingers of his other hand down the long column of Merlin’s neck. Merlin flinched at the touch but did not move away.

“Never say never, little hawk,” Lot whispered, thumbing across the ridge of one of Merlin’s collarbones as if to a lover rather than an adversary. “I think we both know you would do absolutely anything if it meant keeping your precious Arthur safe.”
Merlin kept his head bowed and his eyes down when they entered the Council chambers, but even so, a subtle movement arrested his attention; Arthur’s entire body growing unnaturally taut. Even in the middle of a conversation with another Council member and with his back to the door, Arthur had apparently sensed the moment Merlin had entered the room and tensed because of it. Merlin bit his lip to force back the sob that wanted to escape and scurried to his place against the wall behind Lot’s seat.

No mention was made of Arthur’s reaction to Merlin, although several in attendance shot Merlin disapproving glances in response. Merlin ducked his head still further and blinked back tears with a shaky breath.

The remainder of the items up for discussion with regard to the treaty proposal went remarkably smoothly, and the final meeting concluded with time to spare before the evening meal.

“I shall have my scribes draw up the terms of the treaty for us to sign in the morn. Does that meet your approval, my lord?” Arthur put his hand out to Lot, who shook it heartily.


“Well then, let us adjourn to the banquet hall where we can celebrate the coming together of two great nations.” Arthur stood and beckoned to everyone with a smile.

“If you would permit me but a short intermission so that I might refresh myself and dress appropriately for such a festive occasion?”

“Of course,” Arthur nodded. “We could meet in, say, a candle’s mark?”

Lot turned and aimed a lascivious glance at Merlin before replying. “That should be plenty of time, my lord.”

Arthur’s smile turned wooden and his voice hoarse as he replied with a curt nod of his head, “Fine. If you will excuse me.”

Merlin couldn’t help but long to ease Arthur’s pain as his king and closest friend strode stiffly from the room.
Merlin followed Lot back to Uther’s chambers and set out the king’s change of clothes in frosty silence. He was determined not to say or do anything that might bring on a repeat of this morning’s attack on Arthur.

Lot scooped up the pile of clothing and stepped behind the privacy screen to change. If Merlin thought the king’s sudden show of privacy was strange, he knew better than to mention it. “I could get used to this,” Lot said after a moment from behind the embossed leather partition.

Merlin did not dignify the comment with a response. Instead, he began sweeping the ash out of the hearth and setting a new stack of logs as if the king had never even spoken.

After a moment, Lot stuck his head out around the edge of the screen and asked mildly, “You’re not even the least bit curious as to what I am referring to?”

“No,” Merlin responded flatly, not even bothering to turn around and face the infuriating man.

“You’re learning,” Lot said smugly as if Merlin’s silence were a learned behaviour taught by him… and in a way, Merlin supposed that it was.
Even though Lot was ready well ahead of time, he waited until several minutes *after* the proposed meeting time to arrive at the feast, presumably so that all eyes would be upon them when they entered the hall. Despite his vow that he would let nothing else Lot did bother him, Merlin could tell he was shrinking in upon himself as the many eyes in the room judged him and found him lacking.

As they approached the empty seat next to Arthur at the head table, the King of Camelot stood to greet Lot. “Thank you for joining us,” he said, his voice cordial, but Merlin felt hear the undertone of exasperation beneath the pleasant greeting.

“Please excuse my tardiness, my lord,” Lot said, sounding sincere. “No offence was intended, I assure you. We just had a bit of a…wardrobe mishap is all.” Lot slid his gaze surreptitiously toward Merlin as if to convey a silent message to Arthur that the delay was Merlin’s fault.

Almost unwillingly, Arthur glanced toward Merlin. Merlin could feel Arthur’s gaze settle on him, but he dared not make eye contact for fear of what he might give away if he did. He could not afford to give Lot any more reasons to torment Arthur, and certainly Lot would if he thought Merlin were doing anything to thwart his plans.

Apparently Arthur took Merlin’s refusal to acknowledge him as a confirmation of his worst fears. “Ah,” Arthur replied at last with grim understanding. “Yes, well those things do happen. Please, take a seat, my lord, and we shall begin.”

Merlin did his best to ignore both the din of celebration and the throbbing pangs in his heart. It was excruciating to be so close to Arthur, to know he was in mortal danger, and be able to do absolutely *nothing* to help him.

*There has to be a way. There has to be a way. Think, Merlin; think!* Merlin chanted inside his own head, willing himself to believe it. For the spell to be unbreakable was not an acceptable scenario, therefore he needed to stay sharp and keep his thoughts on the riddle that was the cursed pendant instead of on Lot’s stupid mind games.
As his brain mulled over the problem, Merlin tuned out the world around him. He performed his task of serving King Lot on autopilot; stepping forward to fill his trencher as each course was served, topping off his wine glass at regular intervals. Perhaps after the feast, he would check in with Gaius to find out if he’d discovered anything new. Or maybe he’d visit that secret room in the library where he’d found the goblin and seek out contraband magic books. The answer was out there, he knew it was…

“…isn’t that right, Merlin?” Lot asked with a slightly raised voice, as if he was aware that Merlin was not attending and wanted to gather his attention back to the situation at hand.

“I’m sorry, what?” Merlin replied, not daring to blindly agree to anything Lot had in mind.

“I was just telling Lord Arthur how you begged to return with me to Essetir to carry on as my servant when my entourage leaves tomorrow. Yet he insists that he must hear the words directly from you before he will grant your release.”

“Yes, Merlin. I’m waiting,” Arthur insisted, his chin jutting out almost defiantly. “I demand that you look at me and tell me that you honestly wish to leave my service. After all these years, it is the least you can do.”

Merlin’s face blanched and his mouth gaped open, speechless. *Lot wanted him to leave Arthur? He couldn’t! He wouldn’t!* “No, I don’t…” but the words died in Merlin’s throat as his eyes were arrested by the movement of Lot’s right index finger. It stroked down the length of chain at his neck, as if he were simply playing with it, but Merlin knew better. It was a warning that Arthur’s life would be forfeit if Merlin did not cooperate now.

“…wish to stay in Camelot any longer,” Merlin finished, forcing himself to raise his head and meet Arthur’s eyes. “I no longer want to be so far from home—”

At that, Lot brushed a thumb softly across his lips as if in thought, but Merlin caught the subtle signal and knew that it meant that nothing less than a complete betrayal of Arthur would satisfy Essetir’s king. “—nor do I desire to be parted from Lord Lot. I confess that being in his service has been quite…a pleasurable experience.” The words tasted like ash in Merlin’s mouth.

Arthur actually flinched and then closed his eyes on a small sigh. “Very well, Merlin,” he said, his voice flat and emotionless as he turned his head away from them, “I would never force you to stay where you do not wish to be. Go then, and with my blessing.”
It took all the willpower Merlin had to not fling himself at Arthur’s feet and beg forgiveness. Even so, he could not keep the tremble out of his words when he replied, “Thank you, my lord. You are too kind.”

