Serum

by Keandre

Summary

Merlin is supposed to save his father whose life is threatened by the Serum, a drug developed under the Pendragon government to keep sorcery at bay. He doesn't count on getting entangled in a web of intrigue and long forgotten secrets. Falling in love, however, hits Merlin totally out of the blue.

"Merlin stares at the syringe as it is emptying bit by bit. The blue liquid's spreading through his body reaching every part and every fibre and as it takes command of him, cell by cell, his magic recoils and struggles against it. It tries to push the icy blue away with all its force and fight it with all its might. But the Serum has the force of a tsunami washing over every attempt to resist it."

Notes

This idea has been with me for almost a year now, and I'm quite excited that it's finally taking shape. Hopefully it'll catch your imagination, too!
If there's anyone reading this who has a knowledge of chemistry, well, I freely admit that I have no clue. (which is probably blatantly clear to the chemical expert within seconds)
Please bear with me and remember that whatever I'm doing, it is all for the story's sake!

Just a couple of tiny explanations before you start:
The story starts out in the present and then looks back to find out how Merlin and Arthur got
to this point. (I'm sure you would have figured that out for yourself anyway, but I just can't help myself...) And it is not going to be an easy ride!

MU stands for magical user

So, there it goes....
Three weeks before the end

The sting of the needle piercing into his vein is nothing compared to the impotent anger and the overwhelming frustration that rages through him. He watches breathlessly as the medic pushes the plunger of the syringe down slowly and the blue liquid inside disappears drop by drop into his bloodstream. So this is it. Somehow he never thought that the unthinkable would ever happen, but he’d relied on his magic one time too many to get him out of a tricky situation. And ended up in this high security prison cell which has been specially designed for sorcerers like him.

Odd. Merlin barely manages the thought. To end up here, in this desolate place he inspected with Arthur only a few months earlier. He remembers his shock that such a place should even exist. What an irony he should end up here himself!

The cell is small, maybe three by three metres, and is lit by a lonely, dull light bulb sticking out from the wall above the door. Merlin’s only too aware that the walls are reinforced with cold iron to stunt the use of magic inside it and, in time, make the imprisoned more responsive to any questioning.

Its power hit him as soon as the overzealous guard pushed him brutally into the cell some time earlier. How long ago exactly, he can’t tell. It’s no wonder considering he was half conscious at the time, his head blood smeared and his legs and arms tightly shackled. The little energy he’d left, he used to deal with the acute pain searing in his chest.

“That’s where you belong, you traitorous piece of filth.”

The man hissed at him and kicked him into his chest with the butt of his laser gun, aiming deliberately at the raw wound on Merlin’s shoulder. Merlin winced in pain, crashing onto his knees on the rough stone floor. Another blast into his back hurled him across the ground, grazing his elbows in the process, and although his body acknowledged the burn, the pain never fully registered as if his mind considered it negligible compared to his other injuries.

When he collapsed into a curl next to the makeshift bed, he sensed in an instant that the guard was going to go for more and intuitively lifted his arms to protect his head. A second later a kick hit his shoulder and another one went straight into his torso. The cracking noise of a breaking rib and the agonizing, stabbing pain that followed were the final straw to Merlin’s endurance. His body seemed to consist of nothing else but screaming agony and as he lay motionless on the ground, the stench of antiseptic and the bleach that had been used to disinfect the cell was the last thing his brain processed. He could take no more, and it was just as well that mercy took pity on him and released him into unconsciousness.

A glaring light shining brightly into his eyes brought Merlin back into reality. For a moment he had no idea where he was and what the heck was going on. Then it all came back in a flash. He’d been caught red-handed using magic. And he’d been thrown into this forsaken cell which reeked of death.

Once confusion and disorientation had settled, he groaned as the agony of his injuries engulfed his whole being. A second later he wished he wouldn’t have. Not only was his abused body shaking with throbbing pain, but he could feel that the dark force of the cold iron had crept silently over him while he’d been knocked out. He sensed his magic was uneasy and quivering inside.

Slowly everything around took shape and he found himself surrounded by four men. Three guards and a man in a white coat whose voice sounded somewhat familiar.
“Put him on the table!” He ordered, while Merlin was wrecking his brain trying to match a face to
the voice. Rough hands grabbed him and dumped him on the steel table strapping him down so tight
he could hardly move a muscle. Merlin yelped as the leather straps cut into his arms, and despite his
drowsiness and lack of coordination his eyes went golden instinctively to defend himself. He did
hear a man wailing as he crashed into a wall, but the feeble attempt to defy his jailers ended
embarrassingly quickly. He simply was too weak to conjure up the power he needed to escape, with
the cold iron doing the rest to incapacitate him.

“Merlin.” The voice said in a deep, rather satisfied voice.

“Trying to live up to your reputation as the most powerful sorcerer to ever walk the earth?” Merlin
followed the sneering voice of the man in command and held his breath when he recognized the
person addressing him. It was the Chief of Research, Dr. Edwin Richter. Although theoretically a
member of Arthur’s security team, it was well known that he reported directly to Uther Pendragon.
He was not only fiercely loyal to the Governor, but also shared his intense hatred of anything
magical.

“No sorcerer before you has been able to perform magic in these four walls.” The doctor smiled,
appearing pleased. “That should make this little experiment even more interesting.”

At that, he opened a metal case that contained a syringe and a few bottles of a blue liquid. Merlin
knew exactly what this was. The Serum. The one substance every magic user feared more than
anything else. Merlin stared at the fluorescent blue of the liquid and could not help imagining what
this would do to him. Unconsciously he started to pull at the straps holding him down.

“Are we getting nervous?” Edwin said and smirked. “Just face it you’re finished. “No need to hurt
yourself any further,” said the medic in a derisive manner.

Hurt himself further? What a joke! Merlin almost let out a bitter chuckle. Another injury wouldn’t
make any bloody difference to his fate. Because the Serum would finish him off anyway. Once he
was injected he was certain to die sooner or later, just like so many of his kin before.

Uther Pendragon had the abominable formula developed in the seventh year of his government. The
official propaganda had always claimed that its use was in the best interest of the sorcerers who were
injected. That all it did was to prevent them from performing magic and thus ensuring their own and
the general public’s safety. In fact, it was often stressed how human the use of the Serum in the fight
against the perversion of sorcery was.

The citizens of Albion had welcomed the introduction of the Serum because so many were afraid of
magic and its power. With the media playing their part in spreading stories about sorcerers adjusting
to a ‘normal’ life after being injected, the Serum was hailed publicly as the perfect means to contain
the spread of magic while maintaining justice and peace. And it had become the norm that anyone
cought doing magic was injected. No matter what.

And now Merlin’s the one being punished. He stares at the syringe as it is emptying bit by bit. The
blue liquid’s spreading through his body reaching every part and every fibre and as it takes command
of him, cell by cell, his magic recoils and struggles against it. It tries to push the icy blue away with
all its force and fight it with all its might. But the Serum has the force of a tsunami washing over
every attempt to resist it. Uther’s scientists have been working relentlessly to perfect the formula over
the years. These days it is so effective at suppressing magic that there’s no getting away from it.

Not even from someone like Merlin who’s been hailed the most powerful sorcerer of his day.
Because the Serum is designed to increase in its effect the more magic it encounters. People of far
lesser powers died not too long after the administration of the drug, many suffering terrible side
effects and often welcoming death as a relief from their ordeal. Not that any of this has ever been mentioned on the news! No, the inhabitants of Camelot have been kept in blissful ignorance about what the Serum really does.

Merlin closes his eyes and breathes through deeply. So this is the moment that signifies the beginning of the end of his life. God, his hopes had been so high to do something meaningful for his people. How much had he wanted to demolish the threat of the Serum. For a moment he thinks of Hunith, but he immediately pushes the thought away. He doesn’t want to imagine her face when she finds out that she is going to lose someone she loves for the second time within a year.

Just as the last drop of the Serum enters Merlin’s bloodstream the heavy iron door of the cell is banged opened. The medic and the guards look up and immediately stand to attention because it’s Arthur Pendragon, the son of the Governor and Minister of Justice who’s just entered.

Arthur looks flushed as if he was hurrying and the expression on his face is rather fierce. Merlin can hardly make him out from his position, and although there’s no reason to justify this whatsoever, he feels comforted by his presence.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Arthur growls at Edwin while he subconsciously stares at the few drops of blood collecting on the inside of Merlin’s arm.

“I act upon the direct orders of the Governor,” the doctor answers, while he’s pulling the needle out of Merlin’s arm with a smug, satisfied smile.

“Of course you realize that it’s your duty to inform me of any administration of the Serum.” Arthur emphasizes every single word to make his point and there’s no doubt that he’s more than displeased. “So why didn’t I hear about this sooner?”

Merlin knows this tone of voice and mood so well and, even without seeing Arthur’s face, he would bet his jaws are clenched and his lips thin. Angry Arthur’s a force to be reckoned with. And the men before him know it, too.

“The Governor ordered that the Serum should be given immediately after the trial, Sir;“ Edwin mumbles in a much more subservient manner. He knows Uther is on his side, but he certainly doesn’t want to end up in the middle of an argument between Uther and his son. Because when the going gets tough, blood is always thicker than anything else.

Merlin tries to catch Arthur’s gaze, wants to read what’s in his eyes, but Arthur’s still standing with his back to him. It seems he’s mainly here because he’s thoroughly pissed off about being left in the dark about the timing of the injection.

“Is that right, Edwin?” Arthur puts on his most arrogant tone, and Merlin can virtually feel how Arthur’s running his eyes over the man in a condescending way. Edwin’s never been a favourite of the young Pendragon, to put it mildly, even if he’s the family doctor. Arthur’s stated on more than one occasion that the white haired wiry man was Uther’s ally through and through.

The doctor’s claim is most likely true, though. Uther was adamant Merlin should be punished as quickly as possible. He had committed a capital crime after all. Nevertheless, Merlin’s certain that Arthur won’t stand for this man going behind his back while he officially works under his supervision.

“I want you to report to me later, understood?” There’s so much authority in Arthur’s voice, so much natural leadership quality in the way he acts that Edwin backs off.
“As you wish, Arthur,” he mumbles while collecting his implements and putting them back into the metal case. He leaves with a short, reluctant nod towards Arthur.

“And you three,” Arthur grumbles at the guards, “I want you back here in half an hour. This prisoner will be moved to the medical cells on the ground floor.”

“But sir…” the tallest guard hesitates. “He’s a sorcerer.”

“Wouldn’t you agree that this shouldn’t be a problem anymore as he’s been put out of action by the Serum?” Arthur’s voice is trembling. The guards wouldn’t detect it, but Merlin who knows every single nuance of Arthur’s voice, who knows how he looks and sounds when he’s thoughtful or happy or bored, is not fooled. The slight tremor in the words stands for a lot more.

“Now, release him from these shackles and get on with it.”

The men seem to understand THAT at least and after letting Merlin loose they leave quietly. Deafening silence spreads through the cell.

Merlin attempts to sit up, moving like in slow motion to avoid aggravating his injuries further. The ice blue inside him swirls around and grabs hold of his whole body. He carefully scrambles up, but can’t help but groan as he tries to get his legs off the table. His head is fuzzy and it takes all his concentration to bid his body to do what he wants.

Arthur hasn’t moved, still turning his back on him, obviously with no intention of giving him a hand. Why would he? Merlin thinks bitterly. There’s so much unspoken hurt between them, such a heavy load of unresolved emotions, it is no wonder.

Finally, Merlin has managed to sit up. He drags in a deep breath. All he’s able to do at this instant is to stare at Arthur’s back who in turn has his eyes glued to the door where the guards have not long disappeared. The dressing on the back of Arthur’s head symbolizes in so many ways what has gone wrong between them.

Arthur knows he can’t look at Merlin at this moment. Because as soon as he does he has to acknowledge what’s just happened. His heart’s thumping inside his chest and he’s sure that he’s unable to utter even the tiniest word just now. It seems his brain is frozen in shock and disbelief.

Merlin. The Serum. Too late. He’s been too late. Merlin’s going to die. No. It can’t be true. Can’t be. No.

The thought keeps hollering inside his head, growing louder and louder and, in addition to his exhaustion, nearly overpowers him. This is all too much to cope with. The last few months have been sheer hell and just now there are too many adverse feelings suffocating him he has no idea how to deal with.

He can’t face Merlin because the realization that he has failed him stabs at his insides relentlessly. The Serum should have never reached Merlin. Certainly not today. He would have found a way to avoid it, would have thought of another solution despite everything that’s happened in the past. But now it’s too late. And he can’t bear it. Can’t bear to lose the man he once loved. Still loves. Loves.

Arthur pushes the thought away vehemently. Bloody nonsense! Those days are long past. He angrily reminds himself that this is the punishment for sorcery and for attempted murder. It’s what the law prescribes and he is the one that’s responsible for upholding the laws. Merlin deserves what he got.

Why does it feel so bloody painful though? So dreadfully wrong? Have there not been signs hinting at Merlin’s innocence?
And Merlin still waits. And waits. Until something breaks inside him and he erupts.

“Why are you here, Arthur?” he pushes out as if he was in the driving seat and not the one who’s just been condemned to a painful death.

Arthur takes an audible breath. He knows he has to say something, but all the conflicting emotions inside him are driving him crazy and he feels defenceless against them, unable to control them the same way he used to. Before Merlin.

“Why did you come back?” Arthur finally asks hoarsely, carefully avoiding eye contact. ”Did you not do enough damage the first time?”

So did you. Merlin thinks defiantly. “I had no choice,” he says, much more determined than he feels.


“Surely you know what happened the first time!” The accusing tone of Merlin’s voice causes Arthur to stiffen. “The Serum’s killing too many of us. It was the only way.” Why should Merlin lie, when it’s crystal clear his mission was to steal a copy of the formula. So Gaius could study it and develop an antidote. So his people didn’t have to suffer anymore.

“Why you?” Arthur asks, knowing the answer, but just wanting to say something.

“I know the premises. I know the defence mechanisms. I know you,” Merlin croaks the last bit, not only because he’s suddenly feeling very heady and strange, but because the last sentence simply rips his heart out.

“More lies and treason, then, Merlin.” Arthur’s disappointment and anguish are clearly evident and Merlin flinches. How can he understand that Arthur’s never felt so torn in his life? And that falling back upon safe phrases is his only means of coming to terms with what happened.

“Just what to expect from a sorcerer.” It slips out before Arthur can help it. It’s the propaganda he’s been taught from the moment he was born. It’s what he’s been told all his life. How can he reject all this in the favour of one man? It means giving up everything he’s ever believed and leaving him stranded and lost somewhere in nowhere land.

Merlin cringes at Arthur’s condescending words and his heart dies, drowning the last ray of hope in a sea of despair.

“I assume that must be it,” Merlin pushes out. He’s deliberately provocative to see whether he can rile Arthur enough to face him.

“Why would I be different from the rest? I’m just another one of those twisted, criminal magical minds that threaten Albion. Just another sorcerer who wants to corrupt the foundations of this nation. Is that what you believe Arthur?” Sarcasm and anguish are dripping off Merlin’s words and the fact that Arthur still hasn’t had the guts to turn round is making his blood boil.

“That’s what you think I am, don’t you?” Merlin finishes off sharply. And God, he’s so hurt, so torn to pieces when he says it because despite all that’s happened he’d kept hoping that maybe, one day, Arthur would stand up publicly against his father’s views about magic and that maybe, one day, Arthur would be able to forgive him.

Now he understands that he was dreadfully wrong. Arthur’s always been his father’s son. And how could he not be, when he’d heard nothing but well phrased slogans about the evils of magic since childhood. It’d been Merlin’s own fault, his decision to ignore this painful truth because he hadn’t
wanted to see it. He’d thought that Arthur could be different. How more wrong could he have been?

*Of course I gave him no reason to think differently.* Merlin admits to himself, a wave of guilt crushing his weary shoulders. *Arthur. I’m so sorry. Arthur,* his mind whispers, the word remaining buried and unheard inside his head.

Arthur’s listened to Merlin’s tirade in silence, and it feels as if every bloody word is burning him like fire. Because Merlin’s right. It is what he’s thought for so many months and what he’s never come to terms with. He can’t deny that a big part of him still thinks it to be true. As for the smidgen of doubt - he’s so confused and unsure about so many things just now.

And then, as if he’s heard Merlin’s silent plea, Arthur finally turns round and their eyes meet. Merlin’s heart misses a beat at the intense hurt that stares back at him. But there’s anger and rejection, too. Too much of it. For the fraction of a second it feels like losing Arthur all over again, even though Arthur isn’t his to lose anymore.

“Who the hell did that to you?” It escapes Arthur before he realizes what he’s just said. The sight of Merlin, looking thoroughly broken, blood-smeared and bruised all over has cut straight through his heart and pushed anything else out of its way for a second.

Shocked by the unexpected question Merlin stares at Arthur. Exhausted in mind and in body, his voice starts failing him. “What does that matter now, Arthur?” he whispers faintly. “I’m condemned to die. A scratch here and there….”

And at that, everything’s suddenly all too much and he topplles over, losing consciousness again.
“Shit!” Merlin can’t believe he has ruined another sample. This is the third one this morning. It is hard enough to get a hold of blood samples containing Serum. Destroying them “en masse” as he’s managed in just a couple of hours is not exactly a very bright thing to do. The fragile glass plate has slipped his fingers and lies on the floor now, broken in thousands of tiny pieces. The delicate contents are contaminated by dust and dirt and completely useless for further research.

Merlin stares at the shards accusingly and then pieces the glass together with a quick flash of gold and one slight wave of his hand. Even if the sample’s spoilt, he’s at least not wasted the glass plate.

“Merlin!” Gaius chides him, but his voice is warm and full of affection, even if it has the familiar hint of exasperation in it. “You know better than to use magic inside the Institute.”

Of course Gaius is right. He’s acted out of instinct, without really thinking, yet again. Anybody could have come through the door to their lab just that very second to see. And then hell would have broken loose and he would have not only lost a job he dearly loves, but also compromised his family, his friends and the research Gaius and he had been working on secretly for such a long time. And that would have been really the last thing on earth he needed. Particularly at this moment in time.

“I really think you should call it a day.”

The old scientist looks at the young lanky man in front of him. Merlin hasn’t been his usual efficient self in the last two days. No wonder considering the recent events. He really needs to take some time off until things have settled, whatever that may entail.

Merlin nods. He knows his work has suffered after the catastrophic news on Wednesday morning and he’s certainly not been living up to his reputation as the most gifted biochemist in the Institute. He’d figured that work might do him good and take his mind of the dread that hangs over him like the sword of Damocles. But he’s made one embarrassing mistake after another this morning.

“Go and see Hunith,” Gaius adds and squeezes his shoulder gently. “She really needs you just now.”

“Thanks, Gaius.” Merlin genuinely appreciates the kindness and the advice of the much older man. Of course, nobody - apart from his parents - knows him as well as his mentor and immediate superior in this facility. Gaius has been a family friend for as long as he remembers, and he has no idea what he would have done without him when he was just a boy and not quite sure what to do with his magic. Who knows what would have become of him without Gaius’s guidance. His mum does not have magic after all and though his father is a talented sorcerer he’s nowhere near as powerful as
Merlin.

Even the faintest thought about his father has an immediate effect on him. His throat has gone all dry and his heart has started to beat at double speed.

His father. Balinor.

Merlin’s eyes involuntarily flick to the wall where the most important news flashes of the last few days are continuously displayed on a fibre optic glass screen. He stares at the front page of today’s paper, unable to process what the heck has happened.

COLLUSION WITH EVIL

Blacklisted sorcerer, Balinor Emerson, caught in attempt to free convicted Magic Users.

Captain of the Justice Squad killed!

Balinor’s usually not only cautious and meticulous in everything he does, he has years of experience dealing with the soldiers of the Justice Squad. This should not have happened. End of story. The fact that it has and that this is Merlin’s new reality is more than mind blowing.

He’s read the article that goes with the headline. It’s been painful to stomach all the deceit and falsified information the Pendragon Regime has been dishing up to make his father look like a devil walking the earth. When all he did was trying to save some innocent people, a family of five who’d been reported by a neighbour for using magic in their home. At least they had got away. So his father’s efforts hadn’t been in vain.

He had wanted to accompany him that night, but his father had been adamant.

“This is too dangerous, my boy,” he had said with a stern look on his face. “I don’t want to see you anywhere near there.” There was no point in arguing with his father when it came to this. They’d discussed it often enough before.

Now that the worst has happened, he keeps asking himself why he didn’t insist. Why had he given in so easily? He could have saved his father, he is sure. If only he’d been there.

“Stop blaming yourself, Merlin.” Gaius startles the younger man out of his thoughts. “Your father knew what he was doing when he asked you to stay behind.”

Merlin grits his teeth. They’ve had this discussion at least three times since this morning, but he knows that nothing Gaius says will help him feel better about this. His father’s been caught and he’s going to die if he is given the Serum. And as far as Merlin can see it is all his fault.