As Merlin shut the door to Uther’s chambers, Lot began a sarcastic slow clap that made Merlin’s blood boil. Merlin clenched his jaw and squeezed his hands into fists as he turned to face the loathsome man.

“Bravo!” Lot crowed, his mouth twisted into a cruel smirk. “That was a command performance, Merlin. I wasn’t sure if you had it in you.”

“I don’t know why you forced me to say such a vile thing,” Merlin hissed, “since there is no way in hell I would ever go anywhere with you.”

Lot laughed in Merlin’s face. “Said as if you thought you had a choice. Think about it, Merlin. Do you honestly think I’d leave you here so you can warn Arthur in my absence? Not that it would do you any good; I doubt he’d even believe you at this point. And besides, do you really trust me all alone with this?” Lot held the pendant up by the chain.

Even though everything Lot had said was true, Merlin stubbornly did not answer.

“I didn’t think so,” Lot continued as if Merlin’s silence was the reply. “Now,” he continued silkily, “you will go and pack your things and make your goodbyes. And if I hear that you’ve so much as breathed a word of this to anyone…well, I don’t think that Arthur will like the results.
Before Merlin had even gotten through the doorway of their shared living space, Gaius had turned
toward him. Merlin’s face crumpled at Gaius’ worried expression and stepped into his mentor’s open
arms, grasping him tightly about the shoulders. “Please tell me you’ve found something,
Gaius…please,” Merlin pleaded desperately.

Merlin felt rather than saw the physician move his head in the negative. “I’m sorry, Merlin, but
there’s nothing.”

Gaius stepped out of Merlin’s embrace and held him at arm’s length, staring at him as if he were
trying to commit Merlin to memory. “You heard, then,” Merlin deduced, realising belatedly that
Gaius had not been not seated far from the head table and could very well have overheard Merlin’s
conversation with Arthur at the feast.

“Yes,” Gaius nodded gravely.

Merlin’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears and he angrily wiped a hand across his eyes to dash them
away. “I…don’t know how to do this, Gaius. I can’t leave him! Or you…” his breath hitched,
sounding dangerously close to a sob.

“You can and you must,” Gaius insisted. “You must not let that pendant out of your sight until we
can find a way to neutralise it.”

“If we find a way,” Merlin said morosely.

“We will…but I confess I am a bit surprised to see you here,” Gaius admitted to Merlin. “I would
have thought Lot would have wanted to keep you late like he did last evening.”
“No,” Merlin replied bitterly. “He has sent me to pack and to make my farewells, not that there is anyone other than you at this point who would even miss me.”

“I’m sorry, Merlin. I know how difficult this must be for you, but you know that what you’re doing is ultimately for Arthur. Try to take some comfort in that.”

Merlin sighed forlornly. “Hard to do when even Arthur doesn’t believe in me anymore.”

Merlin had barely climbed between the sheets of his bed when he belatedly realised that there was someone else he needed to say goodbye to, another member of his adoptive family he was loathe to leave. With a weary sigh, he sat up and pushed his bare legs out from under the comfort of his blankets, reaching for his trousers and boots.

Poor Gaius was snoring lightly in his cot as Merlin tiptoed past him. He would have told his mentor where he was going, but didn’t have the heart to wake him. Without having to be told, Merlin already knew the physician would miss him keenly, and did not want to disturb his last night of peaceful slumber.

As he clambered down the front steps of the Citadel into the courtyard, Merlin looked up. The moon had not yet reached midheaven, although it was high in the sky, a silver disk that cast a cold bluish hue upon everything it touched. Merlin shivered and pulled his suede jacket more tightly around himself, nearly totally obscuring the tucked-in nightshift he still wore underneath.

With ease of practice, Merlin didn’t even need to use magic to obscure his exit through the Lower Town gate. Instead, he merely hugged the shadows cast by the castle wall and threaded behind a drowsing guard. As he walked, his heart thumped in his chest, less from the exercise and more from the thought that perhaps his soon-to-be companion might have the answers he sought. He forcibly quashed the feeling, though, afraid that the fragile hope blooming in his heart would soon be dashed.
against the rocks of despair.

Tilting his chin toward the sky, Merlin called, “O drakon, e male so fiengometta tesd’hup’anankes!” and then sat forlornly on the damp ground to wait.

After only a few minutes, Merlin could see a familiar dark shape silhouetted against the bright sky that grew larger the closer it came. Finally, the earth shook beneath his rump as Kilgharrah landed not ten feet in front of him. Merlin didn’t acknowledge the dragon’s presence, or even bother moving from his miserable ball on the grass.

“What troubles you, young warlock?” Kilgharrah asked in his deep, rumbling voice that vibrated as if the words had originated from inside Merlin’s chest.

Merlin swiped at his eyes with the heels of his hands and stood. “I have come to say goodbye,” he said, unable to meet Kilgharrah’s eyes as he said it.

“You are sending me away?” Kilgharrah asked, his voice filled with both indignation and betrayal.

“No,” Merlin replied with a shake of his head, “I am going away, and it is best that the person I am leaving with not know of your existence. I must go, if I am to protect Arthur.”

“But how will leaving Camelot protect your king?”

“I don’t know, honestly. All I know is that I screwed up and it is up to me to do something to fix it, even if I don’t know what that thing is!” Merlin gripped fistfuls of ebony hair and tugged as if it would somehow relieve the anguish overwhelming him.

“Perhaps you had best start at the beginning,” Kilgharrah urged softly, his voice devoid of its normal dry sarcasm.

And so Merlin did, the words tripping and falling from the warlock’s lips like water in a bubbling brook; like one long stream of consciousness until every last painful second of the last three days had spilled out.
“You said there was a ritual?” Kilgharrah asked at length, once Merlin’s monologue had finally dwindled into a miserable, wretched silence.

“Yes, with goblets and coins.”

“It has been many years since I have heard of the Sáwol Tréow ritual being performed,” Kilgharrah mused aloud, his gaze unfocused as if he were deep in thought. “It has been so long, in fact, that it was believed that the goblets were lost to the sands of time. Evidently they were not.”

Merlin’s head shot up. “Wait! You know about this ritual?”

“Yes,” Kilgharrah answered. “It is was meant to be a means of trust between warring parties by placing one’s life into the other’s hands as a sign of faith.”

Merlin nodded. It was much as Lot had said.

“It is very dark magic to twist the ritual’s original purpose in order to steal the fate of another’s soul.”

That was also something Merlin already knew. “Is there any way to break the spell?” Merlin asked impatiently. “Gaius and I searched, but we couldn’t find anything.”

“Normally, the answer would be no,” Kilgharrah explained. “For you however…”

“For me, what?” Merlin asked breathlessly as his heart thumped hard against his ribcage.

“As I have told you many times before, you are Arthur’s other half, the other side of his coin, his soulmate.”