“Give Hunith my love,” Gaius says and hugs Merlin heartily. “And I’ll see you tonight at the meeting, okay?”

“Sure. See you later Gaius.” Merlin attempts a smile. “And thanks, you know …” Gaius just claps his shoulder in acknowledgement and then Merlin is out of the door.

He whisks along the corridor, his mind running over ideas and options what their next course of action has to be. One thing’s for sure. There’s no way he’s just going to stand by and watch his
father die at the hand of the Pendragons. Something needs to be done, and pretty soon, too.

Half an hour later he lets himself into the house where he grew up.

“Merlin!” Hunith has appeared at the living room door. She’s pale and her red eyes give away that she’s been crying. Not that she ever does it in front of him or anyone else for that. She’s keeping up appearances and she does it very well. Underneath it all though, Merlin’s certain, she’s breaking apart.

Wordlessly Merlin opens his arms to envelope his mother in a tight embrace. He can feel the sigh of relief she exhales when she rests her head on his chest.

“Thanks for coming,” she murmurs and holds onto her son like a lost child. Merlin automatically starts wrapping his magic around her, cocooning her in it like in a huge pink ball of cotton wool.

“Onlæ,” he whispers and is gratified when he feels her body respond to the relaxation spell.

Hunith looks up at him and gently strokes across his cheek. “What would I do without you, my son?” And she rewards him with a tiny smile and a gentle kiss.

Merlin’s eyes are tearing up despite his best effort to remain calm and collected for her. Of course this is exactly why Balinor had made it a rule from his first day in the FMU that they should never go out on a mission together.

“Somebody needs to be there for Hunith, should anything happen.” He’d often explained when Merlin had been left behind on an assignment Balinor was leading.

“Come.” Merlin gently coaxes his mother into the living room and they get settled on the cosy settee.

“Have you heard anything new?” Merlin enquires, anticipating the answer but asking anyway to get Hunith to talk.

“Nothing official, Merlin.” She shakes her head. “But Will says that the trial will probably take place later today.”

Thank God for Will who’s able to get some kind of information out of the Justice Ministry. Although he’s not disclosed exactly how. From what Merlin knows he has got some kind of informer inside. Not that he really cares as long as they find out what the latest moves of Pendragon government are and how Balinor’s case is proceeding. Lawsuits involving magic offences are usually kept completely behind locked doors and out of the public eye.

“Later today, hmmm,” Merlin repeats. His mum knows what’s coming, and so does he. The Pendragons don’t waste time when there’s a case against the use of magic. The verdict will, no doubt, come through by the evening. He’s glad he listened to Gaius and left work early. Hunith needs his support 24/7 just now. She’s going to rely on his strength when the inevitable happens.

“They’re going to give him the Serum, aren’t they?” she asks breathlessly, barely able to hide the anguish in her voice. He notes that she’s phrased the comment as a half question, as if there’s some hope that she might be mistaken. Even though it’s common knowledge what happens by default to sorcerers convicted of doing magic. He fervently wishes he could contradict her. But Balinor has not only got magic, he has also killed one of the Pendragon’s security men. And that alone demands the severest of all punishments.

“How long do you reckon has he got after it?”
“Nobody can be sure of it, mum.” Merlin does not really want to say what he thinks because it would feel like kicking someone who is already down. He is also not certain that he can face the cold truth himself.

Hunith has started trembling and Merlin hates to see his mother who’s calm and composed by nature so upset and nervous.

“Have you been sleeping at all?” He strokes over her hair trying to calm her again.

Hunith throws him a look that implies that he already knows the answer to this.

“You need some rest. Shall I help?” Merlin offers and is glad when she agrees.

“Just for the afternoon though, Merlin.” She gives her consent. “I need to be awake for the meeting this evening.”

“Sure. Of course you need to be there.” Merlin places his hands on her head, closes his eyes and visualizes his mother sleeping soundly.

“Beslæpan!” he mutters under his breath and a second later Hunith relaxes into his arms and then her breathing becomes steady and regular. Merlin carefully places his mum’s sleepy form on to the sofa and covers her with the woolly blanket that is thrown over the arm rest. Then he quietly closes the living room door and wanders into the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea and find something to eat. He walks over to the fridge and stops short in front of it.

There’s a family photograph pinned to the door. It was taken five months ago, before Morgana went off to Avalon University for her third year of English Literature. Actually she should be back soon. He tried to put her off coming home, not wanting to disrupt her education but she would not hear any of it.

“Balinor might not be my biological father …,” she’d said “but he’s the only dad I ever had and I’ll be damned if I miss out on showing him my support in a time when it matters. And Hunith will be glad of some female company.” And that had been the end of it.

As if on cue Merlin hears a key in the front door and seconds later Morgana’s in the kitchen hugging him.

“I came as quickly as I could.” She throws the car key on the sideboard and dumps her bag in a corner.

“You must have broken quite a few speed records on the motorway.” Merlin looks at her with a big question mark on his face.

“I did make the engine spin that little bit faster.” Morgana grins and winks at her foster brother, knowing full well that he would never condone such reckless use of magic. Then they both give each other a quick once over as it’s been weeks since they have last met.

“You are looking thinner again.” Morgana teases. But still so bloody handsome. Something inside her adds before she can stop it. Damn. She really had thought that she had this under
control. Time to change the topic. That is not why she’s here after all.

“So how are things?” she enquires, turning all serious, and Merlin takes a couple of minutes to fill her in.

“I hate the Pendragons,” Morgana pushes out when Merlin stops and her cheeks are flushed with annoyance. “I hate them more than I’ve ever done before. We all deserve to have a life in this country, and it is bloody time that they’re shown that we’re a force to be reckoned with.”

Merlin can feel the anger radiating from her. If anything, Morgana has become even more radical since she’s been at uni and met a crowd of sorcerers who share her belief that the current regime should be ousted by magic. For once and for all. The sooner, the better. Magic should reign freely again, they say, as it used to be before the present governor came into power.

“Remember when we were kids and we made up plans how we would take revenge on the Pendragons for things they’d done?” Morgana reminisces and her brow furrows deeply.

“Yeah, poor Uther and Arthur died quite a few unorthodox deaths.” Merlin smirks.

“We could still rekindle some of those ideas…,” Morgana suggests tentatively.

“Wish it was as easy.”

“Maybe it is?” Morgana catches Merlin’s gaze and looks at him as if she expects something to happen. When Merlin just shakes his head and sighs, mumbling something like. “This is the real world though.” She clenches her teeth and turns away.

Merlin who’s known her for so long is quite aware that something is amiss. Of course he understands why she feels so strongly about the Pendragons. They stand for everything that is wrong in Albion from her point of view. Uther has always been the main catalyst for all the evil that has befallen MUs all over the country. Morgana’s parents included. They were both killed in a raid by soldiers of the Justice Squad.

Merlin remembers when Hunith had come home one day when he was seven, holding a small distraught girl of about two in her arms.

“Alator found her. She has magic,” His mum had said. “There’s no one of her family left. She needs a home that understands her. Poor little thing.” Merlin can still clearly recall his father lifting Morgana onto his lap without any hesitation.

“What’s her name?” He had looked to Hunith for an answer but was surprised when the girl answered herself, quite unafraid and forward. “I’m Morgana. Are you my new dad?”

Balinor had chuckled and placed a kiss onto her head. “You’re a brave one, aren’t you?” he’d said and that had sealed their bond.

Yes, Morgana has good reason to detest the Pendragons, but Merlin doesn’t believe in violent solutions by default. It has never been his way, or indeed Balinor’s. As much as he loves his sister he will never agree with her on that point. She has always viewed her magic as a tool to get what she wanted, even when she was a little girl.

“You know that a war to free magic will not solve anything, Morgana.” Merlin tries to appease her. “And so many lives would be lost, on both sides.”

“What’s the point of all your power if you can never use it? It’s pointless. Imagine what you could
do, how you could shape the world…” Morgana’s temper flares up, just as it always has when she
tries to argue her opinion. Her eyes are blazing and her body is shaking with contained anger.
Although Morgana has never held back in speaking out against the government, this outrage is on a
different scale. She pauses as she notices Merlin’s lips purse and his eyes shadow with concern. He’s
worried. Morgana notices his side way glance and quickly reins herself in. The last thing she wants
to do just now is to fall out with Merlin.

“All I mean is that something needs to be done. This can’t go on any longer. Look where it got us.
Look at dad…” And at that her voice falters.

“I know you’re upset,” Merlin mutters and gently pulls her close. “And maybe one day there will be
a fair and just Albion for all its citizens. All we have to think about now is how to save our father.”
Morgana knows when to back down.

“Sorry I was getting carried away. I am so worried …” She bites her lips and Merlin realizes that
he’s forgotten for a moment that this is as hard on her as it is on him and his mum.

“Sure, sis. Come here.” Then he folds his arms around her and they stand quietly in their embrace.
Merlin’s trying to comfort her, offering strength and patience and brotherly love and gently rubs her
back.

And though Morgana understands his intention and appreciates his kindness with all her heart, she
cannot help but notice the warmth of his body and the familiar scent of his after shave. And she
instinctively wants to lean into him and … Damn. This can’t go on any longer. It has to stop.
Because Merlin is her family. And she won’t risk losing that.

And so Morgana unwraps herself a bit too hastily out of his embrace. “All calm here again,” she
mutters and squeezes his arm before she adds. “Better get a shower before the FMU descend on us!”
She gives Merlin a vague smile, turns, and jogs upstairs.

Merlin gazes blankly at the staircase where Morgana has just disappeared. “Typical Morgana,” he
mumbles and then sneaks into the living room to check on Hunith who is still fast asleep. Time for
him to get a quick breather, too.

When Merlin opens the door to his old bedroom he immediately feels like a teenager again.
Everything has been left exactly the way it was on the day he left for university. The old posters are
still gracing the walls and books and magazines still teetering on a pile on the desk near the window.

It brings back so many memories. Of his life then, his friends, his sister and his parents. And his
father, of course.

There are photos of their holiday at the southern beach of Carleon on a pinboard on the wall. Balinor
had taught him to swim that summer and how to catch fish with the wink of an eye. Then there are
the books on magic his father gave him to read when he became aware of his powers. They’ve been
sitting on his book shelf to this day, disguised as reference books of some kind.

Merlin throws himself onto the freshly made up bed – no doubt Hunith has anticipated him staying
for the night – pulls his arms behind his head and closes his eyes.

Father. He whispers in his head hoping that maybe this time he will reach Balinor. Father. He
repeats, swearing not to give up yet. Are you there?

But Balinor doesn’t answer. The silence is deafening and Merlin’s heart sinks.
It had been on his tenth birthday when they’d connected by telepathy and over the years it had strengthened their bond in so many ways. Merlin had always looked up to his father, admired him for his wisdom, his goodness and his tenacity and he tried to make him proud. But what would Balinor want him to do now? How can he sit back and watch his demise rather than go out and try to do SOMETHING to save him.

Merlin’s lips twitch when he thinks about it. Because if you look at it in the cold light of the days Balinor is a rebel. Even a criminal if you define him by the laws of the country. Neither view tells the real story. Namely the story of a man who’s been risking his life relentlessly to save others. People who are innocent, but simply pursued for their magic. People who are caught using magic for the good, like healing and seeing. People who perform magic to help others for the benefit of all.

While Uther Pendragon hates magic so much that he can’t see beyond its existence, Balinor knows where to draw a fair line. Those sorcerers who abuse their powers will never receive a helping hand from him and he’s been called a hypocrite and traitor for that by the radical fractions in the FMU. To Merlin though Balinor is a hero, a man of integrity who understands what good and evil means.

Merlin calls out for his father a third time, not expecting an answer, but as this is all he can do at the moment, he tries anyway. When no reply is forthcoming, he lets his head sink onto his pillow and sets his mind free. He needs to clear his thoughts before this evening.

At the stroke of nine the inner circle of the FMU has congregated and settled around the round table in Hunith’s kitchen.

Merlin has greeted them all: Gaius and Alator, the oldest family friends and Balinor’s closest allies. Alice and Hunith, the grand dames of the circle. Gilli and Will, his childhood friends, and of course Morgana and himself.

They have been heading the actions of the FMU for years and each of them represents a certain part of the magic community: seers, healers, druids and sorcerers of all kinds. Their faces are all sombre. Balinor is their leader and his capture has rattled them. As the oldest present Gaius opens the meeting and is the first to speak.

“We all know why we’re here today.” He looks round the table receiving acknowledging looks while Merlin gives him a curt nod. “So let’s get straight down to it: What are we going to do?”

“Just blast him out,” Morgana suggests in the full knowledge that most of those present would never agree to this, and she can see Merlin raising his eyebrows.

“Morgana,” Hunith scolds her tenderly, but she has not let go of her daughter’s hand that’s tightly wrapped around hers.

“I think that’s not quite the solution we’re looking for.” Gaius speaks out what everyone’s thinking and shortly states what his own opinion.

“If what Will’s contact has told us is correct, Balinor will be convicted and injected tomorrow morning. From experience we know that he’s got between three and five months after that. If we want to save him we have to find an antidote for the Serum as quickly as we can.”

Silence descends on the room. Time is not exactly on their side in this endeavour.

“How far have you got with decoding the Serum?” Gilli asks and looks expectantly at Gaius and Merlin.

“Not far enough to produce the antidote. There’s something we seem to be missing.” Merlin admits
rather sheepishly. Breaking samples like he did this morning has also not been very helpful.

“Yes, there’s a missing link to the formula that we can’t seem to figure out, no matter what we’ve tried,” Gaius confirms reluctantly.

Developing an antidote will probably take long enough, although magic could help that along, but without the complete chemical composition of the Serum it will certainly never happen.

“So what we need to do is to get the proper formula, first of all.” Alator sums up. “They must have a blueprint somewhere in the Ministry of Justice.”

“Great!” Gilli growls in exasperation. “We’ve never been able to get through those doors so far.” Which has been due to the well-established fact that the Ministry is equipped with every security measure known to mankind. “Surely there’s no way we could break in?”

“That’s not what anyone’s suggesting, Gilli.” Will is pulling a face at his friend. “But we must either find a way of getting inside the Ministry to locate the formula or persuade Uther to hand it over voluntarily.”

“Uther? Hand over the formula voluntarily? And YOU think I’ve lost my mind.” Gilli looks at Will as if he’s grown a purple beard, a pink tail and angel’s wings in one unexpected move.

“Just think of it, Gilli. All we need is something we can bargain against the formula.” Something that Uther would trade for it without thinking.”

“There aren’t so many things that precious to Uther,” Gilli retorts sarcastically.

“Hold on, Gilli. Will’s right.” Morgana has been hit by a wave of inspiration. “And it’s not so much a case of something rather than who.”

All eyes turn to her and there is a sudden hush in the room.

“Arthur,” Morgana states triumphantly.

“What are you saying, child?” Gaius looks at her sceptically, a bit like a school teacher after a pupil has given an unexpected answer.

“If we believe the press and all those reports we’ve seen over the years Arthur is the one person Uther genuinely cares about.” Everyone around the table nods in agreement.

“Hence, he’s the perfect bargaining tool,” Morgana finishes in conclusion.

“Did I hear you right there, Morgana?” Alator throws in. “You want to trade Arthur against the formula?”

“That and handing over dad.” Morgana’s mouth is a tight line now, determination pouring out of her gaze. “Surely that’s a deal Uther wouldn’t be able to turn down?”

“Hold on! Hold on!” Merlin intervenes rather alarmed.

“Have you all gone off your head?” Merlin is raising the voice of reason. “Do you realize what this could mean for any of us and our families? Uther will do everything he has in his power to find those responsible for taking his son away from him. And if we ask him to exchange Arthur for dad, he will know exactly where to start looking. Let’s face it. We’ll eventually be headhunted and none of our families would be safe anymore.”
Pondering silence spreads in the room. Merlin is right. This plan would put not only them, but also all their families into mortal danger.

“So what do you think we should do then?” Gilli asks in a resigned voice.

Merlin stands up while maintaining eye contact with each person in the room.

“I think we should go back to what we said earlier. Maybe there’s a way to get a hold of the formula before we move on to more extreme measures.”

“And how are going to do that?” Morgana raises her brow. “Waltz in and ask for it?”

“Have any of you read the tabloids recently?” Alice who has only listened so far, leans forward and looks round the table with a sudden spark. It is not that she’s a friend of the common press but she has bought a range of papers throughout the last week to make sure she got every little bit of information about her friend’s arrest.

“Yes, there were a couple of reports that none of Arthur’s PAs have lasted any length of time in recent years and that he’s currently re-advertising the post.” Gilli smirks.

“No wonder, the arrogant prat he is,” Morgana mumbles and a few of them nod.

“A right spoilt, conceited bastard, from what I’ve heard, who is bedding every male alive in Camelot.” Will agrees between gritted teeth. And then throws a glance at Gilli. “Never realized you were one for reading the tabloids.”

Gilli raises two fingers and mouths “Shut up, Will!” across the table.

“Stop bickering guys!” Merlin mumbles. “Thinking about it, this is perfect. A PA job in Arthur’s office would not only get me right into the heart of the Justice Ministry but also as close to Arthur as possible. And he is the man responsible for the Serum.” Yes, this is ideal, indeed, he thinks to himself. Infiltrating the Ministry will also get him close to his father and the place where the formula is most likely kept.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Merlin. You have not the slightest clue what a PA does. Arthur would never dream of employing you! You are a biochemist, not a secretary.” Gaius isn’t impressed and looks at Merlin with scepticism.

“I did study media for a couple of semesters.” Merlin defends his idea. “Surely it can’t be that difficult and as for the employing part – I am sure Gilli and Will can magic up a CV for me that makes me totally irresistible!”

Hunith heads pops up and her eyes are asking just one question. “Why you, Merlin? I can’t lose both of you.” Merlin swallows hard, because the plight of his mother isn’t lost on him, but how can he not volunteer for this job?

This is his father they’re talking about and it is his fault that he’s in prison to start with. He is the one with the magic and therefore he should be the one to put this right.

“I need to do this for him and myself, too, mum. And I’m the only one who’s able to decipher a chemical formula.” He puts his arm on his mother’s in an attempt to pacify her.

“But…” Hunith has turned dreadfully pale. “If something happens to you…” She does not finish her sentence for the second time in a row. Merlin may be a powerful warlock but he can still get shot, stabbed, beaten up or hurt in any other physical way.
She prefers to stop her train of thought at this point because she knows it will do her no good. She understands that Merlin has made up his mind and that there’s no way she can change it.

“I know what you’re thinking mum.” Merlin puts his hand on his mother’s and gently squeezes her fingers. “But this is going to work. It has to. Because we need to save dad. And once we have the formula, the Serum will be no threat to our kind any longer.”

“Hear, hear.” Alator agrees and the rest join in a quiet clap. “And if all fails we can always come back to Morgana’s plan.” And he winks at the young woman.

“So I take it we are agreed.” Merlin takes a last check around the table. This is a big step up for the FMU. Saving innocent people is one thing, trying to infiltrate the Ministry of Justice and get up close to the heir of the Pendragon government is a completely different kettle of fish altogether.
A few days later

T I R E D.

The five letters are written in capitals and cover the complete page on the note pad in front of Arthur. He stares at the word as if it has some hidden agenda. Stares at it until the letters blur before his eyes and the word reverberates in his brain all over again and again.

Tired. Tired. Tired.

There doesn’t seem to be any room for anything else. It’s that word and a huge vacuum where other thoughts, emotions and ideas should roam freely. Arthur rests his head wearily on both his hands and tries to make sense of this moment in time.

“Of course you are bloody tired.” Gwaine had laughed at him earlier. “A night out on town and four pints of lager would do that to anyone!”

Yes, true. He did have too much alcohol the previous night and taking that dark haired fit bloke whose name he’s forgotten, was it Barry or something, to his usual hotel room afterwards has undoubtedly not helped. He had hoped in vain that sex and alcohol would do the trick for him one more time and relax him enough to find some sleep in the aftermath. It was a pattern he had relied on for the last two years after all. But it had let him down big time last night.

Still, Arthur knows fine that this is not the true reason for his exhaustion. It has always been there. Okay, “always” is obviously an exaggeration because the proof that there was time when he felt like a normal human being is right before his eyes. His gaze gets drawn to the picture on the side of his momentous, oak desk. It shows a little blond boy giggling in the arms of an equally fair haired woman. He is supposedly five in that picture and his mother is tickling him. It is such a happy, carefree moment.

Not that he can consciously recall it, but he loves everything about it. The warm smile on his mum’s face. Her hands all around him in a teasing, but protective manner. His joy and laughter, and the happiness that comes with feeling secure.

Arthur’s lips twitch into a sad smile.

“Wish you were here, mum,” he mutters and lovingly thumbs over her face.

Even if he can’t remember the occasion when this picture was taken, Arthur’s pretty sure that he was healthy then. His eyes sparkle so vividly of joy – there’s no way he felt awful then.
When it all started? It is a mystery he’s often tried to solve. To no effect. And he will not solve that puzzle now either because he’s unable to concentrate on any coherent thought. He closes his eyes and lets his head fall on his chest slowly. The thumping inside hasn’t stopped for hours. No matter what. It has made every thought an effort, every move a carefully constructed action. It’s time for the pain to stop.

He opens the top drawer of the desk without looking and grabs the packet of painkillers. He pops two in his mouth and swallows them without water. It is quite a technique he has developed over the course of time. When he puts the tablets back his hand pushes against a bottle of hypospray.

Arthur sighs reluctantly. He should probably take this as well, while he is at it. It is his “happy spray”. That’s what he called it when he started taking it at the age of six. Or was it his father who named it to make it easier for him to get used to it? Arthur can’t remember. In any case the name stuck and it sounds a hell of a lot better than “the ever present reminder of an incurable illness that is crippling his daily existence.”

“This will help you to feel better,” Edwin, the family doctor, had said and smiled at him when he had come home one day from primary school, complaining from a really sore head. And Arthur had reluctantly put his arm out to let the doctor administer the quick burst of medication through his skin. It had tingled but it had not been as sore as Arthur had expected.

He has been taking it ever since.

The hypospray’s become a daily routine from then on, a habit just like washing or getting dressed. And Arthur was glad of it because it worked well for many years. It seemed to calm him and enable him to focus better.

All that changed one day when he was twenty-five. When suddenly, from seemingly nowhere and for no particular reason he was plagued by headaches day after day. That was before the night mares started. And the fatigue. And the irritability.

His father ordered Edwin to change the composition of his medication straight away –and there was a slight improvement to his symptoms to start with, but then it seemed to level off.

Arthur remembers those days as the beginning of the end of his life as he knew it. It is when his body started to fail him - at least this is how he perceives it.

So Arthur stopped taking his “happy spray” overnight out of protest.

“No point taking this when it doesn’t work anyway!” he’d shouted in frustrated resentment at the doctor. God, had he been angry then! It was like being consumed by impotent rage – a rage directed at himself, at the doctors, at his father, at the world, but most of all at the hopeless situation he found himself in.

“You can’t afford to give it up, Arthur.” Edwin had tried to appease him. “Your condition won’t allow it!”

”And what condition is that?” Arthur had shouted back at the top of his voice. “It hasn’t even got a name!” He’d glowered at Edwin trying to will him into explaining what the fuck was wrong with him. But what was Edwin supposed to say?

“Please yourself.” He’d eventually shrugged his shoulders and left him to it.

His refusal to continue his treatment resulted in Arthur ending up in bed for five days, oblivious to the world and in absolute agony.
Arthur smirks while the few thoughts in his head seem to tumble around in ever decreasing circles. Nothing has changed in the way he feels about all this now. Just that he’s learnt the lesson that he can’t afford to leave the happy spray out.

Over the years the feeling of intense tiredness has crept up on him like a stealthy predator out for a kill. It has tightly wrapped itself around him and his life and has slowly squashed everything that could have made his life enjoyable. Fun and laughter are things he hardly remembers because he’s too bloody tired to appreciate them. And things get to you more easily when you feel permanently drained.

Of course there’s the occasional smile, a snort, a giggle. But Arthur can’t remember laughing out loud, right from his belly, from the bottom of his heart, and meaning it, for a long time. No wonder he’s getting the reputation of being an arrogant, grumpy ass. It’s obvious that his staff try to avoid him when it becomes clear that he has a really bad day. He is well aware of it and feels even more put out by it because there’s nothing he can do to make himself feel better.

Arthur has tried to fight it. In fact he is fighting it on a daily basis. He loves sports and, at one time, he was the best Polo player in Albion. The exercise invigorated him and made him feel alive even if it was only for a short time and he had to suffer the consequences afterwards. Like dizziness and nausea.

Two years ago he had to give up Polo because of it. He took up the gym instead and attends with iron determination three times a week because he likes keeping fit. Unfortunately it doesn’t change that he feels like a man of a hundred at the age of thirty-two.

He knows that he pushes himself to his limits when he is at the gym. Not to show off, as some of his friends believe, but to simply prove to himself that he can make his body do things men at his age can, and that he’s not as rotten on the inside as he continually feels.

No matter how many doctors and specialists he’s seen over the years – none of them could ever determine what was actually wrong with him. Not one was able to give that bane of his life a name. On paper his test results told him that he was as healthy as the next man and that was what the doctors had confirmed again and again. It is unbelievable. In a way, it’s a cruel joke.

The five letters of the word in front of Arthur get blurrier and blurrier as drowsiness sets in. Arthur wants to drown that feeling of eternal insomnia and that he’s lost in the middle of a maze with no way out.

And then, finally, Arthur drops off as his body demands the rest it so desperately needs. It is pure relief when his eyes eventually close completely and his head sinks onto the desk while his mind closes down. He will have this minute. Just a minute…..

“Arthur!” The accusing voice of his father rips Arthur cruelly out of his sleep.

“Get a grip of yourself, for Goodness sake.” Uther stands in front of him, eyes piercing and brows furrowed.

Arthur drowsily sits up in his chair, automatically straightens his tie and, like on the push of a button, replies. “Sorry, Father.”

“Alcohol last night?” Uther enquires coolly, and Arthur, knowing better than to lie and far too drowsy to whip up a believable fib, nods reluctantly.

“Sex, too?” Uther continues and Arthur just sighs, which in itself is answer enough.
“Did the tabloids get any pictures?” Damn. Arthur rebels on the inside.

*This is like a blooming inquisition*, he thinks grumpily. He manages to shake his head to answer his father’s question and reminds himself dutifully that after being at the centre of at least three major scandals in as many years in which Arthur has been lovingly nicknamed “Party Arty”, his father is probably entitled to give him this lecture.

Uther audibly grits his teeth. “Look, Arthur. You know, I don’t care what you do in your own time. I think I’ve been quite … generous with your … preferences and excesses over the years.” Uther stops in order to breathe in deeply.

**True, father,** Arthur admits inwardly. **We’ve never talked about me being gay. Never. I don’t even know what you really think about it.** All Arthur does know is that Uther has never questioned him about it. Strange really considering that Uther must want to continue the Pendragon line. And yet he’s never mentioned marriage to Arthur or going out with some well-connected young lady.

Not that Arthur would complain about that. But he has often wondered why his father kept this eerie silence. For now though Uther’s seeking his gaze and then continues.

“**BUT…,**” and Arthur feels a really big “but” coming on. “**What you do outside your job cannot affect your performance right here. Or drag the reputation of this government and our family into the dirt. I’ve no idea how often I have to repeat this to get it into your head?”**

Uther gives his son a side way glance and he inwardly cringes. Arthur’s handsome face is pale and his red rimmed eyes are heavy and darkened by deep shadows underneath. It looks as if he’s lost weight again. A pang of guilt, even if it just lasts a short second, runs through Uther’s heart. Maybe he is too hard on the boy, pushing him like this when he knows that the illness is getting to him and that his actions are in some way a means of desperation?

Uther dismisses the thought as quickly as it has appeared in his head. He’s got some of his closest people working on his son’s medication all the time. And eventually Arthur will be fine. All he can do is keep him on track until then. That is what he believes. It is what he has to believe because anything else would be inconceivable. Everything will work out in the end.

But in his current state of mind Arthur can’t help to feel like a five year old that has been told off. He knows at the bottom of his heart that his father has a point and that, so far, he has been lucky that the public has seen his slip ups more of an amusement rather than taking it against him. And he’s mature enough to realize that his reason for being annoyed has to do with the fact that his father has put his finger on a sore spot.

As if Uther has read his mind he carries on in a much more lenient way. “**You’re getting too old for behaving like that, Arthur. At least when you’re out there, in the full view of the people and the press. The public have been forgiving so far, but it’s getting to the stage where they want to see what leader they’ll have in a few years’ time. They’ll want to know that they’re safe and in good hands in the future. We don’t want to rattle their belief in this government.”**

Ouch. Now that hurts. In his defence Arthur notes mentally that he HAS been more careful in how much he drinks and who he has taken to bed since the last show down with the media. He’s also kept a much lower profile than before, but obviously not low enough.

**“But you know that I need…,”** Arthur starts, but his father cuts him short.

“**Look, son,**” he starts, as he puts his hands on Arthur’s shoulders and turns the young man round to fully face him. “**I understand there are things you need to get the relaxation your body requires, but**
please, just try to keep your …. activities private. Right?”

Arthur nods quietly. Of course his father is right. His way of life has been getting out of hand recently and even though he’s made some effort to keep it under control he can’t afford to look like an irresponsible drunk to the citizens of Camelot any longer.

He has been brought up to love Camelot and Albion. And he does. More than anything else. And his work means everything to him.

“Look,” Uther says. “This is the kind of stuff the public want to see more of.” And he tabs a couple of buttons on the interactive glass screen of Arthur’s computer. “This has just been on the news.”

Safety chip set to reduce petty crime by 20 percent within weeks!

Arthur swallows. It’s not often his father gives him praise, particularly not when they have been “discussing” his life style just a minute earlier. And he appreciates it and mumbles a “Thanks” in Uther’s direction.

The chip has been his baby and he’s infinitely proud of it. It is a quick and easy way to call the police for support by a voice activated device and it should make Camelot a safer place to stay. The first batch of chips will be out on sale within the next week and he’s looking forward to seeing it improve people’s lives.

“You know I only want the best for you?” Uther mumbles quietly because emotions are usually not a topic high on his list.

“I do, father.” Arthur gives a small smile. “I just feel so bloody awful, it …”

Uther awkwardly claps Arthur’s shoulder and interrupts his son. “Yes, yes. We have been through this before.”

“Anyway, just here for a short social call,” Uther adds and then makes to leave. “And I sent you the file with the latest cases before I came. I need them sorted by the end of the day.” And then he is gone.

Arthur runs his hands through his hair and rubs his eyes and sighs. Why does he feel like shit now? His father does care about him and worries about his health continuously. He has Edwin and his team working on his medication permanently, trying to find a cure and he looks after him in every way. Maybe that is it? Arthur wonders for a second. Maybe his mollycoddling is getting to me?

Arthur gets up and stretches and then goes into the bathroom attached to his office to splash cold water onto his face. He has no idea how long he’s slept. His account of time is generally quite dodgy when he feels like this, but he must have had about an hour. Enough to keep him going, anyway.

When Arthur returns to his desk he checks the files George, his father’s PA, dropped off earlier. Arthur’s not surprised that they’re all neatly presented and in order and he chuckles somewhat bitterly. George has listed the case files meticulously and attached little notes at the side of each document telling him in detail what he’s supposed to do with it. As if he doesn’t know.

Arthur grumbles. He may not be running on one hundred percent at the moment but this is an insult to his efficiency and intelligence, in his opinion anyway. How is he supposed to grow into the leadership role he will inherit from his father one day if he gets smothered with condescending “advice” all the time?

“Hi, boss. You alright?” Gwaine sticks his head round the corner with a cheeky grin, wiping his
flowing brown locks out of his eyes. Arthur notices the concerned look in his face which defies the chirpiness in his voice, but chooses to ignore it.

“As alright as it gets, Gwaine.” Arthur grins at his friend. “Perfect timing as usual.”

“Yeah I saw Uther leave.” Gwaine retorts good-heartedly and sits down on Arthur’s desk.

“Look what’s just been broadcast.” He fiddles on his tablet with a wide content grin on his face.

Arthur watches the news clip about the launch of the Keep Safe Chip for the second time within minutes.

“It looks great, Gwaine. That’s why my father’s just been here.”

Gwaine pulls up his eye brows in pretend shock. “Uther’s come to compliment you? Wow.”

“Not me. Us. You played a vital role to get this done.”

There’s no way Arthur’s going to take the credit for the chip alone. It would have never happened without Gwaine who is not only a loyal friend and the most outrageous flirt Camelot’s ever seen – well maybe him excluded – he’s also the nerdiest computer geek Arthur’s ever known. The man’s pure genius and has the touch of a god when it comes to computer technology.

“But you’re the one who came up with the idea.” Gwaine smiles warmly and chuckles.

“Get off it, Gwaine. We both know how much time and effort you invested in this.” Arthur’s eyes are smiling now.

“To change the topic slightly, have you checked all my mails and appointments for the rest of the week?” Arthur throws him an apologetic look.

“Sure. Everything’s under control, Arthur.” Gwaine nods. “You know I don’t mind helping out while you are searching for a new PA, but …. We’ve had the emergency with the alarm system at Lamia Farm and they really need me there if you want it sorted before the end of the week.”

Arthur guiltily blushes and mumbles something like, “Really sorry, mate,” under his breath. It is after all his fault that Gwaine is kind of doing two jobs at the same time at the moment. Not that he doesn’t get compensated generously, still…

“I sent out adverts at the beginning of this week. Shouldn’t be long.” He tries to comfort his friend, but Gwaine just chuckles.

“You reckon you will get any applications after the way you treated the last three?” he teases.

Arthur looks genuinely astounded. Surely there are thousands of people out there in Albion who would kill to get a top job like being Arthur Pendragon’s PA? No matter what.

Gwaine seems to have read his thoughts and interprets the surprised look on his face correctly. “As much as I hate to take it to you, you’ve got yourself a reputation out there, Arthur.”

“Arse!” Arthur throws the pen in Gwaine’s direction and lets out a short snort. “I am NOT that bad.”

And, as an afterthought. “What reputation?”

Gwaine shakes his head in exasperation. “Face it, Arthur. You’re the ultimate nightmare. Either you destroy your PAs’ confidence with your moody arrogance or you shag them until you’ve had enough of them and send them off to a better life far far away. Neither makes for a very good
Arthur sighs. And again. He’s not quite sure why his recent PAs have been such a disaster. Timothy had been great at his job, but then appeared one day with tears in eyes mumbling “I can’t take this anymore”, virtually threw his letter of resignation at Arthur and then disappeared never to be seen again.

Gerard and Jarid had been different. Maybe not as organized and efficient as Timothy, but incredible fit and rather … forthcoming on what they were prepared to do for him. Unfortunately Gerard had been lured away by the press and had to be bribed into silence while Jarid had thought that Arthur was as much in love with him as he was. Once he started talking of setting house up together Arthur had had no choice but to finish it before his delusions could ruin him completely.

So okay, he can see Gwaine’s point, but surely his bad luck with PAs was not his fault only.

“I promise I’ll find someone and get you back to your own office asap.” He does try to sound apologetic and Gwaine gets it.

“No need to grovel, mate! But your word in my ear!” Gwaine’s almost out of the door when he turns round again. “Did you get any sleep?” he asks quietly and smiles at Arthur when the blond nods.

“Good on you.” Gwaine sounds relieved. “And try to get more because you are turning into a right grumpy bugger!”

“Thanks, Gwaine. Now that’s really comforting to hear.” Arthur pulls a face and expects his friend to leave. But Gwaine is hanging on, suddenly looking at him quite earnestly.

“Seriously though, Arthur. People have started talking about your moods and your touchiness.” And when Arthur throws him a look indicating that this is what employees have always done, he adds gingerly. “More than normal, you know.”

Arthur holds his breath. This is not good. Real rumours can be extremely damaging if you’re playing in politics, and once they start spreading it might not be possible to stop them. There’s a difference between people complaining jokingly and viciously trying to damage your reputation.

“Just a word of warning. That’s all.” Gwaine winks at him trying to take the edge of his comment, but Arthur takes it for what it was. The advice of a loyal friend who doesn’t like to see him getting into trouble. And he’s grateful for such honesty.

“Thanks, mate.” Just before Gwaine’s out of the door, Arthur asks, “You put the staff meeting into next week’s schedule?”

“Yes, sir!” Gwaine shouts with fake reverence and as he closes the door behind him there’s a ping on Arthur’s PC screen. It’s a message from Uther.

“Scheduled five candidates for PA. Interviews tomorrow. Starting 10 a.m. Names and details attached.”

Arthur freezes and then his temper flares. He can’t believe that his father has taken the liberty to dump five people for an interview in his office without giving him the chance to take a pick of the long list first. Assuming there was a long list.

He hasn’t even been informed that Uther got involved in this. It is yet another example of how Uther shows him that, in the end, he is the one who has the final say in things that matter. Despite how well Arthur has done in his job, despite the fact that the public love him, scandals and all, and despite the
obvious loyalty his staff show him. Well, so far at least.

Arthur grits his teeth and speaks an acknowledging mail on to his computer. There’s no point of arguing over this. Maybe it’s for the better anyway. His record with PAs can’t exactly be commended.

Arthur sighs for the umpteenth time. His father means well, he’s sure of it, even if he shows his affection in strange and unexpected ways at times. He probably perceives taking charge of Arthur’s employment problems as a favour to his son, not as the intrusion it actually feels like.

Then Arthur returns to the files Uther has transferred and starts processing them. Each folder contains the details of one criminal that’s been convicted within the last week. It states the Court’s verdict, lists what the punishment entails and finally makes a recommendation in which Correction Institute the prisoner should go.

He opens the FYEO file, types his password and enters all the data to create a record for each person. It’s been an unusually busy week for crime. There has been a couple of thefts, one break in and one bank robbery. But all these pale before the incident where a man freed a family of MUs who were on their way to Lamia House.

Arthur tabs on the personal details button of the man, curious to see who had enough guts – or insanity - to confront a lorry full of highly trained security guards. The photo of the criminal pops up and although he’s seen the man in passing in the docks during his trial, the picture startles him.

Arthur checks out his features and gets caught in the intense blue of the man’s eyes. Strange how much strength and determination glow in them. And how much kindness. The man looks almost regal in the way he holds himself. And there seems to be an air of quiet assurance and inner strength around him. Odd for a man that is facing the most severe punishment Camelot can bestow on someone. Very odd.

Arthur shakes off the weird uneasy feeling and reminds himself to concentrate. Eagerly he types in the name and address of the man:

Balinor Emerson, 25 Ascetir Drive, Ealdor Estate, 37785 Camelot
Merlin stares motionless at the newspaper clippings in front of him and tries once again to get accustomed to the facts. Balinor was injected with the Serum the day after the FMU meeting, just as they had feared, turning their attempt to save him into a race against time. His heart is heavy with the knowledge that his father is suffering from the effects of the drug in the depth of a prison cell, alone and cut off from the rest of the world. For convicted MUs are not allowed any visitors for three months following their verdict. Frustration, anger and acute worry for his father’s welfare threaten to overwhelm Merlin for a second before he reins himself in. There’s no point letting his emotion rule his thinking – the best way to help his father is to concentrate on the task in hand.

He settles down on his bed and looks at the folder in front of him for the last time. Will and Gilli have compiled everything that there is to know about Arthur Pendragon in record time and he’s spent most of one week studying reports, news clips and videos about the man who’s the ticket to his father’s life.

Not that he’s starting from scratch. Everybody in Albion has followed Arthur’s life from day one. They celebrated when he was born, they saw him take his first steps and develop into a lively young boy.

When his mother died in a tragic accident at their house when he was six, the country showered him with compassion and kindness. No boy of that age should lose his mother, was the common consent. News about the Governor’s son was few and far between during the time he spent in boarding school. But when he graduated, there was much talk about his top grades and his prowess as a sportsman.

Even if there were discernible signs of arrogance, the reputation for being a softer, kinder version of the old Pendragon, was born the day he saved one of his friends, Gwaine, from drowning in a freezing lake and was most reluctant to take any credit for it. Arthur’s words “Anyone would have done it,” were splashed across the headlines the next day.

The press and the public have always loved Arthur. Blond, athletic, handsome, and if reports can be believed a complete charmer, it’s no wonder that he is adored by most. And he has not long been voted the best looking bachelor in Albion for the fifth year running. Wherever he appears both, men and women alike, swarm around him, cumbering for his attention.

The young Pendragon’s reputation as a playboy is legendary and, surprisingly, the people of Camelot have been very understanding about it. When Arthur came out at the age of eighteen there was a brief outcry of shock and disbelief but that was only short lived. Rather than being vilified, the majority of citizens rallied behind him in sympathetic support. Naturally there were those who watched with raised eyebrows and asked questions about the impact of this for the future. Their voices were silenced quickly by those who stood behind Arthur.

Arthur’s love affair with the press was tested sorely though when his apparent like for partying became the centre of attention for the media in the last three years in which alcohol and sex seemed to become a major part of his life. Once one “kiss and tell story” after the other started appearing in the papers, even cautious voices began to wonder whether Arthur Pendragon had gone off the rails. And his affairs with two of his latest PAs did nothing to disperse that rumour.