“Yes, I know, but how does that fact change anything?”

“Connections such as the one you share with Arthur are rare, young warlock. And as such, they are rarely taken into account when such spells are devised. The curse cannot be thwarted entirely, but it can be tricked.”
“Tricked how?”

“Because you and Arthur are parts of a whole, the curse would not be able to distinguish one from the other.”

A dawning understanding filtered through Merlin. “So the curse cannot be broken, but I can take his place so that it affects me instead of him.”

“Yes.”

“What must I do?”

“There is a spell you must perform.”


“Yes.”

Merlin sighed. He loathed the idea of using his magic on Arthur for anything other than healing or protection spells, and he had a feeling that this would be neither.

“But the transference can only take place during a time when your souls are truly joined.”

Wrinkles of confusion formed across Merlin’s forehead and creased the skin between his brows. “Truly joined? When would that be exactly? Because we are running out of time.”

Kilgharrah raised one scaly eyebrow, a gesture that was eerily reminiscent of Gaius at his most exasperated. “Surely, young warlock, you do not need me to explain the mechanics of such things…”

Oh. Oh! The dragon’s meaning washed over Merlin in one mortifying wave that brought heat to his
cheeks and the tips of his ears. “But Arthur doesn’t even think of me in that way!” he protested half-heartedly, but his heart was already pounding with anticipation.

“If you’d ever actually bothered to look, Merlin, I think you’d have found that you are mistaken,” Kilgharrah replied wryly.

Merlin turned the thought over and over in his mind, studying it from all angles as if it were a foreign plant or a new incantation. “But if that’s the case, then…” he swallowed around the growing lump of horror wedged in his throat, “…what I’ve done…it’s even worse than I thought! Gods, how he must hate me…” He slumped to the ground as if his knees could no longer support his weight.

“Merlin,” Kilgharrah’s voice was both soothing and scolding, “have you listened to nothing that I have told you? A half cannot hate that which makes it whole. You complete Arthur, just as he completes you; you know this.”

He did know it, for whatever had happened between them all these years: Arthur’s tendency to berate rather than praise, to tease rather than respect, to mock rather than listen; for Cedric, and Freya, and Balinor, and Guinevere… Each memory was acutely painful on its own, but they were breath-stealing in their intensity as a collective. And yet, none of it had changed Merlin’s feelings for Arthur; not one whit, except perhaps to make his devotion to his king even stronger.

“Go to him, Merlin, and repair the breach between you. It is not too late.”

Merlin pushed to his feet again and squared his shoulders. “And the spell? The enchantment I must cast?”

Kilgharrah lowered his head and breathed the spell into Merlin in a shower of golden sparks. Merlin shuddered as the powerful magic—simultaneously foreign and familiar—enveloped him, soaking through his skin and into the core of his own magic.

“Thank you, old friend,” Merlin said once the process was complete, a formal bow aimed at the dragon. “You’ll never know how much this means to me.”

“Oh, I think I do,” Kilgharrah said, a small puff of smoke curling from his nostrils as he chuckled. “Until we meet again, young warlock.”
Merlin turned and walked away, and—despite what he was about to do—his heart was much lighter than it had been when he’d entered the clearing.

He was so relieved, in fact, that he didn’t even stop to think it odd that the dragon thought they would meet again even though he knew that Merlin was walking toward his death.

All things considered, Merlin decided it was best that he approach Arthur’s chambers via the servant’s entrance. He didn’t think that the guards at the entrance to the royal wing would be all that happy to see him. Nor would Arthur, for that matter…but that couldn’t be helped.

Merlin raised his hand to knock and then paused mid-motion. Better to seek forgiveness than to ask for permission, he thought, especially when he didn’t want to give Arthur a chance to say no.

As he opened the door, it creaked on its hinges as it normally did. Poor servant that he sometimes was, Merlin had never gotten around to oiling it the way he should have. In fact, he was surprised that George hadn’t gotten to it yet…

“Merlin? What are you doing here?”

Merlin’s eyes snapped in the direction of the bed where Arthur, dressed in his normal sleeping shirt, was propped up in bed. The light of a lone candle on his bedside table cast his skin and hair with a deep golden hue. His eyes were wide with surprise and other sentiments Merlin dared not name. “I… uh…” Merlin stammered coherently, stunned by the sight of Arthur still awake and looking both so gorgeous and yet so emotionally exposed.
As if Arthur had suddenly realised his own vulnerability, he straightened his shoulders and cleared his throat. “I’m surprised to see you, Merlin,” he said more formally, his voice now deeper and razor-sharp with pain, “I would have thought you would be attending Lord Lot this evening.”

“And me,” was the silent accusation that hung in the air between them.

“Actually,” Merlin said hesitantly as he crept a step or two further into the room, “he sent me off quite early to pack and make my goodbyes.”

“And I would have thought you’d have said all there was to say to me earlier. After all, you made it quite plain that you are eager to leave this place.”

_And me_, was the silent accusation that hung in the air between them.

“Arthur, I…”

Arthur stiffened and reprimanded him harshly, “That’s ‘Sire’ or ‘King Arthur’ to you. You have long since forfeited the right to call me by my given name.”

Merlin flinched, the barb hitting its mark with excruciating accuracy. “Please, Sire, I…” but Merlin didn’t know what he wanted to say. He didn’t know what he _could_ say that would possibly make this right again. Arthur’s form blurred as Merlin’s eyes filled up with tears.

A long, tense silence stretched out interminably until Arthur finally prompted, “You what?” His voice was strained, bitterness and wistfulness battling for dominance in his tone.

Merlin sucked in a shivering breath and rasped, “None of this is what it looks like, Sire. It’s not at all what it seems…”

“Then how is it?” Arthur demanded to know.

“It’s… I…” Merlin stammered, his hands coming up to cover his face as he trembled like a leaf, swaying in place as if moved by an invisible force.
A gusty sigh was punctuated by the creaking of a bed and bare footfalls coming nearer and nearer to Merlin. There was the scrape of wood against the floor and then Merlin felt a strong hand at his elbow. “For Gods sake, Merlin,” Arthur said with achingly familiar exasperation, “sit down before you fall down.”

Merlin sat blindly, allowing the king’s hand to guide him into the seat. Then he leaned forward and heaved in deep breaths, trying not to hyperventilate.

Beside him, another chair groaned as Arthur’s weight sank into it. “Now,” his voice said, much closer to Merlin than before, “explain.”

“There’s a spell,” Merlin began, his words barely above a whisper, “a curse.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The goblets, the coins. They are meant to be used for a ritual just like Lot said, but that’s not what he did. Instead, he twisted their magic and used them to place a curse on you.”

“What kind of a curse?”

“Lot took the coins from the ritual and inserted them into some kind of pendant that he wears on a chain around his neck. With it, he controls your life essence.”

“Controls my what?”