“Not exactly a keeper, are you?” Merlin mumbles and glances at a photograph of Arthur at a charity event a few years ago. He has to admit that Arthur is a very attractive man. He would have to be blind not to see that. His infectious laugh, with his head thrown back and his face scrunched up with
hilarity, has often been caught on camera. One of them was even The Picture of the Year when Arthur was twenty-eight. *It is a gorgeous laugh,* Merlin decides, before he stops himself in mid-thought, happily ignoring a tiny knot forming in his gut. What the heck? He’s got lost too easily in something that’s completely irrelevant to his task.

What he needs to find out is what Arthur is like. Who his friends are, how he works and what he enjoys doing. Only then will he be able to gain his trust to a degree where he can succeed in his mission.

One thing is clear, however: Although seemingly not quite like his father, Arthur does follow his creed when it comes to magic. His stance against the use of it is firm, and he has been reported saying that the Serum is a godsend to rehabilitate MUs into a normal life. How can he possibly lie like this to all the people who think so highly of him? As Justice Minister he is in charge of the Serum and responsible for its usage. He must know of the drug’s dire consequences and how it really affects sorcerers.

Merlin’s face hardens and he automatically grabs the round pendant on the chain on his neck Freya gave him for his last birthday, as he always does when he looks for comfort. His fingers skim over it carefully and the warm feeling evokes the memory of a cheerful day long ago. How happy had they been and how wonderfully oblivious that their life together would end so soon!

Merlin grabs the triskelion for a minute and lets his mind wander. He pictures Freya’s bubbly face framed by her brown curls, her eyes are twinkling with joy and her tender smile. He still remembers every detail of it. “Freya”, he mumbles and can almost feel her lips brushing against his.

No. Merlin pushes the memory away as quickly as it has overwhelmed him. There’s only pain and resentment to be had if he lets this get out of hand. But he cannot help reminding himself of the promise he gave Freya before she died in his arms. “I will find the man who did this,” he’d whispered, heart-broken and choked by tears. “I will get the justice you deserve.”

Merlin closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He wishes Morgana had not spoken about it the night before when she left to go back to university.

“You have as much reason to hate the Pendragons as me,” She’d said and looked at him with knowing eyes. “Not only for dad’s sake, but for Freya’s, too.”

Merlin has buried his pain for all those months so carefully and he’s not keen to move the lid of the box that contains all the anguish and anger her death have left behind. No, this is something he doesn’t want to deal with, now even less than before.

He quickly opens the self-help book on “How to be the perfect PA” which he has sped through twice already. One more turn can’t do any harm.

Merlin is early. But that’s what a good PA does. At least that is what the book said. He walks towards the Ministry of Justice and checks himself for the last time in a huge shop window.

He has owned the suit he’s wearing since his 21st birthday and even he can tell that he has outgrown it just a little bit. The trousers’ legs are on the shorter side and it is probably better if he does not
attempt to button up the jacket. It is not too bad though, he’s telling himself – he’s certain that he looks totally respectable. And the borrowed purple tie from Gilli looks rather smart … ish. Merlin can’t help grinning. Formal wear is not exactly his forte, so this will have to do.

He is getting closer to the entrance when he spots a group of building workers to the right hand side of the Ministry who are in deep conversation with a few suited men. There’s a lot of pointing and waving towards the big hole in the ground that has been cordoned off. From the strange crackling noises, Merlin detects that there must be some kind of problem with electrical lines. He vaguely remembers something mentioned on the news reel the previous night.

Merlin is just about to pass them when a man in jogging gear and a hood over his head appears out of nowhere on the pavement in front of him. Merlin would have not taken any notice of him, had he not sensed a presence of magic. Suddenly alert, he watches the man deviating from the pavement to cross the lawn in front of the building site, heading towards the congregation at the pitch hole.

“This is not right,” Merlin mumbles to himself and instinctively heads after the bloke who is closing the distance between him and the group quickly.

“What are you up to?” Merlin wonders, but he can tell that he’s heading towards one person in particular, an older guy in a suit. As the jogger approaches his target he reaches out with the intent of grabbing him. Merlin understands immediately what the mystery bloke intends to do. If there’s open electricity in that hole on the ground, as it appears to be, anybody falling in will be seriously injured at the best.

Merlin has almost caught up with the jogger, but he isn’t close enough to stop him. Without thinking, his eyes turn golden and then time slows. Not a lot, just a little bit, to give him the chance to get to the man. Surely nobody will notice?

Then the jogger thrusts his arm forward to assault the man and give him that deadly push. Just in time Merlin leaps at him and tackles him down to the ground before he can do any damage.

Merlin hazily hears voices shouting in excitement behind him while he’s rolling on the muddy ground trying to hold down a young man who puts up an admirable fight. When Merlin pushes him back on the ground hard, his hood falls off and his face becomes visible.

“Daegal!” Merlin hisses breathlessly through his teeth. “What the …?” Why would Morgana’s old school mate be right here at this instant and act like that? In shocked surprise he lets go for a second and Daegal, having the advantage of youth and speed, wrangles out from Merlin’s hold and turns round to run.

By now the rest of the crowd have surrounded the two men and when Daegal slips out of Merlin’s grip they all move in an attempt to stop him. A second later they are all pushed back by an invisible force.

“He’s using magic!” Everybody is shouting and screaming in panic now. Two of the workmen start chasing after the young sorcerer who’s racing across the square in front of the Ministry and they start catching up on him.

Merlin takes a split second decision. What Daegal intended to do was dreadfully wrong, but he is Morgana’s friend and one of his kin. If he is caught now, his fate is sealed.

No way I’m letting you die. He quickly flicks his golden eyes at the men running after the young sorcerer and suddenly one stumbles over his own feet and brings the other man down when he tries to hold onto him to keep his balance. A tiny sigh of relief escapes Merlin when he sees Daegal
getting away.

The young man is hardly out of view when a swarm of security men stream into the street surrounding the Ministry, but by now it is far too late – Daegal has vanished in the bustle of the streets.

Everything’s happened so fast that Merlin has had no time to think, and as he is getting up from the slippery ground, he suddenly becomes aware of what he has done. Just like Daegal he used magic and even worse, right outside the Ministry of Justice. The mumbling of his lips casting the spell, the golden flash of his eyes, were most likely captured on CCTV for eternity. Great. But unlike the younger man he is very much present to receive the judgement for his actions.

“Promise me not to use magic when you are there,” Hunith had asked him before he’d left. Her eyes had been full of pain. “It is simply too dangerous! I can’t bear to lose you both to the Serum,” she’d whispered as she held her son in a tight embrace.

“I promise,” Merlin had assured her calmly. “On principle. But there might be times when it is necessary.”

“Only to save yourself, as a last resort.” Hunith had tried to bargain and Merlin had agreed. What else could he have done? How can he abstain from using his powers when he can save a person’s life? Or in this case two.

However, performing magic in broad daylight outside the Ministry of Justice, is not very bright. Merlin presses his lips together tightly and quietly shakes his head at his own stupidity. He hasn’t even got as far as the damn ministry and he’s already broken his promise and put himself into danger.

A rather stiff-looking bald man walks up to him just then and looks at him sternly.

“You are a right mess, young man,” he says disapprovingly and Merlin looks down his front to find his suit trousers covered in mud and grass stains. Earth is caking around the knee area and it seems there’s a rip at the back of the trousers. Some buttons of his shirt are missing, his tie is beyond repair and the sleeves of his jacket look as they’ve been used to scrub a floor.

“For Goodness sake, George.” Another man has followed shortly behind the George fellow. “That man has saved my life. If I’d gone down that ditch…” And he glances at the hole in the ground rather horrified. When he takes a step further out of George’s shadow, Merlin’s heart stops beating for a second.

It seems he’s just saved Uther Pendragon’s life.

Arthur is rushing down the corridor towards his office when he gets stopped by a call from behind him.

“Arthur!” When he turns round he finds Percival who has just caught up with him. Percival is the Head of Security in the Ministry and directly responsible for his safety.

“Arthur,” he repeats and then gasps, a little bit out of breath. “I just wanted to have a quick word.”
“Sure! Any problems?”

“On the contrary! Karyn walked again for the first time yesterday.” And Percival beams as if Christmas has come early.

“I’m so pleased to hear that.” Arthur smiles and claps Percival’s shoulder.

“I would have never thought it possible, you know, after the accident.” Percival’s suddenly all serious. He had been sure then that his wife would spend the rest of her life in a wheel chair. Until Arthur offered his help and organised a place for Karyn in an exclusive private sanatorium where she was treated by the best doctors and physiotherapists. And now she will be able to walk again. Thanks to the man in front of him.

“I can never thank you enough for …,” Percival starts, but Arthur interrupts him promptly.

“Stop right there, mate.” Arthur squeezes Percival’s shoulder. “I am glad I could help, right. That’s it.” And he smiles broadly at him, wondering not for the first time how a man as huge and strong as Percy could be such a softie underneath it all.

“I need to go. Got some candidates for the PA job.” Arthur rolls his eyes and turns to leave. He wants to skim through the files quickly again, before the interviews start. Just as he sits down at his desk to open the document his mobile rings.

“I have found your PA. Just send the other hopefuls away!” Uther shouts down the phone. Arthur can hardly believe it. He grits his teeth so hard that his jaw muscles ache. After being presented with a list of candidates by his father, he’s not even going to get the privilege of picking the person he likes.

Arthur stands up abruptly and his chair shoots back when he moves away from the desk. This is unbelievable. The last thing he wants is a man at his side, chosen purely by Uther. He wants someone HE can trust and relate to, not some spineless bootlicker who would do anything to get into the Governor’s good books.

Ten minutes later his father appears at his door with an extremely scruffy and dirty looking man in a badly fitting suit, no doubt one of the workers from downstairs.

“So where is that mystery guy you’re so fond of?” Arthur growls, hardly succeeding in hiding his anger. At least he can express in some way how much all this infuriates him.

Uther’s brows furrow and his temper is rising deep below. His son has no business talking to him in a tone like this, particularly not in front of employees. He pushes the man next to him towards Arthur and introduces him.

“This is Merlin Emrys. He was scheduled for the interview with you today.”

Arthur gives Merlin a passing glance and tries to remember any details about the guy he might have seen on his application form. When his mind draws a blank he vaguely glances over the man. All he can see is a tall, gangly, big eared man with an unruly mop of dark hair who is covered in dirt from top to toe.

“Did he crawl on all fours across the ground to squirm his way into your favours?” Arthur is scathing. “He certainly looks it.”

“This man…,” Uther says rather pompously, “…has actually saved my life.”
“Saved your life? Him?” Arthur points at Merlin in the most condescending way.

“Are you joking? Seems he cannot even save his own butt!” He inwardly grins when he sees Merlin’s hand shooting to his bottom in a faint attempt to cover up the giant rip in his trousers by placing his hand over it, and the radiant blush on Merlin’s face even transcends the layer of mud on his cheeks. Arthur can’t help but feeling smug.

“He has shown incredible presence of mind.” Uther sounds pleased, completely ignoring Merlin’s embarrassment as he explains in a few sentences what happened earlier.

Arthur turns round to look out the huge glass window overlooking Camelot. He has long learnt to give up once his father has made up his mind about something.

“Merlin Emrys is your new PA. That is my last word.” Uther glowers at his son. Merlin has done him a favour and he owes him one back. Giving him the job he came for is an easy tit for tat and Arthur will bear the guy. At least for six months. If he’s no good he can always fire him and employ somebody else then.

And with that the Governor stomps out of Arthur’s office. The two men are left behind and silence settles between them.

Arthur’s aware that Merlin is waiting for him to speak, to say something that’s going to clarify their position. He decides rather huffily to make this as difficult for the man in front of him as he can.

He notices that Merlin’s biting his lip when he glances at him sideways for a second. Nervous, is he? Arthur smirks in quiet satisfaction, realizing simultaneously that his behaviour is probably not quite fair. Well, there’s no ‘probably’ about it, if he is honest with himself. However, his annoyance at this whole bloody affair outweighs any other emotion at this moment in time.

When Merlin addresses him first, Arthur looks up rather startled. This is quite unexpected and unprecedented. Surely etiquette demands that the guy has to wait until he’s spoken to?

“Looks like I’ve got the job then,” Merlin says and his voice is challenging him to claim otherwise.

Arthur’s face hardens. This is great. The guy hasn’t been ten minutes in his office and he’s already rubbing it in that his father is treating him like a five year old. Arthur stares out of the window. He needs to compose himself and swallow his anger before he’s able to speak.

“Well, it looks like you have,” he finally responds, keeping his voice cool and indifferent as he walks up to his desk. “You’ll have to do.”

“So, Merlin,” Arthur draws the name out in the most condescending way on purpose. Maybe there’s a way of talking Merlin out of this, he wonders and strategically plans his next move.

“It seems I’m stuck with you.” He pauses and sighs deliberately. “Your initial contract is for six months after which your position will be reviewed. Not that I expect it to last any longer,” he adds rather flippantly.

“Me neither,” Merlin replies quickly which leaves Arthur stumped for a moment yet again. Bloody hell! This guy will not get the better of him!

“Not only a hero, but a comedian as well!” Arthur tut-tuts sarcastically. “What other natural gifts do you have, Merlin!”

“Manners ..., sir.” The cheeky retort startles Arthur into silence. He is dumbstruck and strangely
impressed at the same time. No one has ever dared to put him into place like that. Not even when he was having one of his really bad days. He opens his mouth to speak, but stops short when their eyes lock.

He has never seen eyes that shade of indigo. Although … a passing memory of eyes in a similar shade staring at him somewhere, at some point, flashes past, before he falls back into the depth of dark blue in front of him. Merlin’s eyes are more expressive than words could ever be and just now they stare at him in silent accusation. Arthur takes a quick breath and REALLY looks at Merlin for the first time.

A bagful of butterflies erupts in his stomach. Merlin is gorgeous.

His eyes are framed by the longest, most seductive eyelashes. The cheekbones are kicking out right at him while the strong chin is perfection itself. Arthur’s gaze follows the never ending neck and before he can help it he pictures his lips caressing the soft spot below Merlin’s ear. Those generously sized ears, barely covered by the unruly dark hair scream to be explored and the lips…

Merlin’s lips are breath taking. Full and strong and tempting. Arthur involuntarily moves a step towards the other man when he becomes aware that they have looked at each other far longer than politeness requires.

Arthur drags his eyes away and focuses on the picture behind Merlin instead. What on earth is he doing! What is he thinking about? His whole body is flushed and aroused in desire, and the guy has hardly spoken to him! Is he getting that desperate?

This is ridiculous. Arthur’s scolding himself and gets angry at his own weakness. And he reminds himself who this Merlin guy is. Someone Uther has just planted in his office for the next six months. No doubt he will be reporting back to his father every week.

Arthur is doing well working himself back into his anger. He isn’t going to get beaten by the indecently gorgeous man in front of him. Damn it.

Distracted and momentarily thrown off track, Arthur, who was intent on putting Merlin in his place, has somehow lost the red line. Right. He certainly needs to show that guy who’s the boss here. The sooner, the better.

“Right Merlin,” he growls hoarsely. “First thing to remember here is that I give the orders. Understood?”

“Of course, sir.” Merlin sounds obedient, but Arthur is pretty sure that he can detect an undertone of defiance in the words.

“And you better bin that rag you are wearing.” Arthur continues. “Go to Salaries on the way down and ask Elena to give you an advance and the address of my tailor to get yourself something decent to wear.”

“I don’t need any favours, sir,” Merlin replies drily. “I’m quite capable of clothing myself.”

“Save your breath and do it, Merlin,” Arthur retorts dryly, giving Merlin another once over. “Seems you not only need the money to buy a decent suit but some serious fashion advice, too.”

“Are you always that gracious, sir?” Merlin definitely has a talent for saying one thing and meaning another, Arthur notes at the back of his mind. His words are polite, yet they’re screaming “Arrogant bastard!” subliminally. It is quite an art, actually, and in some way a very refined kind of insult.
Clever, Arthur admits. The man in front of him is not only showing intelligence, but also that he doesn’t scare easily. Somebody who will not shy away when the going gets tough. Arthur eyes Merlin from the side in appreciation.

For some odd reason he’s starting to enjoy this unorthodox conversation, and not only because his body feels drawn to the guy like a magnet. There’s something about Merlin he can’t quite name, but it is there nonetheless.

“I’ll be as gracious as you deserve, Merlin,” Arthur answers sarcastically. If Merlin likes to play games he can do that, too. And in this game he has the upper hand to start with, so picking up the gauntlet will hardly cause him any damage.

An unexpected grin spreads over his face and he is slightly taken aback when Merlin’s eyebrows shoot up at the sight of it as if he’d seen something quite miraculous. Arthur shakes the thought and continues.

“You realize that there’s an apartment on top of this building that comes with the job? All the senior employees live here. I do expect you to move in as soon as you can. Preferably at the beginning of next week.” And his voice leaves no doubt that this is what Merlin’s supposed to do.

“I have a perfectly nice flat on the south side of Avalon.” Arthur notes that Merlin sounds decidedly unhappy about this. Hmm. This could mean progress!

“I need to have my PA 24/7 and living in the apartment next door guarantees that I can always call upon you when I need you.” Arthur exaggerates, hoping that putting it on thickly will persuade Merlin to call it a day.

All he gets is a slight stiffening in Merlin’s gait and a perplexed look, followed by an almost inaudible, “Aren’t I lucky?” that Merlin’s muttering under his breath.

“I heard that.” Arthur picks up the challenge and searches the other man’s gaze.

“If you don’t like the terms….you know where the door is.” He raises his brow provocatively and hopes that this will crunch it for him. If Merlin quits now he will be free to choose his own PA after all.

“I don’t think your father would appreciate finding out that you forced me out of this job before I even had a chance to start,” Merlin says it slowly and with intent, as he stares at Arthur defiantly.

Damn, he’s good. Arthur is both annoyed and impressed that Merlin has been able to read his intentions so easily. Arthur clenches his teeth. So, as usual, he’ll have no choice but to bow to Uther’s will. Steeling himself, he decides to be the professional he is.

“Welcome to the Ministry, Merlin.” He makes a feeble attempt at being polite and stretches out his hand to shake Merlin’s.

Merlin lifts his hand with hesitation, but then seizes Arthur’s hand firmly.

What happens next is a complete shock. It is as if a low current of electricity flashes through them as soon as they touch. The pulsating energy leaves Arthur’s hand and arm tingling and oddly detached from the rest of his body.

For an instant he stares at Merlin in bewildered surprise, unable to utter even a word. What the heck was that? Where did it come from? Why did this happen? Arthur can neither answer any of these questions nor explain them. So he does the only thing he can possibly do. He decides to pretend the
incident never happened.

“I’ll expect you here on Monday morning, bang on 8 am. In the meantime I’ll make sure somebody will contact you about getting your belongings moved to your new apartment. I’d also like you to speak to Percival in Security to organize a date for your in-depth security check up.”

“Monday. 8 o’clock, sir,” Merlin repeats, seemingly reverent, as he heads towards the door. There’s one more thing though that Arthur cannot possibly let go.

“Merlin!” A mischievous smile plays on his lips and his eyes are twinkling with suppressed laughter.

“Unicorns?” Arthur chuckles quietly, his eyes wandering suggestively to Merlin’s backside where a pair of brightly coloured and boldy patterned pants peek out. “Really?”

Merlin blushes violently and his hand shoots down south to cover the tear on the back of his trousers yet again. In the process, however, he doesn’t look where he is going and bumps into the doorframe with aplomb, almost ending up flat on his face.

His ineptitude renders Arthur absolutely speechless and then causes him to explode with laughter a second later. This is the funniest thing he’s seen for a long time and Merlin’s perplexed face makes it even more amusing. Arthur is shaking with hilarity and Good God does that feel good! His whole body has relaxed and the foul mood Uther has put him in evaporates in thin air.

“You might want your eyes checked on the way to the tailor’s. If you can find him, that is,” he snorts, wiping away a tear of laughter from his cheek. Somehow the atmosphere has lightened and for the first time in ages he feels more like his old self.

Merlin rolls his eyes and turns to leave mumbling something under his breath, but Arthur is pretty sure that he’s made out the words “vindictive” and “prat” in the babble.

“I heard that, too!” He shouts after Merlin and then grins.

Maybe this Merlin is not going to be as bad as he initially feared.
The mole

Hi to everyone who has joined this story in the last few weeks! Thank you all for your comments and the kudos you left behind! <3 You're totally cool!

It is high time for me to thank my two beta-readers here, who put up continuously with my moans and groans and are incredibly patient with me! So a big hug and a HUGE thank you to Elena A. and starglen. You are wonderful!

It is Monday morning and at five to eight Merlin steps out of the lift on the eighth floor and starts walking down the corridor that leads to Arthur’s office. So here it begins. He has no idea what awaits him or whether he will be successful, all he can do is try and if he fails to get what he wants this way, then there might have to be another.

Landing the job is the first hurdle out of the way. Boy, was he relieved about it after all the carry on between Uther and Arthur. He remembers standing there like a spare, utterly nonplussed to be the centre of a row between the two most powerful men in the country within the first half an hour of his arrival.

There was no doubt that Uther’s interference had pissed off Arthur big time and that, as a consequence, he had behaved like a total jerk and let the anger at his father out on him. If Merlin hadn’t been there for a certain purpose he would have told Arthur to stick his job wherever he had wanted within minutes because he can’t be bothered with people that arrogant and supercilious.

Merlin’s never been treated with so much disdain in his life. Arthur and charming? What a joke! The man is nothing but a giant prat. A good looking one, admittedly. And yes, Merlin did study Arthur in detail that morning – surely it was logical to compare the object of his studies to the actual man?

Arthur looked thinner than in his most recent public pictures. His chin and cheekbones appeared more pronounced and there were dark shadows under his eyes. The young Pendragon was the walking image of a man who hadn’t slept properly for weeks. Too much partying and sleeping around, most likely, Merlin deduced drily.

But then Arthur had smiled unexpectedly and Merlin had been struck by the vast transformation it caused. The tired, haggard look had been wiped away and a much younger, happier man had appeared. Someone who radiated charisma. A man destined to be the leader of a nation.

Rubbish. Merlin scolds himself. This is the man who deliberately tried to put him off this job for his own gain. If he had resigned from the job Arthur would have been rid of him without having to defy his father... a perfect get out clause!

And this is the man who teased him mercilessly about his choice of underwear. Damn. Merlin can’t remember ever feeling that conscious of his body before, and he regretted for once that he never takes more care with what he wears. He usually tends to grab the first thing that comes to hand in the morning. Unfortunately, that day he’d picked that pair of pretty atrocious pants Morgana had given him the previous Christmas as a joke. Adorned with two enormous unicorns they are just exactly the kind of thing you would never ever want anyone to know you possess. He had felt like such an idiot!
No point going over old ground. Merlin tells himself as he is walking down the corridor. It is more important that he concentrates on the task in hand. Acting the efficient PA and pandering to Arthur’s wishes. Gaining Arthur’s trust. Finding out where they keep the formula.

As far as he knows his job is nothing short of being a servant. Even if it is better paid. The hours can be gruelling, so he has read, and Arthur’s mention of needing him 24/7 has left a strange taste in his mouth. If things continue the way they have started, being in Arthur’s presence all the time could turn out rather wearing.

And yet, his mind refuses to let go of the man in question. Arthur had been so rude on the one hand, but then given him that stare of … how could he describe it… Bewilderment? Want? Awe? when he set his eyes on him properly for the first time. Strange. Merlin has no clue what to make of it. Even stranger though that his heart did a little flip then.

But strangest of all was the weird jolt between them when they shook hands. It was as if his magic was reaching out to Arthur and found something vaguely familiar in the procedure. Familiar and yet peculiar and odd. He’d been unprepared for the vision that struck him the same moment. The image of a vibrant light smothered by darkness had come and gone so quickly that he almost believed he had imagined it all when he dissected the incident later.

He’s never experienced anything like it and the shock on Arthur’s face reflected exactly what he’d felt at the time. Maybe Gaius can shed a light on this? Hope, he does. Merlin thinks, because something inside him urges him to get this sorted.

Merlin has almost reached Arthur’s office and consciously clears his head, vehemently pushing all his thoughts into the back of his mind. He’s here for his father and for all of his kin who have suffered the Serum for so long and he is intent on helping them. With that firmly in mind, Merlin knocks at Arthur’s office door at exactly two minutes to eight.

“Come in! Arthur’s voice sounds rough and little bit muffled.

Merlin can see why when he enters. The door to the private bathroom that is attached to the office is wide open and Arthur is standing at the sink shirtless, facing the mirror in front of him while he is towelling his face and torso. The finely sculpted muscles on his back are moving smoothly as the towel glides over them, hiding and uncovering new moulds of toned strength each time.

For no particular reason Merlin’s eyes are drawn to the broad shoulders and the muscular arms that dictate the rhythm of the towel skimming over the naked skin. His eyes follow the soft line where Arthur’s hair meets the nape of his neck and he cannot help but notice the wet strands of blond curling into the skin.

“Like what you see?” Arthur asks cheekily and rips him out of his observations with a self-satisfied grin. Merlin realizes in an instant that he has been watched all along through the mirror. A hot flush of embarrassment rushes through his body and his ears take on a deeper shade of crimson. What the heck did he think he was doing? Self-conscious and flustered, he spits out a quick reply.

“Depends what’s underneath, sir.” Shit. Where did that come from? Merlin curses himself for his quick tongue when he catches Arthur throwing him a furtive glance of consternation through the mirror. Then the blond turns round as if to answer but stops short to do a double take.

Arthur’s eyes are scanning him from top to toe like a radar looking for a lost ship in the sea and the silence that comes with it is turning more and more uncomfortable by the second. Is there is anything wrong with the new suit he is wearing? Has he committed another fashion crime that insults Arthur’s over heightened sense of aesthetics? And above all, can Merlin really deduct something quite
predatory in Arthur’s look or is he interpreting this completely wrong? Before he can put more thought into it, Arthur snaps out of his stare.

“I see you did find the way to my tailor’s,” he says a bit absent-mindedly, unable to hide the flush of heat that is creeping up his neck.

“GPS, sir. Works every time.” Merlin bites his lips, trying to suppress a grin.

“Right. Glad to hear you’re all coordinated now,” Arthur quips back and Merlin’s almost sure that Arthur’s lips are twitching as he turns round swiftly to busy himself taking a fresh shirt from the small wardrobe inside the bathroom and throwing it on.

“That’s more than I can say about you!” Merlin is grinning unashamedly now, his eyes glued to Arthur’s shirt. When the blond follows his look to find out that he has buttoned it up wrongly he hastily puts the error right with a couple of flustered movements and ignores the blush that’s spreading across his cheeks.

_Touché! Payback time!_ Merlin can’t help feeling just a tiny bit cocky for making Arthur feel embarrassed this time. He is telling himself off the next second for letting his emotions rule his head. Why the heck does he find it so hard to act reverently! And to pretend that Arthur is God’s gift to this earth. Whatever he says or does. This is not good enough, he decides and he pulls himself together.

Merlin clears his throat and, in the most polite tone he can muster, says, “What can I do for you today?” Arthur throws him a suspicious look.

Merlin tries to smother the exasperation that flashes through him. Surely he can’t fault politeness?

Apparently, he chooses not to. Instead, he conducts himself in a very business-like manner. “I mailed a ‘to do’ list to your computer this morning. Gwaine Spencer is coming down first thing today to see you. He’s the Head of Technology here and will introduce you to Eoin.”

“Eoin who?”

“Eoin is our electronic on premise intra- network. It is how we communicate inside the Ministry and what you will find on your computer outside. You’ll need to know your way round it, otherwise you’ll be no good to me.”

The pointed reply to the arrogance of the last remark dies on Merlin’s lips as he reminds himself just in time that a perfect PA would never do a thing like that and he bravely manages to squeeze out, “Of course, sir.”

“And there are a couple of suits that need to go to the dry cleaner’s. Elena will give you the address. You’ll find a few reports waiting to be cleaned up on your PC once you are ready to go and I would also like you to pick up some theatre tickets from The Orbit.”

“Is that all, sir?” The words slip out laced with a heathy dash of sarcasm before Merlin can even think about it and he bites his lips, annoyed at his inability to simply shut up.

Oddly, the atmosphere suddenly changes. A shadow passes over Arthur’s face that is followed by a much softer, kinder look and could it be that he is hesitating before he continues?

“Listen Merlin. I know that things didn’t exactly go very well at our last meeting.” Merlin is taken aback at how surprisingly unsure Arthur’s voice comes across.

“Nicely put, sir.” Merlin agrees with a straight face, waiting with bated breath of what will come
“I might have acted a little … too rash and jumped to conclusions about you too quickly.”

For a second Merlin wonders whether he can trust his ears. Is that some kind of apology? It sure sounds like that. Even if the s-word has not come up.

“I would appreciate if we could put all this behind us and start from scratch.” Arthur’s words are tinged with uncertainty. He brings his eyes up and finds Merlin’s.

“As my PA you will be part of a big chunk of my life and I need to be able to give you my complete trust. I need to know without asking that I have your full cooperation and loyalty. I’m aware that doesn’t happen overnight, Merlin, and that we have to get to know each other better. But I’m hoping that you’re willing to give me a chance. Do you think you can do that for me?”

Ouch! Merlin’s throat is suddenly tight. Arthur’s words are honest, open and sincere and hit Merlin straight in the heart like an arrow. Why does he feel like a traitor all of a sudden? Why is he overwhelmed by bad conscience? Why do Arthur’s eyes rip something open inside him that he cannot even name?

There’s no way he can answer these questions just now, but the realization that there’s more to Arthur Pendragon than he thought hits him out of nowhere. Gone is the arrogant prat and what is left behind is a genuine guy who is willing to put his cards on the table. Arthur’s apology stands, even if it’s somewhat obscure.

Merlin’s voice crackles a bit when he speaks again. Not only because he is not quite sure how to deal with this new side of Arthur, but also because he knows that he has judged Arthur too quickly as well.

“Of course, sir. I’ve already forgotten about it.” And the warmth he feels inside translates into a beaming smile spreading across his face.

“Glad we sorted that,” Arthur pushes out huskily.

“Right. Yes. Of course. Let’s think of this as a new start,” Merlin replies sheepishly, unclear how Arthur has managed to make him feel so awkward in such a short span of time.

“Anything else, sir?” he asks, half-turning to leave the office.

“Yes, Merlin. There is.” Arthur waves him back. “Please, don’t call me ‘sir’. It really does not suit you.”

There is a moment of silence and then their eyes lock, and they both grin in mutual understanding.

“Whatsoever you prefer,” Merlin says and happily ignores the fact that Arthur’s smile is making his heart beat a bit faster.

“I have always disliked the title ‘sir’ because …” Arthur stops to rephrase what he was going to say. “I am not my father.”

Are you not? That will remain to be seen, Merlin thinks full of apprehension, but he has to admit grudgingly that the Arthur he’s met this morning has surprised him in many ways and, apart from that, there’s something else, some unexplained factor about him he can’t put his finger on.

“Arthur, then, sir,” Merlin says, and they both laugh.
“I’m relieved we have settled that.” Arthur puts his hand on Merlin’s shoulder to squeeze it, just as men do.

And Merlin flinches as the vision hits him unawares, and it is strong and clear this time. There is a golden light desperately flickering under a veil of darkness. The flames are licking against the shadows, trying to break through, trying to free themselves from their prison. And yet, they are suffocated again and again.

When he snaps back to reality he is faced with Arthur staring at him darkly, his eyes awash with hurt and rejection. Shit, Merlin has to act quickly to make amends for his strange reaction.

“I didn’t mean that, Arthur. It’s an old wound that keeps bothering me,” he lies, for how could he possibly explain to Arthur what really happened?

To his credit, Arthur recovers in record speed. “Sure. No worries.” But strangely Merlin can detect another layer of crimson creeping up his boss’s neck.

Thank God the embarrassing situation is interrupted by someone knocking on the door. Saved by the bell, Merlin sighs inwardly with relief.

“I think that must be Gwaine now,” Arthur mumbles and a second later the aforesaid pops his head into the office.

“So you’re the latest victim.” The brown haired Adonis grins at Merlin and eyes him unashamedly.

“Did Arthur hand pick you for your looks?” He teases good-naturedly.

“I’m all brain on the inside,” Merlin retorts easily, and Gwaine laughs out loud.

“I like you, Merlin,” he says and points towards Arthur. “Has he been behaving himself?”

“You better not frighten Merlin off with some of your horror stories about me.” Arthur warns jokingly before Merlin can say anything and Gwaine grins as if to say that he will do just as he pleases.

“I think you manage that quite well yourself.” Merlin gives Arthur a cheeky look and Gwaine laughs out loud.

“Right, come on, sunshine.” Gwaine is heading out to Merlin’s office. “I’ve got some goodies to install on your computer and then I’ll introduce you to EOIN.”

A few minutes later Merlin and Gwaine have settled in front of Merlin’s computer and Gwaine boots up the state-of-the-art PC.

“I hear, you are a hero, as well?” he asks casually while he is clicking menus and applications with rapid speed.

“More luck than hero,” Merlin mumbles.

“And modest, too!” Gwaine rolls his eyes to then check Merlin over appraisingly. “Almost too good to be true!”

“So what can EOIN do?” Merlin tries to change the topic of the conversation, thanking the gods a minute later that he’s been successful.

Two hours on, Merlin’s brain has been bombarded with technological instructions, but, he has to
give credit to Gwaine, he is pretty sure he’s got the bigger picture.

“Basically you have got a similar content of secure files on your computer as Arthur which you will need to receive and forward information from the different departments to this office,” Gwaine finally states to finish his explanations.

Now that is quite an exciting revelation. Merlin’s suddenly fully alert with anticipation. If he pokes around here or there, he just might find a clue to where the formula is kept.

Gwaine stands up, shakes his hair and pronounces ‘the case closed’.

“If there’s anything else you need, you can mail me or shout help on extension 3.” He grins at Merlin and waggles his eyebrows, indicating he is expecting a call pretty soon and that he will welcome it.

Then Gwaine’s expression changes very quickly, however, and he asks quietly, “So, how has he been treating you so far?”

That’s putting Merlin in an odd spot because he’s not sure if he can say what he really thinks to one of Arthur’s most loyal employees. This Gwaine must surely be the one that Arthur once saved?

Gwaine sees Merlin hesitating and adds, “Don’t worry. I’ve heard and seen it all!”

“We’re good, I think. After a ropey start.” Merlin has decided to be as honest as he can.

“Arthur can be quite a grumpy bugger when he has a bad day. And there have been plenty of those recently.” Gwaine stops as if to consider what he wants to say next. “Don’t let it put you off, Merlin,” he eventually says. “You seem to be a nice guy and he deserves someone who’s good to him.”

Merlin’s face must express some scepticism because Gwaine chuckles.

“Believe me, Merlin. Arthur is well worth it once you start looking behind the arrogant facade.” And then he winks and when he turns to leave, they see Arthur standing in the door watching them.

“You two seem to get along like a house on fire,” he states drily and looks from one to the other.

“I approve of this one, so don’t scare him away!” Gwaine laughs, clapping Merlin’s shoulder to show his appreciation. Then he is quicker out of the door than you can say good bye.

“High time you get started, Merlin!” The sudden coldness in Arthur’s voice startles Merlin. His head jerks round, noting the change of tone and the indifference in Arthur’s gaze. What is this all about now?

“I am already on it!” Merlin smiles in an attempt to lighten the mood, but it feels like the temperature has dropped at least ten degrees. Arthur doesn’t reply. Instead he turns round brusquely and heads towards the door.

“Moody prat,” Merlin mutters under his breath, noting that he’s never met anyone who could change so much from one minute to the next. A second later he dismisses the thought as irrelevant and throws himself into the files on his PC waiting for editing.
Arthur sinks into his chair at his desk. The warmth he’s felt inside him earlier this morning has long evaporated as if it had been doused by ice cold water.

Merlin lied to him. He is hundred percent sure of it. Gwaine clapped the same shoulder he’d touched not long before that. With his friend, however, Merlin didn’t flinch an inch. In fact, he had not reacted at all. Why would Merlin lie to him about something as inconsequential as that?

Maybe his reputation precedes him and Merlin wants to make clear that he doesn’t want to be touched by him? He has no idea who Merlin is and what his views are. What if he can’t stomach the idea of having a gay man as his boss?

Things went so well until that flinch. He has always been one of those tactile guys who express their feelings by physical touch. It is what he does all the time and he never even thinks about it. He certainly didn’t expect Merlin to react that strangely to his touch and it had hurt. Arthur isn’t used to being rejected and Merlin’s action has left him with an array of confusing emotions.

Or is there more to this than meets the eye? Arthur shakes his head as his reasoning hits a wall and he tries unsuccessfully to distract himself by the latest crime reports.

The minute he set his eyes on Merlin earlier this morning his heart had gone into freefall. The previous week Merlin had blown him away, despite the dirt-covered suit and mucky face, but this morning when he appeared, wearing that light grey suit, expertly moulded onto his body by his tailor, Arthur had struggled to find his composure.

Actually, the image seems permanently stuck in his head. The shape of the suit accentuates Merlin’s tall lean shape and long legs, while the indigo tie reflects the blue of his eyes, bringing out every nuance of the colour. The well-fitted jacket, sitting loosely on his shoulders sets off the white and grey shirt perfectly. Merlin is stunning and could grace any fashion magazine for sure.

Get real, you moron! You are behaving like a bloody teenager! Surely you can control yourself at thirty-two! Arthur shouts at himself. Not to mention that he doesn’t know Merlin at all. Still he had found it incredibly difficult to tear his eyes away and only the fear of being noticed to stare - again - had given him the incentive to do so.

Arthur pushes out a sigh. Merlin is a complete riddle to him. He tried to make up for his bad behaviour on their first day because he didn’t want the other man to judge him from his first impression alone. Of course he will also have to work closely with Merlin for six months, Arthur defends his action, ignoring the little voice in the back of his head whispering that he also wants Merlin to like him for completely different reasons.

Anyway, why does Merlin have such a devastating effect on him? It’s not as if he hasn’t seen attractive men before and he has not only seen them, but taken who he liked, too.

This though? He’s never been rattled so profoundly. “Love at first sight” pops into his head before he can count to three and he swears at the mere thought. How can his brain conjure this up when he doesn’t even know if Merlin’s interested in men? Falling for a straight guy is pure hell. He’s seen it happen and it’s never ended well.

His reason tells him to be on guard. Merlin’s not only lied to him, but there’s a chance that he has close links to Uther. That’s one for Percival to find out. If he can substantiate that allegation, then Merlin will have to go. No matter what his father says or what his bloody feelings are asking him to do.
Arthur wants to trust Merlin and let him into his life. Yet, reason dictates that getting involved with a PA he isn’t able to rely on completely is sheer madness. He’s ticked that box already twice with two of his previous PAs. He certainly can’t allow himself to act like a complete fool again. No, that would be idiotic beyond belief. *It certainly would be.* He keeps repeating to himself. His heart, however, is screaming a very different message.

Eventually Arthur takes a deep breath and dials Percival’s extension.

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*So it seems Arthur has good days and bad days.* Merlin recapitulates on his way down to security three days later.

*What the hell is going on with him?* he wonders. He can’t remember reading about any problems in the media he’s studied and he resolves to get to the bottom of this.

And then there is that vision. Which is even more puzzling. What does it mean? Why does it happen each time Arthur touches him? He must speak to Gaius about it at the weekend. If he has one. The phrase 24/7 still reverberates in his mind.

“Ouch!” The young woman shouts out in pain as Merlin crashes into her and sends the pile of documents in her hands flying.

“I’m really sorry…,” Merlin hesitates. He’s been so caught up in his thoughts he didn’t notice her when she appeared at the corner of the corridor. He remembers the face of the brown haired girl. She works somewhere down in Archives as far as he is aware.

“So.” She smiles at him and takes the hand he has offered in apology. “We met in Salaries the other day.”

“Are you okay? I wasn’t really watching where I was going.” Merlin mumbles as he bends down to pick up some of the files that lie scattered all over the floor.

“I noticed.” Sefa smiles.

“Hope these are not in any way precious?” he asks as he hands them back to her.

“Well, this document here is 200 years old and on loan from the National Library and that one …”

Sefa starts and laughs when she sees Merlin’s face drop.

“Just kidding, Merlin.” She grins and adds. “You’ve done no horrendous damage.”

Despite everything Merlin can’t help but smile back at her friendly face, and as he flashes his dimples he can see her blushing. Women do that at times when he speaks to them. A lot of times, actually. Freya was the first to point that out to him in the early days of their relationship.

“Have you any idea what you do to the female population of this world?” She’d asked him innocently and giggled at the puzzlement spreading over his features.

“Girls love you, Merlin. I can’t believe you’re that oblivious!” she’d continued and Merlin had frowned, somewhat mystified.
“But why?” he’d genuinely asked, wondering what she was on about. With his way too skinny frame, his gangly gait and oversized ears he was not exactly handsome. He really couldn’t see the attraction at all.

“Just the fact that you have no idea how gorgeous you are, pulls the ladies, you dope. There’s nothing more attractive than innocence,” She’d answered matter of fact and then kissed him gently. “Just as well I’m here to save you from all those girls who are trying to get a piece of you.” She’d teased and then pulled him close to find his lips.

Freya. Merlin swallows hard. He shouldn’t have allowed his mind to stray. But Sefa reminds him of her. The brown curls playing around her delicate face and the warmth in her gaze, as she smiles up at him.

“Some of us are going to Clumsy’s across the square for a drink after work tomorrow. Want to join us?” Sefa looks expectantly at him.

“Looks like I’m clumsy enough,” Merlin answers and Sefa laughs out loud.