“You heard me. With that necklace, Lot—quite literally—holds the fate of your life in the palm his hand.” Merlin looked up at Arthur and said pleadingly, “That’s why I’ve been acting so strangely, Arthur…I had to protect you!”

Arthur shook his head in that way he did when he thought Merlin was being particularly idiotic, but his eyes regained some of their old sparkle. “Merlin…” he sighed, “you should know better than to blindly believe such claims of sorcery. He was probably just trying to scare you into helping him.”

Merlin glared at Arthur with supreme irritation. “I didn’t just blindly believe him, Arthur! What do
As Arthur opened his mouth to answer, Merlin cut him off, pointing an imperious finger in his direction. “Don’t answer that.”

Arthur’s lips twitched.

“I told Lot flat out that I didn’t believe him. That’s when he showed me what that thing could do.” His eyes connected and held Arthur’s own when he said, “Remember when you couldn’t catch your breath on the training grounds yesterday morning? That was him, teaching me a lesson.”

Arthur’s eyes grew wide as he sucked in a lungful of air between his teeth.

Merlin’s blinked back a fresh wave of tears as he admitted softly, “Your dizzy spell this morning was my fault, too. I tried to get a closer look at the pendant while he was sleeping, but he caught me and took it out on you. Gaius and I have been trying to find some way to break the enchantment, but to no avail.”

He didn’t bother to mention the solution the dragon had provided.

“Not your fault,” Arthur insisted, “It’s Lot’s fault.”

Merlin shrugged one shoulder half-heartedly.

“And this is why you’ve been…?” Arthur went on. “Why you said—?”

“Yes!” Merlin breathed desperately. “Yes, Arthur. He threatened to kill you if I didn’t do exactly what I was told.”

“But… Last night you were—”

“That was not by choice.”
“He forced you!?” Arthur hissed as his eyes flashed murderously. "I'll kill him!"

“That would be an incredibly bad idea at the moment, seeing that any damage that is done to him is also done to you," Merlin reminded him. "And he didn't force me, or at least, not in the way you mean. You saw what Lot wanted you to see, Arthur. Nothing was actually going on. It just was a set-up. “

At that, Arthur slumped forward in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. “I…I thought…” Arthur rasped, and his voice sounded hoarse and wretched.

Terrified, but following an instinct he couldn’t explain, Merlin reached out and rested his hand on Arthur’s bare knee. “I know. But I would not… I would never…”

Arthur stared at Merlin’s hand and then glanced up at him. The look of fragile hope that Merlin found on the king’s face nearly took his breath away.

“It’s you, Arthur,” Merlin vowed, “It’s only ever been you.”

One moment Merlin was staring into Arthur’s bright blue eyes, and the next, Merlin was grabbed by the lapels of his jacket yanked unceremoniously toward the king. Merlin stumbled as he went, landing awkwardly in Arthur’s lap as the king wound his fingers into Merlin’s hair and pulled him into a fierce kiss.

Merlin, not exactly the shrinking violet type, gave as good as he got, nipping and sucking at Arthur’s bottom lip until he acquiesced and allowed Merlin’s tongue in his mouth where Arthur could suck on it. Merlin moaned, slid one leg over Arthur’s lap to sit astride him, and plastered his chest against Arthur’s, desperate to be closer.

The king, without stopping the kiss or even pausing to take a breath, deftly untied the strings to Merlin’s nightshirt as Arthur’s mouth slid across Merlin’s cheekbone to his ear. “Gods, Merlin,” he said, his hot breath teasing the sensitive skin of Merlin’s earlobe, “Do you have any idea how long I have wanted this!? Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

Merlin shivered and then ducked his head under Arthur’s chin to suck at his Adam’s apple, “Me? What did you want me to do, walk up to you one day and say, ‘Excuse me, Sire, but when you look at me like that, you make me want to bend you over your desk and fuck you senseless’? When would that have ever been a good idea?”
“Pretty much any time between ‘Do you know how to walk on your knees?’ and now would have sufficed…” Arthur admitted sheepishly.

Merlin trailed his tongue along Arthur’s collarbone as he chuckled, “Ha, I knew that was meant as a double entendre! You naughty prince…”

Arthur’s shrug became a full body shiver as Merlin trailed his fingers down the king’s sides. “I think it might have been unintentional on my part at the time, but in hindsight, yeah, probably,” he admitted, grabbing Merlin’s roaming hands and holding them captive. “And stop that; it tickles.”

“Well, then get the bloody thing off!” Merlin insisted, grasping two handfuls of Arthur’s shift and tugging at it for emphasis.

“Hmm, someone’s impatient,” Arthur mused, standing up and dragging Merlin with him. “And what about you, Mister ‘I’m still in my boots and jacket’?”

Merlin hopped on one foot, pulling off one boot and sock, and then the other. “Working on it…”

“Not nearly fast enough,” Arthur complained, reaching forward to yank the long ends of Merlin’s sleeping shirt out of the waistband of his trousers. “Honestly, Merlin, you’ve been dressing and undressing yourself for twenty-three years, one would think you’d be able to multitask by now.”

“Says the man who needs someone to help him dress,” Merlin joked, sliding his arms out of his jacket and letting it pool at his feet.

‘I don’t need the help,” Arthur demurred, grasping the collar of Merlin’s tunic to pull it up over his head. “I just prefer to have it.”

“You just like the excuse to keep me close to you,” Merlin teased as he stripped out of his trousers and smalls, expecting Arthur to come back with another witty rejoinder.

But he didn’t. Instead, he looked Merlin in the eye and admitted quietly, “Yes. I do.”
Merlin’s breath caught in his chest. Never in his wildest dreams did he ever believe he’d hear Arthur Pendragon admit such a thing to him. The words made Merlin feel bold, and bolstered by the knowledge, he stalked right up to Arthur, wrapped his long limbs around the king and proceeded to snog the living daylights out of him.

“Me, too,” Merlin murmured against the exquisite temptation of Arthur’s lips, “Oh Gods, Arthur… Me, too.”

Arthur’s hands skimmed down Merlin’s naked back and then cupped his bare buttocks, pulling Merlin’s hard cock into sudden contact with his own, still trapped beneath his shift.

Both of them groaned, and then, panting, Merlin shoved Arthur away from him…just far enough so he could get his hands on the bottom of Arthur’s sleep shirt and yank it off. The rest of Arthur’s golden skin now bared to Merlin’s eyes, he stared his fill, tracing the wide expanse of Arthur’s lightly-furred chest and the rippling muscles of his stomach, lingering on wide thighs made strong by years of knight training and horse riding… and his cock that jutted out from between them, thick, and long, and full.

Merlin reached out and spread his hands on Arthur’s chest; his fingers played with the swirled hair patterns and fluttered across Arthur’s peaked nipples.

A guttural moan erupted from Arthur’s lips as he traced the bow of Merlin’s lips with an index finger and brushed the back of his hand along one sharp cheekbone. His other hand grasped Merlin at the waist to steady them both, his thumb fitting perfectly into the vee of Merlin’s sculptured hip.

At Arthur’s urging, Merlin stepped closer, trapping their rigid cocks between their bodies. Arthur’s hand slid around to Merlin’s arse to hold him in place. As their lips met again and again, Merlin slipped his left hand into the soft hair at the nape of Arthur’s neck as he trapped Arthur’s nipple between the thumb and forefinger of his right and tweaked in time to his kisses.

Of their own volition, Arthur’s hips rocked forward to the rhythm, drawing one tortured gasp after another from Merlin as their cocks slid against each other’s stomachs, smoothed by the trails of their own pre-come. Merlin’s hands slid down and around so that he could grasp two handfuls of Arthur’s toned, peachlike arse and threw his head back with a growl as his off-timed thrust caused their cocks to rub against each other again.

Arthur took advantage of the long ivory column that was exposed before him, licking and suckling a haphazard path down Merlin’s neck from ear to collarbone.
Merlin’s knees were starting to feel weak from the heat pooling in his stomach, but after all the teasing he’d taken over the years about being a girl, there was no way he was going to be the one on his back tonight.

His chest heaving and his heart thundering, Merlin leaned back just far enough so he could slip one long-fingered hand down between their writhing bodies to wrap his palm around both of their slickened cocks and pull. This time it was Arthur’s knees that started to go weak as Merlin’s hand slid up over their cockheads and back down again.

Slowly, Merlin pushed Arthur back one step, then another, and another, all whilst distracting the king with his ministrations. Finally, he felt the solidness of the end of the mattress behind Arthur’s thighs arrest his forward progress. Merlin drew Arthur into a long, slow, drugging kiss…and then pushed hard against his chest so that Arthur fell backward sprawled out against the sheets, his arms pinwheeling in an effort to regain his balance.

With a huff of half-laughter, half-irritation, Arthur protested, “Merlin! What are you—” but that was as far as he got before he was adequately distracted by Merlin climbing on top of him and capturing his lips once more.

After a long moment, Merlin pulled back just far enough to whisper, “That should be self-evident. I’m seducing you,” and then he rasped his tongue against Arthur’s late-evening stubble.

As Merlin’s fingers clasped around Arthur’s aching cock again, the king rolled his hips into the motion, panting, “About damn time, too.”

“Cheeky,” Merlin replied, pinching one of Arthur’s fleshy buttocks in retribution. “See if I let you come now,” he harrumphed grumpily, not meaning a word of it.

Arthur reached up and flicked his forefinger against Merlin’s ear. “Now who’s being cheeky?”

“Oh!” Merlin complained, rubbing at his ear with one hand. When Arthur sat up with a smirk and placed a hand against Merlin’s chest, evidently with the intention of flipping them both over, Merlin caught Arthur’s hand with his own and held it in place over his heart. “Wait…please.”

He cradled Arthur’s hand in his own and brought it to his lips so he could nip at the palm. “Let me,” Merlin said, his eyes and voice soft and caressing as his mouth. “Please let me do this for you,
Arthur. You’re everything to me.”

Their blue gazes locked and held, a million tiny conversations going back and forth between them. Finally, Arthur nodded and acquiesced, laying back against the coverlet with his legs still draped off the end of the bed. His expression was open and his lips were curled up in fond bemusement. He gently tugged his hand free of Merlin’s, using it to cradle his lover’s face instead. “Show me, Merlin,” Arthur whispered and opened his legs wider to make more room. “I trust you.”

Once Merlin had recovered enough to make his limbs move properly, he’d risen from the bed to clean himself from the basin and then brought back a warm, wet cloth to care for Arthur. He roused the king from his light slumber to assist in Merlin’s ministrations, allowing his body to be moved this way and that until Merlin was satisfied the Arthur had been well cared for. After rinsing out the cloth and setting it by the dying fire to dry, Merlin pulled the covers up around a dozing Arthur and tucked him in to keep the king nice and warm. Then, with a wistful backward glance toward his lover, Merlin started to gather up his things.

Merlin was trying to be quiet so as to not disturb Arthur, but he awoke nonetheless and put one hand out in Merlin’s direction. “Stay,” he murmured, his arm making a vague beckoning motion.

“But Arthur…if we’re caught…”

“Just for a few hours,” Arthur qualified. “Please.”

Not able to deny Arthur anything, Merlin set his gathered clothing into a chair and slipped back under the blankets with a bittersweet sigh. Besides, he knew that it was likely that this would be the only time he’d ever get to spend with Arthur as a lover and he didn’t want to waste even a second of it.

As soon as Merlin was within reach, Arthur manhandled him into position so that his head was cradled against Arthur’s shoulder and his arm was across Arthur’s chest. At this point, Merlin didn’t
care if Arthur called him a girl for it later, he snuggled deeper into Arthur’s embrace and sighed happily.

Arthur pecked a kiss to the crown of Merlin’s head. “We should have been doing this ages ago,” he mused aloud, more to himself than to Merlin.

“Mmhmm,” Merlin agreed, all warm and drowsy.

They were both quiet for several minutes before Arthur spoke again. “I don’t want you to worry, Merlin. Everything will be all right; you’ll see. We’ll figure this thing out together.”

A cold lump of regret and sadness wedged under Merlin’s ribcage, making it hard for him to breathe. He buried his face in Arthur’s chest and blinked back tears. “Yes, Arthur,” he agreed, feeling his heart break anew at the lie, “together.”

Merlin rose before dawn, hating to leave Arthur’s side after all they’d shared, but knowing he needed to if he were to return to his rooms undetected. Even though the fire was guttering in the grate, leaving the air in the room crisp and cool, he didn’t dare restoke the fire for fear of the questions that might be asked by George when he arrived and found it still alight.

Instead, he stared down at Arthur—now soundly asleep due to a well-earned, sated exhaustion caused by another heated round of lovemaking—and murmured a warming spell under his breath, closing his eyes over the telltale flash of gold. Merlin knew it had worked when Arthur turned onto his side, burrowed deeper into the blankets cocooned around him and sighed happily.

Merlin shivered as he dressed, although it was not from the chill of the room, but rather from the suffocating weight of the curse upon him. At the time, he’d been so blissed out that he’d barely noticed the transference, save for the light in his eyes that he’d hidden behind his eyelids and against
the moist skin of Arthur’s neck. But now the dark magic made him feel trapped and claustrophobic, his bones aching and his muscles protesting as if he were decades older than he was. (And he should know!)

But he didn’t regret his decision for one moment. Terrified as he was at the prospect of dying, if Merlin could choose all over again whether to save himself or his king, the answer would always be the same.

“I’m happy to be your servant until the day I die…” he whispered at last, echoing a time long past but a sentiment still keenly felt. “I love you.” Merlin feathered a soft kiss against Arthur’s forehead and dashed away the tears that hovered on his lashes as he left.