“People would love to meet you, you know.” She tries to persuade him.

“I have no idea if Arthur needs me.” Merlin makes a careful excuse. “You know what he’s like. As fickle as the weather!” And he rolls his eyes.

Sefa chuckles and adds “You’re welcome at any time!” before she disappears in the lift.

A few minutes later Merlin opens the door to Security to find Percival brooding over a file on the computer.

“Hi there.” He looks up and nods at Merlin. “Just a second.” And he clicks Merlin’s security data away he’s just been reviewing.

Merlin nervously watches the tall, muscly man who he met the previous week when he came in to get an in depth check-up. He has no clue why he has been called down here. He already gave a DNA and a blood sample last time, and all his details – well, the ones Will and Gilli invented – are on record. He passed all the tests with flying colours, so what is this about?

Percival notices that Merlin is tapping his fingers on the table and that he is finding it difficult to sit still. Fidgety…. he thinks. … and egdy. Hmm. Interesting. Maybe Arthur is right and Merlin has got something to hide. If he is, he will definitely get to the bottom of it. He always does because he is a patient and meticulous worker and knows how to approach situations like this.

“So how have you been doing so far?” he asks casually.

“Typical first week, I guess.” Merlin smiles and sits back. He really shouldn’t behave as if he’s done something wrong already. “Lots to learn and lots of names to remember.”

Percival laughs “So you reckon this is better than your old job?”

Merlin is immediately on alert, but keeps his cool. “I liked working at the Institute, but I was looking for a challenge.”

“Arthur is just perfect then!” Percival laughs out loud and Merlin joins in.

“You worked for Gaius Richardson before, didn’t you?” Percival asks, although he knows Merlin’s file by heart.
“Yes, I was his PA for quite a while.” Merlin has no idea where this is going.

“I’ve heard of him, I think.” Percival continues. “Nice guy?”

“Yeah, we got on well. He’s an old family friend.” There’s genuine warmth in Merlin’s voice.

“Was he not a friend of the Governor long ago?” Percival vaguely remembers the name.

“I think he might have known him when he was young,” Merlin answers truthfully. Gaius had been a high flying chemist then and very friendly with Uther. Then the Governor had offered him a job on a team of medical experts to develop a new chemical compound that would fight the threat of sorcery. Horrified, Gaius had declined and their friendship had ended that moment.

“Sorry to call you down here again so soon again, Merlin. The lab mucked up your first DNA sample and they’ve asked me to send them another one.” Percival finally explains why Merlin had to be called in.

“Oh, no problem! Just do what you have to!” Merlin shrugs and opens his mouth for Percival to take a swab. “Is that all?”

“Yeap. All done.” Percival carefully puts the sample into a vial.

“Oh, and I’m supposed to give you this,” he says and walks into his office at the back.

That’s the moment Merlin has been waiting for. His eyes flash golden and the sample reacts for a split second. Nobody should recognize his real DNA now. He quietly thanks Gaius for introducing that very useful spell to him.

The next minute Percival is back and hands over one of the brand new Safety Chips. “They’ve just come out. Brilliant idea of Arthur’s. It’ll keep you safe and sound.”

Merlin takes the chip without any excitement and wonders silently if it has an inbuilt tracking signal. He needs to remember to leave it in his apartment when he goes to meet up with Gilli at the weekend, just in case.

“Thanks. Great!” He fakes enthusiasm. “Cheers and see you later!”

“Coming to Clumsy’s tomorrow?” Percival shouts after him.

“Not this time, Percival. I think I need a good sleep!” And then Merlin’s gone.

Percival takes the vial and packs it up to go to Lamia House. Edwin Richter can check it out in his specially equipped lab there. He might come up with another result than the one their usual lab provided.

He has covered that avenue, but he’s got an inkling that checking out Gaius Richardson could also lead to something. Although he hopes it doesn’t. Merlin seems a genuinely nice guy and he would hate to have to hurt him.
Progress

Merlin flops on the sofa of his new apartment on Friday evening. He’s totally knackered. What a week it has been! He takes a sip of wine and surveys the boxes scattered across the floor. They have been waiting to be emptied all week, and he will finally have time to get down to the task in the next two days. The removal went without a hitch, mainly due to the experienced firm Arthur had sent to organize it.

The apartment itself is amazing – all the latest gadgets and totally swish and exclusive. Merlin grins – at least there are some perks that come with his mission. He leans back and closes his eyes to take stock of what has happened in the last five days.

Arthur’s behaviour has been confusing, that’s for sure. First warm and apologetic on Monday morning and then as cool as a cucumber and professional to the T the rest of the week. He really doesn’t get it. Merlin sighs as his tired limbs relax into the sofa.

He freely admits that he liked the Arthur he met on his first day of work. The distant behaviour that followed was an unexpected blow and he has no idea what caused Arthur to snap back to it. It is pretty annoying how Arthur goes from one mood to the next without any warning. Merlin stops in mid thought. Why does it actually annoy him? It is nothing to him how his boss behaves as long as he doesn’t interfere with what he has come to do.

Merlin takes another slug of wine and stares out of the huge window of his living room. Camelot stretches before him, peaceful and calm, and yet so much pain is hidden behind closed curtains.

Father. Where are you? He whispers in his head, just as he has done every night since Balinor’s arrest. As usual there’s no answer, there can be no answer, and Merlin understands that, and yet, the aching emptiness lingers on.

A knock on the door snaps Merlin back to reality. As far as he knows nobody should be able to disturb the senior staff in their apartments at night time.

Merlin opens the door and exhales in disbelief. “Arthur?” It is a shock to find Arthur standing outside, a rather precarious smile on his face.

“Hi.” Merlin gives a half smirk. “Anything you need?”

“No. I’m fine. I just wanted to speak to you.” Arthur is biting his bottom lip which is totally out of character because nervousness is certainly not one of the young Pendragon’s weaknesses.

“Sure. Come in,” Merlin says while his mind is going ten to the dozens. Why is Arthur here? Surely he could have spoken to him sometime during their working hours?

“I see you are on the wine already?” Arthur waves at the glass on the coffee table jovially.

“It’s been an exhausting week.” Merlin motions Arthur to settle on the couch.

“I see you are on the wine already?” Arthur waves at the glass on the coffee table jovially.

“It’s been an exhausting week.” Merlin motions Arthur to settle on the couch.

“It has,” Arthur says. “And you’ve done a very good job so far.”

The unexpected compliment makes Merlin’s ears burn against his will because Arthur’s sincerity does things to his head he doesn’t quite understand.

“Thanks.” Okay. Arthur has paid him a compliment. Why is he unable to throw the feeling that
“You like the apartment?” Arthur asks, obviously trying to start up some kind of sensible conversation.

“It is brilliant.” Merlin smiles properly this time and Arthur seems to relax a little bit.

“Pleased to hear it,” he says and returns the gesture.

Merlin nods and disappears in the kitchen for a minute to fetch a second glass. It seems only logical to offer Arthur a drink.

“Can I persuade you to have one?” he asks, wondering what on earth is driving him to even suggest it because surely Arthur has no interest investing more time in speaking to him than is necessary. He has made that very clear throughout the week.

Arthur nods. “Thanks. I’d love to.” Merlin’s eyebrow shoots up in surprise. He pours the red liquid slowly while Arthur watches. Is he staring at my fingers? Merlin can’t be completely certain, but it sure looks that way. Shit. Why is the idea alone turning his hands to jelly? He puts the bottle down quickly before his trembling becomes noticeable. And what is it with those tiny bubbles of excitement that keep erupting deep inside him?

Torn between frustration and embarrassment he sits down and watches as Arthur lifts the glass of red almost desperately and takes a huge swig. “If there’s anything else you need here, let me know.”

Merlin looks at him wryly because there IS one thing he has been wondering about. “Why is there a connecting door between your bed room and mine?”

Arthur lifts his head, clearly taken aback by the question. “It was designed this way to accommodate any emergencies,” he says in a most convincing tone.

“Right.” Merlin throws him a rather sceptical glance because Arthur’s eyes are giving away he is not telling him the whole truth.

“It usually remains closed,” Arthur says, “but there’s a key next to it that can be used if needed.”

Merlin nods as if that settles the matter satisfactorily but his common sense sneers at the insufficient explanation. Emergencies. Right! No way, Arthur. No way!

Arthur suddenly looks at him with a determined piercing gaze and Merlin gasps at the intensity of it. “Merlin, I don’t want to beat about the bush. I’ve come to talk to you about something in particular.”

Finally coming to the point. Merlin raises his eyebrows in apprehension, but still manages a polite “Sure. Go on!”

“Your shoulder.” Arthur locks eyes with him as if to measure Merlin’s reaction. “Is there really something wrong with it?”

The shoulder? Merlin retracts his steps for a second and then remembers his feeble excuse. “Why are you asking?” Merlin is not ready to answer before he has an idea what this is all about.

When Arthur tells him, Merlin grits his teeth. What a fool he’s been to make such a mistake! He is surprised though that Arthur’s come to talk openly about it. So what is he supposed to say? I had a vision when you touched me? My magic reached out to you? Oh fuck. What a mess!
His mind is racing to find an acceptable answer and he finally spurts out the first thing that passes as a sensible explanation.

“I took some extra strength painkillers not long after that.” Shit, he really hates lying. And lying to Arthur makes him feel all weird. Like it is wrong or something. But why should it be? Arthur is the enemy after all. Isn’t he?

Arthur’s Adam’s apple bobs up and down; and his eyes give Merlin’s face a once over. He’s checking whether I’m telling the truth, Merlin thinks and a wave of guilt washes over him while he maintains his best innocent look on the outside.

“Right,” Arthur mumbles, his tone suggesting he is not totally convinced but that he’s willing to let it go. He absent-mindedly attempts to grab his glass in a swift move as if he was in dire need of alcohol. Merlin can see that he is too distracted to really pay attention and is not surprised when Arthur knocks the glass with the back of his hand.

They both react instinctively and reach out for it, with Merlin being a split second quicker than Arthur. Arthur’s hand freezes, cupping Merlin’s underneath.

Time stands still for moment and Merlin holds his breath. The vision hits him full force and blinded by its strength, he shudders. As soon as it passes a completely different sensation overwhelms him.

The warmth of Arthur’s hand is seeping through his skin and it spreads through his body at an alarming rate, leaving his hand tingling and causing goose bumps running down his spine.

Merlin’s eyes snap up to Arthur’s, and suddenly the atmosphere is charged with prickling tension. Neither is willing to or feels able to turn away. Hearts are thumping. Blood is pumping through their veins at rapid speed. Heat flushes their faces.

What is this? Merlin is shaking on the inside like a leaf that’s swirled around by a hurricane. His throat becomes tight and dry, and he couldn’t utter a word, even if his life depended on it.

But then Arthur pulls his hand away and the moment evaporates in a flash, creating a vacuum of nothingness where feelings roared a second before.

“I think I should go,” says Arthur in a croaky voice as he jumps up at his feet and heads for the door.

“Glad we spoke, Merlin. Have a good weekend!” And before Merlin can catch his breath and try to make sense of all this, Arthur’s gone, leaving Merlin sitting on the sofa totally gobsmacked and utterly confused.

The only thought that comes through coherently is that he has to speak to Gaius about this weird emotional entanglement between Arthur and him. Surely there’s something that can be done about it!

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The monthly staff meeting has gone on for a good two hours and half by now and Arthur can see that Merlin is bored out of his skull. The yawn that’s been trying to get the better of him for the last half an hour is set on a winning course and Arthur inwardly grins, watching as Merlin’s jaws struggle to suppress the urge to let it out.
A pleasant wave of heat warms Arthur from top to toe in an instant when Merlin looks across the room to smile at him. A proper smile, dimples and sparkling eyes and all. It is a sight to behold and Arthur doesn’t give a damn about his pride admitting that he would do quite a lot to get rewarded like this.

Keeping Merlin at arm’s length during that first week had been hell. His feelings had pulled him into one direction and his reason into the complete opposite one. He could not risk having his objective judgement about his PA clouded by his intense emotional reaction to him, and he knew he had acted sensibly when he had put Percival on Merlin’s trail, even though his heart had protested loudly.

What a relief when Merlin’s DNA sample was cleared by Edwin the following week and when Percival had reported no suspicious links between Merlin and Uther.

He was delighted and called Percival off the case immediately when he’d asked whether he should check up Merlin’s background information in more detail. Surely that was not necessary any longer!

As for the shoulder incidence, he had taken that in his own hands when he went to challenge his PA about it on that Friday night of his first week. Arthur’s still uneasy when he thinks about Merlin’s excuse, and he hates that it leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Yes, he’d decided to accept it, because Merlin could have taken painkillers during the time he spent with Gwaine. But he hadn’t been able to shake that niggling feeling that Merlin might be hiding something. Eventually though it was dumped conveniently in a dark corner of his consciousness.

Arthur half listens to the Head of Salaries prattling on about some new ideas while his eyes scan every inch of Merlin. He feels relaxed in Merlin’s presence. In fact he loves having Merlin round him. For some reason he feels calmer and more composed, he smiles more and he could swear that he can concentrate better. Apart from the benefits of Merlin’s warm laughter, his sharp intelligence and the meticulous way he works.

It’s really very simple: the more he has got to know Merlin in the last two months the more he’s fallen for him. And yes. He has admitted to himself that he has fallen for Merlin. Hook, line and sinker.

For all it’s worth. Because nothing will ever come of it. In the eight weeks they have worked together Merlin has not once given the slightest indication that he might be interested in Arthur… that way. Despite the moment of breathless recognition when he had held Merlin’s hand for a split second.

To Arthur, everything about that had felt right and he is sure that they’d connected on some level that night. But he has no idea whether Merlin experienced the same exhilaration as him, the same pull towards the other man. So far there has been no indication of that whatsoever. Probably there never will be.

It’s just as well that it’s his turn to get up and conclude the meeting with a few words. He hates getting lost in negative vibes.

“Thank God for that,” Merlin mumbles under his breath a few minutes later as he joins him at his desk.

“Sorry to bore you, Merlin,” Arthur chuckles. “I hate to inform you that you are here to work not to be entertained.” And then hands him another pile of files he’s just received from one of the departmental heads.

“Thank you so much, sir.” Merlin says in a mock subservient tone, deliberately using the title in
revenge. “I can hardly wait to get these sorted.”

“I can see you are keen.” Arthur’s eyes are sparkling mischievously. “And I would like to assure you that there’s more where these came from.”

“Generous, aren’t you?” Merlin mutters and rolls his eyes when Arthur adds file upon file to Merlin’s already existing workload.

This is symptomatic for the relationship that has blossomed between them. The banter that has been developing more and more with each passing week has turned into their way of communication and Arthur revels in it. Merlin tends to be blatantly honest, a characteristic Arthur sincerely values. And no other PA has ever had the balls to stand up to him and give as much as he gets.

“Merlin, move your lazy arse and come here,” Arthur says a moment later, keeping in with the theme. “I’d like you to meet someone.” And he drags Merlin towards an older white haired man.

“Edwin, I’d like you to meet my new PA, Merlin Emrys.” Arthur introduces Merlin. “Merlin, this is Edwin Richter, Head of Research at Lamia House.”

Edwin’s chest rises proudly and he adds in a rather self-satisfied tone, “And I am also the physician of the Pendragon household.”

Merlin’s expression is sombre when he takes Edwin’s hand to shake it. “Nice to meet you, sir,” he says, acting as he should, but Arthur gets the strange impression that something is off.

“You have done us a great service saving the Governor.” Edwin’s eyes are piercing straight into Merlin’s, and Arthur sees Merlin shudder. What is this all about?

“I am glad to be of service.” Merlin’s half-baked smile is confirmation that he is uncomfortable.

“Of course,” Edwin says, but his eyes seem to say something different all together. There is distrust in them and suspicion and a promise that doesn’t seem to bode well.

“Right. I think it is time to enjoy the spread.” Arthur defuses the growing tension between Edwin and Merlin, and the three men descend into the ante room for refreshments. Arthur breaks away to speak to Gwaine, while Edwin heads towards the older staff and Merlin joins the crowd he has become friendly with since he started regular visits to Clumsy’s on Friday nights.

Arthur is in the middle of discussing the latest technological problems in Lamia House with Gwaine when his gaze falls upon Merlin and the chatty crowd around him. Caught in the moment he loses track of what he was saying and watches Merlin instead.

There is Elena from Salaries and Vivien who works in Admin. Joy and Aisha are both in Reception and Sofia is responsible for the Mail. And of course Sefa from Admin is there. She has been around his office quite a lot lately. The girls are all gathering round Merlin, giving him their undivided attention, and he is blossoming in a way Arthur hasn’t seen when Merlin is with him.

He is drawing his audience in, captivating them with every word and gesture. They are all hanging on his lips as if enchanted and happily listen to whatever he has got to say. Merlin’s eyes are radiating and his laughter carries across the room, grabbing at Arthur’s insides and tying them into tight knots.

This is a side of Merlin that is new to him and Arthur is hypnotized. And then it hits him. Merlin is actually flirting. Flirting with girls. And his heart drops like a bomb.
Watching Merlin clarifies quite a lot of things – even if Arthur is unwilling to fully accept the cold evidence in front of him.

“Is it as bad as that?” Gwaine asks under his breath and Arthur can hear the concern in his voice.

“Am I that obvious?” Arthur asks resigned and tries to ignore that Merlin has just put his hand on Sefa’s arm.

“I can read you like a book, Arthur.” Gwaine smirks good-humouredly, stating the truth. He has known Arthur long enough to know when he is smitten.

“He’s very popular with the staff,” Gwaine says and then adds rather carefully. “I don’t think it’s wise to invest yourself there, Arthur.”

Arthur’s throat suddenly feels dry and scratchy. After that moment in Merlin’s apartment a few weeks ago he’d hoped maybe at one point …

“I really like him, Gwaine,” he whispers hoarsely and clenches his teeth when Merlin slides his hand on to the small back of Sefa. It looks so intimate, so familiar and anyone watching them would have thought that they are an item or not far off that stage.

Of course Gwaine is right. Arthur shakes his head. He is clearly wasting his time and he should gracefully face up to the fact that he has no chance and never will because Merlin is evidently a ladies’ man.

“I really like him,” Arthur repeats in a more defeatist tone, and hurt is pouring out of his voice. Watching Merlin and Sefa makes it so obvious that he is a deluded idiot.

“I am a fool, aren’t I?” he asks, knowing it is a rhetoric question.

Gwaine has never seen Arthur like this. Sure, he has seen him in love and out of it. He has witnessed first-hand when Arthur suffered from losing someone he had liked and when he pined for someone he had wanted. But nothing has ever been like what he sees now. It looks like Arthur is serious about Merlin and that makes it all the more painful because going by the evidence Merlin is off limits.

“Sorry, mate.” Gwaine squeezes his arm. “I am truly sorry.” And he curses fate for not giving Arthur the break he deserves.

“Maybe you should try to take your mind of it?” It is the only suggestion he can think of. “How about heading off to ‘Pulse 8’ on Saturday night?”

Arthur has not been to the club that used to be his favourite haunt for many years since …. yeah, actually since Merlin’s appeared on the scene. He has had plenty of good times in that place and taken many gorgeous men home after a great night. They’d wanted him and had made him feel good. This is exactly what he needs. Gwaine’s right. A couple of drinks and a good shag. That’s always put him right before and it has made him sleep, too.

“You’re right, Gwaine. It’s a date.” Arthur nods and then turns to leave the room because the sight of Merlin unashamedly flirting with the girls is starting to make him feel squeamish.
Merlin knows he’s late. Arthur’s meeting was at 13.30 and he should have been there ten minutes ago. Shit. Arthur is going to be furious. If there’s one thing he really hates it is unpunctuality. But Sefa’s been talking to him in the canteen and he got so involved in their conversation he forgot the time.

Sefa. Who’s so much like Freya. Kind and funny and full of giggles. No wonder he feels drawn to her. And it seems that she feels the same. Merlin grits his teeth for a moment.

Freya has left a huge hole in his heart and he’s not sure whether he’s ready for someone else to fill the gap. He never did manage to find the man responsible for her death. The man who cold heartedly drove a security van into a crowd of peaceful protesters and then disappeared as soon as it was clear what carnage he’d left behind.

Merlin had tried, of course he had. He’d followed a trail of clues for weeks, researched every little bit of evidence there was, but it seemed that the system was protecting its own and that it was not willing to give him the satisfaction of avenging Freya’s death. And so all his efforts had ended up in nothing. And he’d never got the closure he so desperately sought.

*But this will not happen again, Merlin swears. This time I will be successful. I will save you, Father.*

He arrives back at Arthur’s office a bit out of breath and almost shouts, “Hello. That’s me back from lunch,” when he realizes that Arthur is fast asleep in his chair.