Two candlemarks later, Merlin was knocking on King Lot’s door. “Enter!” Lot called, and Merlin shuffled inside, keeping his eyes averted and his gait slow and laboured, as if he were in great emotional pain. Actually, Merlin really didn’t have to fake that part much, as it wasn’t far from the truth. Besides, the closer he got to Lot and his cursed pendant, the sicker the magic made him feel, twisting and churning like a tempest underneath the surface of his skin.

“Ah, Merlin!” Lot said cheerily, “Right on time, I see. I assume you have packed?”

“I have,” Merlin rasped, swallowing down the bile that threatened to choke him, “but I left my things in my old room in Gaius’ chambers until it is time for us to depart. I didn’t want them to be in the way whilst I was packing yours.”
“A very wise decision,” Lot praised. “I shall have you properly trained up in no time.”

No, you won’t, Merlin thought bitterly to himself, because I don’t plan on living that long. Unexpectedly, that thought brought about such a sudden pang of loss that the sharp pain of it nearly caused Merlin’s knees to give out entirely. As it was, Merlin stumbled forward drunkenly and would have slammed head first into Uther’s old desk had he not put out his arms as a shield.

Lot narrowed his eyes at Merlin as he slowly righted himself. “Have you been drinking?”

“No,” Merlin denied flatly. “Sometimes I actually am this clumsy.”

Lot snorted with amusement. “Right. Well, perhaps with the proper encouragement…” the king’s voice trailed off meaningfully he stroked his palm over the pendant, like he were petting a horse, “…I could break you of that habit as well.”

Merlin shivered, not from fear, but from disgust. He could actually feel the motion of Lot’s hand as if it were touching his skin rather than the coin. It was as nauseating as it was disorienting. “Should I start packing up your things, my lord?” he asked hoarsely.

“Yes,” Lot said. “In fact, it’s perfect timing. I was just about to leave to break my fast with my advisers before the signing of the treaty. We have much to discuss in light of…recent developments.” He smirked.

“So, you were all in on it then? Your entire party knew of your treacherous plan?”

“Not that it matters, but no. None save you and I—and soon your king—know about this.” He tapped at the chain around his neck and Merlin had to close his eyes and breathe around the ripple effect of the motion. “All they will know is that I have received assurances from King Arthur that he plans to be very generous to Essetir in the very near future.”

It might not matter to Lot, but, if Merlin could relay the information in time, it would matter to Arthur. It was always his preference to solve differences peacefully, and knowing the attack on his life was a result of Lot alone might keep the two countries from ultimately going to war over it.

“I will be back in a candle’s mark,” Lot continued, pulling Merlin from his reverie, “and I expect your work to be completed by then.”
“Yes, my lord,” Merlin murmured, keeping his eyes averted from the king.

He startled when Lot’s hand landed on his shoulder in a mockery of the supportive gesture that Arthur might have made. “Cheer up, Merlin; you’ll be home in no time! Perhaps we could invite your family to visit you at the palace…wouldn’t that be nice?”

Merlin clenched his jaw so hard that it made his teeth creak. *Over my dead body,* he seethed to himself, and then the awful truth in that vow sucked the air out of his lungs.

Unaware of Merlin’s distress, Lot chuckled as he turned around and left. Clearly, he hadn’t been expecting a reply, which was just as well since Merlin wouldn’t have been able to give one.

The sound of applause buffeted against Merlin’s tenuous hold on his sanity as it echoed around the chamber of the Great Hall, where the two kings had just finished signing the treaty that officially made peace between their countries. Merlin pressed his back against the wood paneling and waited, feeling the moment of his death creeping every closer. He knew that Lot planned on making his treachery known to Arthur before he took leave of Camelot, and his entourage was scheduled to depart at midday.

After several minutes of being surrounded and congratulated by members of both delegations, the two kings spoke animatedly as they wound their way toward where Merlin was still propped against the wall.

King Lot might have been considered devastatingly handsome to many in his finest formal wear, but to Merlin, he was beyond the pale in comparison to Camelot’s ruler. Arthur looked positively *resplendent* in his immaculately polished armour and long scarlet cloak, his family’s crest emblazoned in gold thread on both shoulders, ceremonial crown on his head. He looked as regal as Merlin had ever seen him, and moved with an almost inhuman grace and confidence. Regardless of the part he was supposed to be playing, Merlin couldn’t take his eyes off of Arthur, enthralled as he
was by the way the multicolours from the high stained glass windows caressed Arthur longingly as he passed by.

Merlin could almost feel the silky smoothness of that golden skin under his fingers again—pressed against his lips, tasted by his tongue—and shivered feverishly.

When the two kings reached what was obviously Lot’s destination, Arthur’s back stiffened and he frowned. “Your manservant looks like he’s about to faint dead away from exhaustion, Lord Lot. Is this how you treat all your servants? Perhaps I should change my mind about allowing him to leave my employ.”

Merlin flinched at the words ‘your manservant’. Even though he knew that Arthur was simply playing a part, hearing him speak of Merlin as if he were a piece of property rather than a cherished friend and lover was almost more than he could stand.

“My lord,” Lot reassured him, “I assure you that I released him quite early from my service last evening. Perhaps it was simply the anticipation of returning to his homeland that troubled his sleep?” Lot turned toward Merlin with one eyebrow raised as if to mirror the question in his voice.

Merlin lifted his head and met Arthur’s eyes obediently. “I assure you, Sire, that my lack of sleep had nothing to do with Lord Lot and everything to do with wanting to be home.”

To his credit, Arthur did not outwardly react to what was basically Merlin baldly declaring that he considered Arthur to be his home. “Very well,” he said with just the perfect amount of resignation and wistfulness to fool Lot, “My apologies, Lord Lot. I did not mean to offend.”

“None taken,” Lot reassured him evenly. “In fact, perhaps you would consider accompanying me on a ride this morning as recompense.”

“A ride?” Arthur asked with considerable confusion. “But won’t you already be on the road most of the day and tomorrow as well?”

“Oh aye,” Lot agreed, “but you and I both know there is a great deal of difference between the drudgery of a caravan versus the invigoration of a sprint across the countryside.”

“That there is,” Arthur smiled encouragingly.
“So could I persuade you? I could do with a bit of wind in my hair.”

“Of course, my lord,” Arthur said, “I am glad to oblige my newest ally.”

Merlin had known better than to think that he would be asked along, and he was right. Granted, Lot enjoyed making Merlin suffer and forcing him to watch while Lot coerced Arthur into complying with his demands certainly would have done that. But Lot was clearly also intelligent enough to realise that being alone with both Merlin and Arthur would probably not play out to his best advantage.

Instead, Merlin had been instructed to coordinate and oversee the packing for the Essetirian entourage and that Lot expected all arrangements to be completed by the time of his return. Naturally, Merlin gave that command all the notice it deserved, which was none. Rather, he trailed along behind the two kings, sticking to the shadows and using both his inborn gift of magic and the stealth ingrained in him by Arthur to avoid their notice.

It was not long before Arthur and Lot reached their destination; the rise near the northern road where the Darkling Woods opened up into a stunning panorama that displayed the Citadel and Lower Town of Camelot at their best; a pearl nestled against the backdrop of green and blue and gold. Arthur reined in Henoegren and dismounted and Lot followed suit.

“What is this place?” Lot asked as he tied his horse’s reins to a sapling and allowed it to graze.

“One of my very favourite vistas from when I was a boy,” Arthur replied. “It’s the place where I first fell in love with Camelot, the city and the people both. The first place where I felt that mantle of responsibility, the need to do the right thing to ensure its continued prosperity.”

Lot walked over and stood beside Arthur, gazing at the incredible view. “It is beautiful,” he
conceded.

Without even turning his head to look at Lot, Arthur said with preternatural calm, “I know what you’ve done, Lot; and I know what you’re trying to do. But I assure you that your plan will not succeed. I will never surrender Camelot to you, not even upon pain of death.”

Lot stared at Arthur with his mouth gaping open. His face was a picture of surprise and outrage.

Arthur turned his head and looked Lot square in the eye. “You were a fool to think you could ever turn Merlin against me…or me against him. He is the bravest and most loyal man I have ever met.”

“But…he is just a servant!” Lot spluttered indignantly.

“He may be just a servant to you, but to me, he is my oldest and best friend and I trust him implicitly.”

Slowly, Lot reached inside his tunic to expose the pendant. “You realise that I don’t have to kill you to get what I want. This amulet not only has the power to kill, but also to torture or maim you…even make you mad…”

Lot saw the sliver of fear that flashed lightning fast across Arthur’s face and pressed his advantage, gloating, “Ah yes, you are afraid of that, aren’t you? How they would all whisper and shake their heads…Mad King Arthur, just like his father…such a shame…”

“You will not harm him!”

Both men turned in shock to see Merlin emerge from the tree line, coming to stand in between Lot and Arthur protectively. “I won’t let you.”

“Merlin,” Lot said waringly, “You have done enough damage as it is. Do not make it any worse on yourself or your king. Go back to Camelot and I will deal with you later.”

“No,” Merlin said defiantly, tilting his chin up. “It is you who will be dealt with.”
“Merlin,” Arthur said quietly from behind him, “don’t do this, please. My life is already forfeit. Let me die in the knowledge that at least you are safe.”

“I can’t do that, Arthur; I’m sorry,” and Merlin was grieved for what was to come, for there was really only way for this to end—Merlin had to stop Lot before the pendant succeeded in killing him, or else the curse would revert back to Arthur.

To Lot, he said, “I am giving you one chance. Remove the pendant of your own free will and I swear that no harm will come to you. Arthur will stand by the treaty you’ve signed and Essetir and Camelot will remain at peace.”

Not surprisingly, Lot laughed, a hearty, rich sound full of ridicule and sarcasm. “And what are you going to do to me if I don’t, Merlin?”

Menacingly, Merlin replied, “You have no idea.”

Lot snorted in disbelief. “A bluff, and not a very good one. If you had any actual means of stopping me, you’d have done so already.”

Merlin rolled his shoulders back to stand taller and aimed one shaking hand toward the foreign king. “Just remember that I did warn you.”

Shaking his head as if in pity, Lot mocked him, “A sorcerer? Really? What kind of an idiot do you think I am? Sorcery has been banned in Camelot upon pain of death for the past twenty-five years. No sorcerer in their right mind would protect a Pendragon.”

“Explains a lot about me then, doesn’t it?”

Lot shrugged one shoulder as if he couldn’t care less. “Have it your way then, Merlin.”

And then a lot of things happened at once: Lot’s hand reached for the pendant just as Arthur started toward the two men, intent on stopping who knew what; a mighty voice that sounded suspiciously like Merlin’s bellowed, “Heofonfyr!” and then a white-hot bolt of lightning streaked across the sky, forking as it reached toward the ground and striking both Lot and Merlin while blasting Arthur off
his feet to land several yards away, thankfully unharmed.

Arthur lay on the ground for several moments in stunned disbelief before scrambling up and rushing to Merlin’s side. He knelt in the grass and cradled Merlin’s head in his lap, trying to ignore the smoke that still wafted up from Merlin’s scorched body. “Oh, Merlin…what have you done?”

Merlin coughed weakly as his mouth tilted up slightly in a brave attempt at a smile. “Saved your life, as usual.”

“Idiot,” Arthur mock-scolded, threading his fingers softly through Merlin’s ebony hair and stroking his cheek. “You’ve got to stop doing things like this.”

“Don’t worry,” Merlin replied, his voice growing ever weaker, “I think I’m done.”

“Don’t say that, Merlin. You’re not allowed to die. I forbid it.”

Merlin’s snort of amusement was barely a whisper. “Arthur…” he said, so softly that Arthur had to tilt his head down to hear, “the pendant. You must get the pendant before he wakes up or all of this was in vain.”

“All of what?”

“I…” Merlin wheezed out another weak cough. “I found a way…found a way to switch the target of the curse.”

Realisation dawned on Arthur’s face. “You knew…you knew the lighting would strike the both of you…”

“Yes. But if I die before he wakes up, the curse will revert back to its original victim. You.”

Arthur’s eyes widened in growing horror. “But Merlin, if I remove the pendant from around Lot’s neck, you’ll die!”
Merlin rocked his head from side to side minutely. “That’s going to happen anyway. Might as well make it count for something.”

“We both know it’s true, Arthur; don’t deny it. Let me die with the knowledge that I’ve saved your life. Please…”

As his vision blurred, Arthur reached up to wipe away what he thought were raindrops. They weren’t. For the first time since he’d lost his father, he was crying.

His hand trembling violently with the effort, Merlin’s fingers brushed against Arthur’s cheek. “No man is worth your tears,” he whispered, reminding Arthur of something he’d said to Merlin a long time ago.

“You are,” Arthur corrected him, cradling Merlin’s hand in his own. “You always were.”

Merlin closed his eyes over tears of his own. “So are you.”

Across the way, a tortured groan indicated that Lot was returning to painful consciousness.

Merlin’s eyes snapped open with alarm. “Arthur! Now!”

Without pausing to think, Arthur raced across the glen, grasped the pendant in one hand, and yanked the chain hard enough to snap the links. As it came away in his palm, the amulet pulsed with an eerie blue light, once, twice, three times…and then went out.

Lot’s eyes opened, but before he could react, Arthur punched him as hard as he could, with all the grief and pain he had inside of him. The king’s head snapped back violently and he fell mercifully into unconsciousness.

Before he even turned around, Arthur already knew what he would find.
Merlin was dead. He could feel it…sense the other half of him that was now gone, a part of himself torn away, leaving a great, ugly, gaping hole behind.