God, he looks dead beat. He often does, but today it is more pronounced than ever. His head has sunk to his chest and his neck is straining at the back. The scruff on his chin, the dark shadows under his eyes and the sunken cheeks make him look decidedly ill.

What the heck is wrong with him? There’s no denying that something IS wrong. Arthur’s mood changes, his perpetual exhaustion and his irritability are unmistakable signs for it. When Merlin gets closer he notices a bottle of hypospray in the paper bin next to the desk.

He is taking medication of some kind. Merlin picks up the bottle and checks it out. There are no instructions on it, no official sign of a chemist. It’s just a bottle and as far as Merlin can see, it’s virtually empty, with just a few drops remaining at the bottom. Which should be enough for chemical analysis.

Curiosity and professional interest as a biochemist come to the fore and Merlin puts the hypospray into his pocket without much further ado, resolving to have it analysed by Gaius as soon as possible. Maybe it will shine some light on Arthur’s illness. It is not as if his boss has volunteered any information about it and it seems prudent to know as much as he can about his employer.

*I might also be able to help him,* a small voice whispers inside his head.

Am I going mental? Merlin asks himself in bewilderment. Helping Arthur with this? Morgana would have a fit. Helping ANY Pendragon would feel like treason to her. And it has nothing to do with what he is out to achieve. And yet…

Merlin gazes at Arthur and is hit by the strong urge to protect the man in front of him. He looks so young and vulnerable as he is asleep … and so handsome. And Merlin’s brain feels thick and muddled out of a sudden.

Which stirs the memory of that evening when Arthur had virtually held his hand. Merlin’s insides had come alive in a way he had never experienced before. Every little fibre in his body had vibrated
with anticipation and excitement, and for a fleeting moment something resembling desire had swept over him, leaving him breathless. He’s been incapable of grasping the reason for his intense reaction to this day.

Something shifted between Arthur and him after that. He could sense it the following Monday when they saw each other again. There was an ease between them, as if two souls had met, recognized their worth and had smiled at each other.

Of course Arthur didn’t change into a perfect competitor for the “Friendliest Employer of the Year Award”. No, he showed his bristles all right when he didn’t approve of things, and he could be quite stubborn when he wanted things done a certain way. Not to speak of his behaviour on one of his bad days. But the underlying aloofness from before was gone, and there had been warmth in his eyes again.

Arthur lets out a little snore and Merlin chuckles. That fits the picture – he is making the guy a mental compliment to have it blown back into his face like that.

A compliment? What the hell is wrong with him? And why for fuck’s sake is his hand itching to go through that soft blonde hair? Merlin grumbles at himself and decides to make Arthur more comfortable. Sleeping like that could do a few things to his back after all.

He pulls Arthur’s arm gently over his shoulder and without fail the vision gate crashes his mind. Undaunted, he wipes it away while he carefully drags Arthur over to the sofa letting him sink slowly against the soft cushions. There is a woolly blanket in the cupboard if he isn’t mistaken, and it takes no time to retrieve it. He cautiously covers Arthur and bends down next to him to tuck him in.

“You really need to get more sleep,” Merlin mumbles as if Arthur could hear him and, without giving it further thought, gently runs his fingertips over Arthur’s cheek. He should have expected it to trigger off the vision again because it has become clear since that first incident that it happens every time they touch. And his magic reacts to the vision, surging forward as if to envelope Arthur and reach the place where the flickering fire is smothered by darkness.

That’s exactly what he told Gaius when they’d met in the Institute a couple of weeks after he’d started working for the Arthur. First Merlin had not wanted to take the risk of seeing Gaius so soon, but the urge to find an explanation for this weird bond between Arthur and him had not let him go.

Gaius had been suitably puzzled. “A vision when you touch? Now that is very interesting.”

“Interesting? Is that it, Gaius!” His old friend used to have answers for everything. Surely that couldn’t be it? “Have you never heard of anything like that before?”

“No off hand, my boy,” Gaius had said apologetically and rubbed his chin fervently.

“And you also experienced strange physical sensations at the same time?”

Merlin had just nodded and talked about it in detail. The shivers and the heat. The trembling and the breathlessness. The way his magic had reached out to Arthur and tried to embrace him.

“Have you ever experienced anything similar with another MU?” Gaius had wondered.

No, he had not. He’d always been able to spot when magic was near him. He had sensed Freya’s when they were together, but that had been a calm, serene feeling, nothing like the wild tumbling of emotions he was experiencing with Arthur.

“I am sorry, my boy, that I can’t enlighten you at this moment. But leave it with me and I’ll see if
something comes up.” Gaius had patted Merlin’s arm reassuringly. “I’ll let you know as soon as I’ve got news.”

And that was how they’d left it, and hopefully, any time soon, Gaius will come up with some kind of answer.

Right. Merlin tears himself out of his thoughts. He really needs to get going. Maybe he can use the time to do further research on the whereabouts of the formula. He is about to tiptoe out of the office when Arthur’s computer screen catches his attention. It is open. Arthur has left his computer on.

The computer that surely must contain information about anything. Merlin swallows hard. He knows he can’t let this opportunity go past even though it feels like a betrayal of the worst kind. Here is the man he’s just taken care of and now he ….

Stop it! You can’t afford sentimentalities like that. This is about your father’s life. Merlin has hardly completed scolding himself when he bends over the keyboard and puts in a search for the Serum.

His heart is pounding with excitement. This could be it. This could be the first step to finding the formula!

Unfortunately there’s only one search result. Merlin’s hand is trembling when he clicks on it to open the document. His heart sinks immediately when it comes up as password protected. Of course it would be! What else did he expect?

Then he looks again and there at the top of the document in bright view for anyone to see it says:

Serum, the formula. Primary contact: Edwin Richter at Lamia House.

This is it. This is the confirmation that the formula is kept under Edwin’s supervision somewhere in Lamia House. Edwin! That figures! Merlin thinks grimly. The day they’d met the man had got under his skin like an infectious disease. And with similar symptoms. His whole body had reacted when they shook hands, and not in a good way. He hasn’t been able to figure out exactly what’s wrong, just that there is something menacing about the guy, something threatening and hostile. He has no idea how Arthur can trust a creepy guy like that, but there it is.

Knowing where the formula is kept should narrow down the search for Gilli and Will. But will they be able to hack into the safest place in Camelot? We’ll have to wait and see. And if they can’t I will find another way to get a hold of it. Merlin swears with a determined grin.

He clicks the information away and almost heads out of the room when another idea hits him.

In for a penny. In for a pound! he thinks and types Balnor’s name into the search engine. The requested details are up before he can blink:

**Balinor Emerson:**

Freed convicted MUs / murdered John Hunter, captain of the Justice Squad on February 24th 2014.

Verdict: Imprisonment for 19 years 10 months. Administration of the Serum.

Serum injection: 12th March 2014, 9.25 a.m.

Imprisoned at: Lamia House: cell no.32, basement.
Relief floods through Merlin. He is alive! After nine weeks Balinor’s still hanging in there and fighting the Serum. That’s all that matters in this instant and it leaves Merlin staring at the screen with a beating heart.

Suddenly Arthur puffs out a disgruntled noise behind him and Merlin shoots around in alarm. Thank God, Arthur is still asleep, and Merlin remains completely motionless for a minute to keep it that way.

“Merlin…,” Arthur whispers in his sleep and Merlin’s stomach churns at the anguish in the one word. Is Arthur dreaming about him? Surely not! Why would there be such a lot of pain in his voice then?

Merlin quickly recapitulates and guesses that it’s probably about the time he completely cocked up a report to Admin. It was his worst mistake so far and Arthur had been livid.

Anyway, he has no time to ponder about something as unimportant as that just now. Arthur looks more unsettled suddenly and he’s turning and twisting on the sofa as if he might wake up any second.

Unwilling to take any further risk, Merlin returns the screen to its desktop and sneaks away to arrange a meeting with Gilli and Will.
“He’s getting worse, isn’t he?” Uther doesn’t need any confirmation for this. He can see in Edwin’s face that he’s summed up the situation correctly.

“I’m doing everything I can Uther,” Edwin assures him quickly, but his lips twitch nervously as he says it.

“Shouldn’t we stop the treatment for a while?” Uther’s had about enough of seeing Arthur permanently exhausted and run down. The hypospray’s supposed to help him, not make him feel worse. Why, he asks himself just as so many times before, why has fate punished his family so cruelly?

Finding out that Ygraine was struck by the illness had been catastrophic, but the day he realized Arthur had inherited the disease was the worst of his life. His only son. The heir to all he has built. Damn.

People have started to whisper about Arthur’s continuing bad health, or so his informers have told him. It is something he’s always feared because Arthur can’t afford such rumours if he wants to be the future leader of this country. Arthur needs to appear strong and healthy, capable of steering Albion through good and bad times.

There’s nothing more Uther wants to see than Arthur succeed him when his time for retirement comes, despite the knowledge that his bloodline is going to end. It’s a fact filling him with sorrow and resentment, but he’s long accepted Arthur’s sexual preferences. Admittedly, the threat that his son might pass his illness on to a grandchild has made his quiet consent a lot easier. At least the affliction is going to be contained like that. That’s worth more than anything else.

Uther sighs and takes note of Edwin giving him the answer he expected to hear anyway.

“I wouldn’t recommend taking Arthur off the hypospray, sir. I’m sure you remember what happened the last time.”

Uther nods. The time when Arthur decided to stop his medication had been pure hell. He’d gone cold turkey on the drug he had taken since the age of six within a day and suffered from the most severe withdrawal symptoms. What a desperate time that had been. Uther had worried every second that Arthur might show signs of his illness. And what if somebody noticed?

But watching Arthur struggling with the side effects of the drug has been equally frustrating.

“Surely there’s something we can do.” Uther’s voice is pleading and threatening at the same time and Edwin flinches.

“I’ve reduced the dosage by 0.75 percent twice last month,” Edwin explains, “and I’ve looked at the composition of the drug from all angles. We can probably try one or two more different combinations of ingredients and see if that helps.”

That doesn’t sound promising at all. Uther grits his teeth and stares at Arthur’s photo that won the Best Photo of the Year competition a few years earlier and has been gracing his desk since. The shadows of the illness were there even then, but not as pronounced as now.

He’ll never find out what’s wrong with him if I have anything to do with it, Uther vows. Ignorance is definitely preferable to facing reality. Uther’s always seen it as his duty to keep the cruel truth from
his son, and that isn’t going to change now. He loves Arthur with all his heart, and he would do anything to save him from finding out what’s really wrong with him, and he will pull his strings to keep this from the eyes of the public.

Therefore, as usual, his choice is one he’d rather not make. He has to sign the consent form, just as he’s done again and again for so many years, in the knowledge that Arthur’s medication is damaging his health, and that one day it might even change his personality. It is the better option out of two appalling ones.

“Do what you can,” he says to Edwin, and takes a pen to sign the piece of paper in front of him. He’s never shied away from making hard decisions before and he isn’t going to start now.

Merlin has set a meeting with Gilli and Will for Saturday evening, and God, is he counting the minutes! It’s such a relief that they’re finally getting somewhere after all these weeks! Unfortunately the latest developments keep his mind working overtime and are distracting him from concentrating on his work fully. He’s been easily distracted, and Arthur’s ticked him off for at least twice since the morning.

Mind, it’s not his fault only. Arthur’s having one of his grouchy days where it’s hard to please him, whatever, and he looks as if he’d partied non-stop for a week.

“I need to see Arthur. Now.” A man with a headful of brown curls, most likely in his late thirties, scurries into the foyer of the reception without any explanation and heads straight for Arthur’s office.

“Not a step further, sir.” Merlin is on red alert. Everyone, no exceptions, has to go through him before they see Arthur. That’s the ‘rules’ as they stand and, to make his point, he plants himself right in front of the office door.

“I’m the Chief of Police, you idiot. Get out of my way.” This is quite impressive. That guy’s very good at ‘doing threatening’, and if Merlin were of a more delicate disposition he’d definitely be intimidated.

“Anyone could say that, sir! Surely you have a badge?”

“Are you kidding me?” The man glowers at Merlin, but Merlin holds his gaze effortlessly.

“Just give me a second so I can check with Mr. Pendragon,” he says, completely unfazed.

“You really ARE testing my patience.” The guy’s getting increasingly annoyed by being delayed.

“What a racket! Merlin, what’s going on here?” Merlin swivels round to face a bemused Arthur who’s been alerted by their raised voices. He looks from one to the other and catches on to the situation in a split second.

“Looks like introductions are in order here. Leon McCloud, Chief of Police - Merlin Emrys, my new PA.” He grins broadly. “Well, not so new anymore, but you haven’t been up here for quite a while, Leon.”

He half turns to waggle his eyebrows at Merlin. “You didn’t recognize the first police officer in
Camelot, Merlin? Really!"

Arthur tut-tuts and rolls his eyes in exasperation. Merlin grimaces. Of course he’s seen Leon on the news and in the papers before, but as his head is swimming with endless toing and froing on what to do next to save his father, he actually hadn’t looked that closely. What else can he do than to bite his tongue and smile sheepishly!

“This is a matter of urgency.” Leon’s impatience doesn’t go unnoticed and Arthur ushers him into his office without a further comment.

“Get coffee and something to eat, Merlin. I could do with a bite.”

Ten minutes later Merlin appears with a tray laden with sandwiches, cakes and two big mugs of coffee. He discreetly enters Arthur’s office and guesses by the sudden hush that whatever Arthur and Leon are discussing is not meant to be overheard. Hmm. Curious.

“Just put the stuff over there.” Arthur points to the coffee table next to the luxurious leather sofa. “Don’t fuss, just get on with it.”

Arthur’s voice is strained and unusually tense, and Merlin throws him a side glance. The news Leon has brought must be highly explosive.

*Maybe it’s something to do with the Serum?* Merlin’s interest has been raised, and as soon as he’s closed the door behind him he mumbles a spell which extends his hearing into the next room.

“… found him in a street hiding behind some dust bins. Somebody had reported seeing a boy using magic and when we got there, I just saw him disappear round the corner. Unfortunately for him, he got himself caught in a dead end,” Leon reports.

“Did he use magic to defend himself?” Arthur asks gravely.

“Strangely enough, no, and he kept repeating that he’s innocent.”

“You’re certain this is one of the boys that got away with his family a couple of months ago?” Merlin takes a double turn. They must be talking about the family his father saved! It sounds like one of the children has been recaptured.

“Hundred percent. The question is what we’re going to do with him?”

“Where is he now?”

“I put him into one the private cells at Ragnor House.”

Ragnor House? Merlin’s mind is buzzing. That’s the low security prison where the Head of Police is stationed. He knows that much.

“So anyone would have to go through you directly if they wanted to get to the boy?” Arthur pauses as if he’s weighing up the facts. “How many people know who the boy is?”

“The arresting officer, Owen Montgomery, and me.”

“Is he someone who can be trusted? Would he forget the incidence if you asked him?”

Merlin does a mental somersault. Why has Arthur not ordered the immediate prosecution of the boy? What makes him hesitate? Is he actually hinting he wants to keep this incident quiet?
“Owen’s a good guy.”

Silence falls and there’s no sound except the breathing of the two men until Arthur speaks up again.

“Let the boy go.” Arthur’s voice is hushed, but certain. Merlin freezes on the spot, too stunned to even breathe. Did he really hear what he thinks he’s heard? Is Arthur serious?

“Take him back to where you found him and tell him to stop using magic in plain view of people. And make sure he understands he will be prosecuted if he gets caught doing magic again,” Arthur adds.

“What?” Leon stammers, apparently as flabbergasted as Merlin.

“I had a huge argument with my Father about this case.” Arthur swallows so hard that Merlin can actually pick it up.

“I couldn’t get my mind round why that family was sentenced. Did they commit a crime? No. Did they hurt anyone? No. Did they plot against the Government? Certainly not. They were just normal people leading a normal life. If they hadn’t been reported by an overzealous neighbour with a grudge they’d still lead a normal life today.”

“But they’re sorcerers,” Leon splutters.

“In their own home and to no ill effect.”

“But the Serum IS the appropriate punishment for sorcerers.”

“It is, by law. That’s true. And if you ask my father you know what he’d say,” Arthur admits, and Leon mumbles something in agreement.

Merlin’s totally dumbstruck. Arthur, Arthur Pendragon, has actually stood up for someone doing magic? AND he is questioning the use of the Serum. Holy shit!

“Would the Serum not have helped them to become better people?”

“You don’t need to remind me of the propaganda that’s out and about, Leon,” Arthur answers slightly surly. “I wrote some of that stuff myself.”

“You do remember you said on many occasions that the Serum is a godsend? That Camelot is a safer place for it?”


“What are you saying?” Leon’s shock and surprise are evident.

“Things have happened recently that make me wonder about the Serum.”

“Like what?”

“One of the chemists working for Edwin contacted me secretly last week and made some serious allegations…,” Arthur says very quietly.

Allegations about the Serum? Merlin’s sucks in a deep breath. Now that sounds promising. What could have happened to persuade one of Edwin’s team to come forward like this?

“And you think that guy’s telling the truth?”
“I don’t know, but if any of it IS true, it will have serious repercussions. He’s asked me to talk to him at Lamia House.”

“And you’re going, I assume.” Leon doesn’t really need to ask, he knows Arthur far too well for that.

“Evidently I need to see for myself.”

“Just be careful.” Leon sounds concerned.

Arthur chuckles. “How can I possibly get into trouble in a high security prison?” They both laugh.

“Can I help in any way…?”

“No, leave it with me for now. Nobody needs to know anything about this before I find out more myself. Understood?”

“You know where I am!” Leon says and Merlin deduces from the shifting of chairs that the meeting has come to its end. He hears the two men saying their good byes, and then Leon rushes past his office, just to return a second later and pop his head round Merlin’s door.

“See you later, Merlin,” he says and smiles. “Just wanted to tell you that you did a good job there earlier, fending me off. That’s exactly what you should do when someone’s trying to get to Arthur you don’t know. I’m glad to see you’re looking out for him.”

“Thanks!” Merlin says, still a bit embarrassed about his faux pas, but he does understand that this is Leon’s half excuse for his own abrupt behaviour. Leon’s almost out of the door when he turns his head one more time.

“And Merlin … I don’t know where you’ve been in the last five years, but it might do you some good to have a go at the “Who’s Who in Camelot!” He winks and grins broadly before he disappears through the main office door.

Merlin chuckles. Funny, how most of Arthur’s senior employees turn out to be decent fellows with a sense of humour. He rubs his forehead and lets out a huge breath of air. Then he sinks into his chair, trying to digest what he’s overheard. It is momentous news that could change absolutely everything.

If those allegations lead to something incriminating the Serum and its use, Arthur will do something about it, Merlin’s certain about it. A glimmer of hope sparks in the back of his mind, and quiet optimism that, maybe, the future for his kind will not be as dark as he’d feared settles in his chest.

He’d always assumed Arthur knew exactly what the Serum did to people. All his kin had. How is it possible he has no idea? Surely there must be reports about MUs that have died of it? Or studies describing the side effects of the drug?

This revelation is shocking enough, but witnessing Arthur’s leniency towards the boy is the thing that bewilders Merlin most. “Let him go,” he’d said. Inconceivable! And directly against the wishes of the Governor who happens to be his father.

He is brave and stands up for what he believes in. Merlin would lie if he said that he isn’t impressed, and the realization that Arthur Pendragon, son of the Governor and Minister of Justice, is a good and honourable man, shakes him to the core.
“Have you gone completely off your head?”

“Are you totally mental?”

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Are you on some kind of hallucinate?”

Merlin lifts his hands in innocence trying to save himself from further verbal abuse as Will, Gilli and Morgana are all vetoing his suggestion.

“How can you even think about it?” Morgana’s eyes are open wide in shock.

“Because I heard what he said, Morgana. That’s why. And because I’ve got to know him better. Arthur’s a decent guy I swear it.”

To say that the looks Merlin’s getting are highly sceptical would be the understatement of the year. Apparently he’s asked for too much too soon.

“Talking to Arthur about the Serum. Honestly!” Gilli shakes his head vehemently. “What the fuck are they feeding you there?”

“He knows there’s something not right and he’s going to investigate it. Once he sees what the Serum really does, he’ll try to do something about it. I’m convinced about that.”

Merlin’s tried to argue his case for the best of half an hour, but to no avail. His friends are refusing point blank to listen. As far as they’re concerned, telling a Pendragon the truth about the Serum is an utterly hare-brained scheme.

Naturally, Merlin can appreciate their point of view. They don’t know Arthur and simply can’t imagine that anyone bearing the Pendragon name has any good in them because it’s against everything they were brought up to believe.

Merlin sips his pint and looks round the pub. It’s stowed out with people on this warm, early summer night. This isn’t exactly surprising because it’s the only pub in this quiet suburban area which is why they originally chose it. There’s usually a big crowd here, and their presence goes unnoticed and unquestioned.

Merlin looks at the worried faces of his friends, taking aboard he’s pushed the boat out too far.