Why did he never understand how very much Merlin meant to him? How could he have not known?

Arthur fell to his knees, scooped his dearest friend into his arms (his lover, his soulmate) and screamed the agony of his heart to the sky.

**Epilogue:**

Consciousness began as a confused jumble of sounds all bleeding in to one another, voices layered and echoed upon themselves so as to make every word unintelligible, before fading back into blessed silence.

Next came the sense of smell, and that was slightly easier to discern the differences in rather than the cacophony of noise: the salty fat from the tallow candles, acrid smoke from the fire, mint and lavender and a host of other familiar healing herbs, the tang of metal and sweat…and Arthur.

Arthur was there, just outside the barrier of cotton batting that held Merlin back from reality. Arthur…I have to get to him! I have to save him! he thought wildly, mentally kicking and pushing to break free of the cool solitude of his mind.
As Merlin reached forward, pushing the membrane separating them ever thinner, suddenly he could sense touch also: the cool wetness of the compress on his forehead, the scratch of the wool of his sleep shirt, the smooth slide of the linen bedsheets... and Arthur’s fingers carding gently through his hair, the pattern soothing and calm, like waves lapping the shore.

Merlin sighed, the soft puff of air brushing past his lips like a caress.

There was a catching of breath above him and then, “Merlin?”

Arthur’s voice was breathless with hope and fear and too many emotions for Merlin to process, let alone name.

Like muscle memory, Merlin’s mouth formed the name, even though no sound came out, Arthur...

“Merlin!” Arthur cried out, and then Merlin felt the touch of Arthur’s lips on his before they trailed to Merlin’s cheek.

“Arthur?” Merlin said again, and this time sound accompanied the motion, though his voice sounded thick and rough from lack of use.

Fingers trailed up the length of Merlin’s sensitive neck and across his parched lips. “Wake up, Merlin,” Arthur teased, his voice teeming with both amusement and relief.

It took Merlin a minute to remember how, but then he blinked and his world exploded with colour. After a moment, his vision cleared to reveal Arthur’s smiling face and his bright blue eyes that twinkled with joy.

“Just like you to be lazing about when there’s work to be done…” he said, tweaking playfully at the tip of Merlin’s nose with his fingers.

Merlin twitched his nose and groused, “Gerroff…” which only succeeded in making Arthur chuckle. He tried again, feeling for all the world that he was trying to speak with a mouthful of marbles. “Whas happn’d?”
“You died, Merlin… Well, sort of...kind of…for a while…” Arthur trailed off as if at a loss at how to explain it himself.

And just like that, Merlin remembered. “Oh.”

“Yes, oh. And you’re never allowed to do it again, do you hear me?”

“Can’t promise that…”

Arthur snorted with exasperation and said wryly, “Try. For me.”

“Fine, Arthur… I will try not to die anymore. Happy now?”

“Not particularly, no, but I suppose it will have to do.”

“How long have I been…out?” Merlin finished awkwardly.

“Twelve days,” Arthur answered.

“Twelve days!?”

“Yes, Merlin. Apparently coming back from the dead takes awhile to recover from, or so I’ve been told…”

“Who told you that?” Merlin asked, happy that he was now able to twitch his fingers and toes under the blankets.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Arthur started out innocently, which obviously meant there was nothing innocent about it. “It could have been Gaius, or Gwaine…or the Great Bloody Dragon…”

“The what?” Merlin gasped with both eyebrows raised in surprise.
“You know, that huge golden dragon that I supposedly killed but apparently didn’t? Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m on about, Merlin. It really doesn’t suit you.”

“Oh. Him.”

“Yeah, him. A little bit of heads up about that would have been nice,” Arthur scolded sarcastically.

“Sure, Arthur. I can see how well that conversation would have went over… ‘Oh, and by the way Arthur, I can command dragons now…””

“Would have been a damn sight better than having him just show up out of thin air!”

“Sorry.” And he was.

“You should be. And how do you even understand a word that overgrown lizard says? All he ever does is talk in riddles!” Arthur huffed.

“I know,” Merlin admitted. “I’ve kind of gotten used to it.”

“And if that isn’t bad enough, I’ve got Druids showing up in Camelot every other day now, asking for an audience with ‘The Emrys’. Something else I should know about, Merlin?”

Merlin flushed beet red and tried to hide beneath the covers. Arthur pulled them back down and glared at him until he cracked. “Well, um…it’s sort of a long story…”

“Well if I’d had to wait for you to get around to telling me, it might have been forever. Luckily, Gaius was able to fill me in on a great deal of it in just a few hours.”

Merlin pulled his elbows up under himself and pushed slightly upright…at least long enough for Arthur to take the hint and shove a couple of the royal pillows behind his back. Merlin leaned back against them with an exhausted sigh.
“Whatever happened with Lot, and the pendant, and the—”

Arthur held up a hand to silence Merlin and then rolled over to rummage in the drawer of his bedside table. When he returned, he was holding the now disfigured and malformed pendant, still dangling from its partially-melted chain. “Your dragon friend did the honours.” He placed the necklace back onto the bedside table.

“Lot and his entourage finally left two days ago, when he had recuperated enough to travel. As incensed as I was, I unfortunately couldn’t go around murdering kings in cold blood—especially right after signing a peace treaty—no matter what the provocation. Instead, I spread about the story that the two of you were hit by a freak bolt of lightning whilst we were out riding…which was at least partially true.”

“Of course, Lot knew the truth of what happened, and I made him aware that if he knew what was good for him, he would keep that knowledge to himself and not try crossing us again. Not that I think he would dare. Apparently calling down lightning is not all that common a gift in sorcerers.”

“It isn’t,” Merlin confirmed.

“Do you have any idea of the huge mess you have landed me in the middle of, Merlin? Between Lot, and all the laws on magic that I’ll have to change, and the Druids, and the dragon—”

“Dragons, actually. As in plural,” Merlin supplied helpfully.

Arthur pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed dramatically. “Oh Gods…I don’t want to know, do I…?”

“Not really, no.”

“Hmm,” Arthur grunted with exasperation. “Honestly, Merlin, you are the biggest pain-in-the-arse idiot in all of the Five Kingdoms.”

“Probably,” Merlin admitted, “but then you’re the cabbage-headed clotpole that fell in love with me.”
“Must be one too many blows to the head,” Arthur said with a smirk, leaning over Merlin now, so close that their lips were almost touching.

“Must be,” Merlin chirruped in agreement.

Arthur shook his head as if doubting his own sanity, leaned forward, and then brushed his lips against Merlin’s.

“Merlin?” he asked after they’d shared a long, sweet kiss.

“Yeah?”

“Do me a favour, would you?”

“Of course. What is it, Arthur?”

“Shut up.”

Chuckling, Merlin wound his arms around Arthur’s neck, pulled the king back down on top of him, and proceeded to do just that.

Fin
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