“Okay guys. I’ll give in. I won’t utter a word to him.”

Will and Gilli let out a sigh of relief, and Morgana smiles properly at him for the first time since they’ve settled down to this conversation. It was such a pleasant surprise when she appeared with his two friends to meet him earlier tonight. He’d thought that she was far too caught up in her studies to come home. Apparently she’d come back to visit Hunith and then had happily accompanied Gilli and Will when she’d heard of their get-together.

“As for Edwin’s computer, we’ll be on the case by tomorrow morning, and be assured that we’ll find a way to retrieve the information we’re looking for,” Gilli says in quiet determination which is wiped by a grin of schadenfreude the next second. “With all the technical problems Lamia House is having at the moment, we should be able to find a way in somewhere.”
“True! The troubles there have hardly stopped.” Merlin remembers Gwaine swearing under his breath only yesterday when he was called out for the umpteenth time this month. “Bloody sabotage. That’s what it is, Merlin,” he’d said.

Will waggles his eyebrows, and Merlin grins, but when he turns round to Morgana he sees a dark shadow passes over her face. Odd.

“We really have to get a move on. Time is precious,” Will says avoiding Merlin’s gaze. Balinor’s been in prison for almost three months now and they’re painfully aware that his time could run out at any point from now.

“Right, we’re off then, Merlin,” Will says and pecks Morgana on the cheek.

“Don’t forget to pass the hypospray to Gaius,” Merlin reminds him.

“Will do,” Gilli promises although his voice gives away that he thinks this is a waste of time. Checking out Arthur’s medication has nothing to do with finding the formula. *But he’s still going to do it,* Merlin thinks gratefully, giving his friend a heartfelt hug.

A minute later the duo is gone, and Merlin and Morgana settle at their table with another drink.

“Are you alright, Merlin?” Her agitated voice is laden with worry.

“Do I look unwell to you?” Merlin retorts with a cheeky wink to lighten the atmosphere.

“I just can’t understand…,” Morgana hesitates. “No, I simply don’t get it, how you can even suggest putting your trust in a Pendragon, Merlin. After all they’ve done to our kind.” Her gaze dips into his as if she’s searching for reassurance.

“Arthur’s a good man, Morgana. I have witnessed it first-hand. I spend most of the day with the guy so I should know! He may be a bit arrogant and offish at times, but down beneath his heart is in the right place!” Merlin hears himself defend Arthur just a tiny bit too vigorously, and from Morgana’s edgy reaction he takes that she has noticed it as well.

“You’re sure they’re not brainwashing you there?” she asks quietly and throws him a meaningful glance.

“Many of the guys I’ve met in the Ministry are just normal people. They’re just like you and me …” Merlin stops short when Morgana physically cringes.

“People like you and me?” she pushes out angrily. “They’re the ones upholding the status quo. They’re the ones who make up the system, Merlin. They’re our enemies, for goodness sake!” Morgana has turned more and more passionate with every word and her eyes have darkened with animosity.

“Working for the system does not automatically qualify you as a villain,” Merlin says and, to prove his point, describes all the people he’s become friendly with. However, the more he talks about them, the more Morgana withdraws from him, and Merlin becomes increasingly frustrated. Maybe it’s time to turn the tables.

“And who are you hanging out with these days, Morgana? Still those radicals who would rather see a bloody war than solve problems peacefully?”

Morgana swallows and puts her hand on Merlin’s. “Have you never thought, even for a tiny second, that perhaps …THIS is the only way?”
“Violence is never right, Morgana. For whatever purpose. And as much I’d like to see the Serum abolished, I can’t condone that the blood of innocent people gets shed for it.” Merlin stops, drawing her eyes to his. “And you know that Father would never ever stand for it, not even to save his own life.”

Silence spreads between them and Morgana keeps staring at the ring of dampness her wine glass has left on the table. Her fingers are fidgeting up and down the stem and the expression on her face stirs memories. This is just the way Morgana used to look as a child when she’d tried to hide something naughty she’d done.

“Morgana.” Merlin suddenly makes a connection that failed him earlier. “Are you involved in anything dangerous?”

Morgana’s biting the inside of her cheek which is a clear sign that Merlin’s hit a sore spot. And she’s avoiding eye contact all of a sudden, too. Now that is a worry.

“Tell me.” Merlin insists because the idea of Morgana getting dragged into something that could potentially harm her is sending alarm bells through his head.

Merlin suddenly recalls her strange reaction when they talked about Lamia House and in a flash, he’s putting two and two together. “The problems at Lamia House. Have you got anything to do with that?”

“Listen.” Morgana looks straight up at Merlin, fire and passion in her eyes. “Some of my friends … they want to fight for our freedom. They want to see all MUs living the life they deserve. They want …”

“What are they doing?” Merlin’s turned pale. “What are they planning to do?”

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist, Merlin.” Morgana’s voice is suddenly harsh and condescending. “All they’re doing at the moment is undermining the system. Rattle them a bit. Shake them out of their bloody self-content.”

“So they ARE behind the problems in Lamia House?” Merlin knows it is a rhetorical question, and Morgana knows she doesn’t have to answer.

“And what’s next?” Merlin tries to push her. “What’s the next step in their plan to ‘freedom’?”

“I can’t tell you, Merlin.” And when Merlin blanches at her refusal, she clarifies. “Not because I don’t want to, but because I don’t know. They’re aware what you’re trying to do, and I think they’re waiting to see what comes of it before they make their next move.”

Great. No pressure then. Merlin puffs out a huge gulp of air and leans back.

Suddenly Morgana moves forward and takes his hand. “You know that I love you,” she says earnestly, but the intensity of the words, laced with obvious anguish, make Merlin halt and wonder. He’s not seen her that upset for a long time.

“Of course I do. I love you, too, sis,” he reassures her with a warm smile.

“I don’t like it when we’re cross.” Her lips tremble and a couple of tears catch in her thick black lashes.

“I’m not cross. I’m just worried you’re getting tangled up in things that are way above your head.” Merlin squeezes her hand affectionately and when he deepens his smile it is mirrored in her face a
second later. Morgana gently strokes over Merlin’s fingers with her thumb while she tries to find her composure.

“I hate seeing you twisted by the Pendragon system. They’re brainwashing you, Merlin. Can’t you see that? You’re starting to talk like them.”

“Don’t be silly, Morgana. I’m not getting brainwashed. I’m just ...” Merlin stops unsure how to continue while Morgana brings it to the point more successfully.

“It’s Arthur, isn’t it?” she asks. “He is getting to you. Right?”

Merlin scratches his head. Maybe Morgana is right. Maybe he has been too close to Arthur for too many weeks and his views are influenced by that? Nonsense! He shrugs the comment off and goes on the defensive.

“What do you mean by that?” The room’s suddenly become incredibly stuffy and hot, and there’s sweat prickling on the nape of Merlin’s neck. There’s decidedly too many people in this room.

“I don’t know how he does it, but he’s changing you. I can feel it.” Morgana looks at him thoughtfully and her eyes narrow. “I won’t let him take you from me. However wonderful you might think Arthur is, Merlin, he’s still his father’s son. And don’t you ever forget it!” Her eyes are blazing with anger and resentment.

Struck by her bitter words, Merlin decides it’s probably best for them to take a rain check.

“I don’t think we’ll see eye to eye on this tonight, sis.” Merlin smiles at her apologetically. “Why don’t we let it go and you tell me all about what’s going on at uni?”

Morgana nods, appearing somewhat relieved, and bends forward to place a soft kiss on his cheek.

“I don’t want to lose you, Merlin,” she whispers and rests her forehead on his shoulder. Merlin feels her body relax against his, and he gently holds her close.

“You’ll never lose me, you daft twat,” Merlin assures her tenderly, and then goes on to distract her with a whole load of questions about her life at university.

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It’s a lovely night for late May. The air’s mellow and full of the promise of summer. Merlin’s heading steadily towards the centre of Camelot. The talk with Morgana has sent his head humming, and he needs some fresh air to think it all through, so the walk will do him good.

Their little tiff has admittedly rattled him. They’ve always been close and it pains him that this whole affair seems to be driving a wedge between them. Morgana was so intense in her belief and so emotional when he talked about Arthur...

Merlin’s train of thought is interrupted when he sees a government limousine pull up in front of the small hotel about ten metres down the road. Instinctively he jumps into the shadows of the next doorway. Whoever this is, any person working for the government might have come across him in one way or another, and he certainly would not want anyone tracing his steps back to the pub.
A sigh of relief escapes him when a young man in his twenties Merlin doesn’t recognize jumps out of the car. *What the heck?* Merlin chuckles when he looks at the guy more closely. *I’ve got a double in the government. Who would have believed it?*

The young man is about his height and also of very slim build. He’s as gangly as himself and his hair is as dark. Looking at him from the back he could easily be mistaken for him. Merlin’s marvelling at this coincidence when the other door of the car opens and a blond bloke steps out. And Merlin’s heart stops.

It is Arthur.

This must be the hotel where he usually takes his ‘conquests’. Merlin watches with bated breath as Arthur walks towards the other man and gives him a radiant smile. *Typical Arthur,* Merlin thinks grumpily, all those media reports about Arthur’s philandering vividly in his mind. Just one smile is enough to charm his way into someone’s pants.

Not that the dark-haired bloke minds. He happily slides his arm round Arthur’s waist and whispers something into his ear that makes Arthur laugh out heartily. It’s that award winning, heart breaking laugh, and Merlin grits his teeth.

He’d had no idea that Arthur was still out on the dating circuit. *And why shouldn’t he,* the voice of reason laughs tauntingly inside him. *It’s not your bloody business what Arthur does to amuse himself in his spare time.* Everyone has the right to a private life, don’t they?

Unable to drag his eyes away he watches as Arthur pulls the guy close and places a fleeting kiss on his ear. A fleeting, but very cute, tender kiss. *Cute? Fuck.* Where did that come from?

“Impatient, are we?” Merlin can half hear the guy’s suggestive promise and his blood goes cold. Arthur must be smiling. Not that he can see it or anything, but it sure feels like that. Why on earth does it bother him seeing Arthur with another bloke? Arthur has a reputation, and he’s living up to it. It’s not worth getting uptight about that. Is it?

The thought dies a sudden death a second later when the guy tilts his head and brushes Arthur’s lips with his and Arthur moans quietly in appreciation. For a moment Merlin’s brain stops completely, then it turns into gluey mush which is rapidly followed by a razor sharp pain, cutting through his heart with ferocity.

The revelation strikes him like a bolt of lightning out of nowhere and, overwhelmed by the shock of it, Merlin stands there, motionless and agape with astonishment, while all those clues and hints he’s pushed aside so many times suddenly click into place with the speed of sound.

The flutter in his stomach when Arthur laughs just the way he does now, the protectiveness washing over him when he finds him tired and exhausted, the rush of heat when they accidentally brush arms, the tingle down his spine when he finds Arthur’s eyes resting his on him unexpectedly and the intense reaction he’s had each time they’ve touched.

The fog that has clouded his vision suddenly lifts and all becomes crystal clear. Merlin shakes his head as if he could get rid of the preposterous thought that’s burning a planet-sized hole in his brain. It’s too late to leave it unacknowledged, so he has no choice but to let it in, and while his eyes follow Arthur and his date entering the hotel, his mind stumbles and stammers before it allows his thought turn into a fully-fledged sentence.

*I wish it was me.*
The beckoning of truth

On Monday morning Arthur enters the office at 8 a.m. as usual. For once he looks rested and cheerful, and Merlin recognizes the tune he whistles as that of the latest hit single. Arthur is happy. Great. Wonderful. Isn’t that nice!

Merlin has steeled himself for this moment for hours. *Stay calm and act normal!* He’s told himself over and over again while chasing his sleep in the small hours of the morning.

“Morning, Merlin!” Arthur shouts brightly and gives him a dazzling smile which immediately pulls the rug from under Merlin’s carefully constructed calm composure without even trying, while those blue eyes send him near suffocating under an avalanche of emotions. He spent all Sunday analysing what his brain still finds impossible to accept a day later.

Okay, he gets it. For reasons unknown to him, he likes Arthur. Well, he did like him before, but now he really likes him. Shit. More than likes him. A fair assessment, judging by the huge lump in his throat and the heat on his face every time he thinks about him, which admittedly has been quite a lot since Saturday when this whole thing exploded inside him with a bang.

Merlin swallows hard. Yes, he can see the signs in hind sight. He’s not totally useless at this. However, coming to terms with the facts isn’t as easy because it’s downright bloody confusing.

He likes women. He loved Freya from the bottom of his heart. When he’d met her in his first year at university he’d fallen for her as soon as he’d set eyes on her, and that had been pretty much it. If the accident hadn’t taken her, they would be still together. He’s sure of it.

And women like him. At least that is what he’s been told, and yes, at the bottom of the heart he does know, but is too modest to acknowledge it. Sefa likes him. He’s pretty certain about that, and he’s equally attracted to her. He’d actually played with the thought of asking her out before this Arthur thing sucked any common sense out of him.

Arthur, however, is a bloke - and Merlin quietly congratulates himself for his perceptive observation - a stunningly handsome bloke, okay, but still a bloke. So what the fuck is going on here?

He spent most parts of Sunday trying to figure it out and couldn’t make head or tail of it until his mind went back to his High School days, and a face stirred somewhere in the depths of his memory. Kenan. Tall, athletic and handsome, he’d made his heart beat faster when he was fourteen. It hadn’t been the kind of crush where you go all soppy and run around bleary-eyed. No, it’d been more like a quiet yearning that was left unacknowledged and, apart from appreciating the guy’s eyelashes and a virginal longing to taste his lips, nothing had ever come of it.

He fancied a boy once, so what? Surely what he feels now can’t be explained away as easily as that? He was young then and right at the beginning of his sexual awakening, at a stage where he started discovering himself. Kenan was soon forgotten when Sophie introduced him to kissing a year later.

*Maybe the line of who you fancy is not that straight.* Merlin smirks at his own pun and grinds his teeth as he watches Arthur heading towards his office. Falling for a guy is unexpected enough and he’s having a hard time trying to wrap his mind round it, but falling for Arthur, out of all men on this earth, is sheer insanity.

Arthur bloody Pendragon. The son of the Governor who nurses a vitriolic hatred against anything or anyone that’s been touched by magic, even in passing. Arthur, who’s a playboy per se and whose
affairs have been well publicized. Shit. Merlin can only suspect that some kind of short circuit inside his head has severely damaged his emotional responses.

But it’s not only confusion that’s gripping him. There’s also anger, a lot of anger, because all this emotional stuff is going to make him vulnerable and leave him wide open to failure, which he can’t afford because too much depends on his success. Way too much.

That’s also the point where the shame comes in. How can he sit here befuddled as soon as Arthur enters the room when his father’s slowly dying of the Serum in cell No.32 at Lamia House? The Serum that’s ultimately Arthur’s responsibility. It’s betrayal as vast as the Sahara. Yet, no matter how hard Merlin questions himself and his ‘motives’, he can’t deny the fact that he’s reacting to Arthur like a hormonal teenager on an extra heavy dose of pheromones.

Merlin startles when Arthur, at the absence of a greeting, returns to Merlin’s desk to give him a questioning look.

“Anything wrong?” he asks, brows furrowing and head tilting.

Everything! Merlin’s heart is shouting at full volume but he’s very proud of his nondescript reply. “No, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look it,” Arthur states bluntly and Merlin cringes inside. A quick manoeuvre of distraction is in order before Arthur, who’s settled leisurely on his desk while taking another stab at whistling that awful tune, asks any more questions.

“Sounds like someone had a good weekend,” Merlin says, forcing a tiny smile.


The heat on Merlin’s cheeks reaches red alert stage in 0.2 seconds and between the embarrassment of knowing exactly what Arthur’s referring to and the pang of jealousy tightening his heart, he has no idea what to say or how to react. No, he’s completely out of his depth. His mouth’s still gaping a moment later when Arthur scans him with suspicious eyes.

“You’re sure, you’re alright?” he repeats with a hint of concern.

“I’m fine. Now let me get on with my stuff,” Merlin replies grumpily in an attempt to put Arthur off.

“Wonder who’s a prat this morning?” Arthur takes the hint and retreats swiftly into his office.

Merlin buries his head in his hands and concentrates on getting his breathing under control. This is just not happening. How could this ever have happened?

Merlin rubs his eyes and lets out a momentous sigh. There’s no way this can end well, and the best thing to do is to sweep all those inconvenient emotions under the velvety carpet of his subconscious and pretend they aren’t there. That’s the only way forward. The only one.

“Merlin!” He almost jumps out of his skin because he’s been so involved in his commiserations he didn’t notice Arthur’s coming through again and standing right next to him.

“There IS something wrong with you, I knew it.” Arthur looks at him so tenderly that Merlin’s insides melt into puddles on the spot. It’s only thanks to his iron will that he succeeds in staying cool and calm on the outside. Merlin forces himself to meet those concerned blue eyes, ready for the onslaught to his blood pressure.
“I’m alright, really,” he eventually chokes out, trying to mask the tremble in his voice.

“You know, you can tell me things, if you need someone.” Arthur doesn’t give up easily, does he? The soft kindness in his eyes and the warm sincerity in his voice make Merlin quiver. Why does Arthur behave as if he bloody cares?

Panic that he’ll lose his composure and do something he might regret bitterly later is near paralysing him. And when he talks again, his words and the tone are much harsher than intended.

“It’s none of your business, Arthur, right?”

Arthur swallows hard, and the warmth that was there a minute earlier disappears into thin air to be replaced by rejection and hurt. He throws Merlin a resentful look and walks back towards his own office.

“I didn’t intend to pry, Merlin,” he grouches as he pulls the door to his office a little bit further closed.

Merlin doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry, to feel relieved or pained, to suppress his want or let it out. He’s never felt like this before, and it couldn’t have come at a worse time in a worse situation.

A few more weeks, he thinks. A few more weeks.

The internal phone brings him back to reality. “And Merlin,” Arthur says dead pan. “Fix me an appointment at Lamia House for Wednesday!”

Arthur’s had about enough of Merlin’s weird behaviour. Particularly today when they are out and about and he could do with some of the prattle Merlin usually supplies quite generously.

“You’ve hardly smiled for the last two days,” he remarks and swears at himself for voicing what was on his mind. Merlin has made very clear after all that he doesn’t want to share any private thoughts with him, and so far, he’s pushed every one of his offers to help away.

“Not a lot to smile about.” Merlin stubbornly concentrates on looking out of the car window. There are dark shadows under his eyes, and his face graces what looks suspiciously like a 5 o’clock shadow. Arthur sighs in resignation. The fact there’s nothing he can do, nothing Merlin will let him do, has been gnawing at him the last couple of days relentlessly.

“Have you been sleeping enough?” Arthur knows damn well this is a bit rich coming from him and that it sounds ridiculously mumsy, but it’s slipped out before he can help it. In fact, what he’d like to do most is take Merlin into his arms and hold him as long as it takes to make him smile again. Yeap. Big chance of that! he thinks bitterly.

“Look Arthur, I appreciate your concern and I know you mean well …,” Merlin says a lot softer all of a sudden, and makes eye contact for the first time in the last 24 hours. Not that Arthur keeps a book about that or anything, it’s just something he happens to notice.

“But there’s really nothing to talk about, okay?” Merlin says and casts his eyes firmly onto the buildings flashing by outside again.
If there’s nothing to talk about, why does Merlin look like a deer that’s been caught and is desperate to get away? Arthur swallows hard, accepting that it’s high time to shut up and leave Merlin alone. He’s made enough of a fool of himself already.

“Look…,” Merlin turns round and finds Arthur’s eyes.

*God, he’s going to tell me!* Arthur thinks for a split second before his mobile rings and the moment is gone.

It’s Aiden. The bloke he picked up at Pulse 8 the other day. Aiden, who looks a lot like Merlin and whose touch left him warm and satisfied. Aiden, who deserves way better than what Arthur’s offering because he’s a genuinely nice guy.

To be fair, Arthur put his cards clearly on the table before they got involved. Aiden knows exactly what he’s in for and, to Arthur, the bubbly theatre critic is the perfect distraction to take his mind of the man sitting next to him and who wants nothing to do with him on a personal level.

“How are you? Yes, I had a great time at the weekend.” Arthur smiles into the phone and notices at the corner of his eye that Merlin’s face suddenly resembles an iron mask.

Aiden wants to see him again. As soon as possible. At least someone seems to enjoy his company. Arthur feels rather gratified and smiles smugly.

“Sure. I’ll see you on Friday. Same place as last time. 8 p.m.?” Arthur confirms their arrangement and laughs when Aiden blows him a kiss through the phone.

When he turns round to continue his cumbersome conversation with Merlin he finds him staring pointedly out of the window. If that’s not a hint, what is? Merlin’s shutting him out deliberately and of course he’s perfectly entitled to that. Arthur is his employer and nothing else. It’s not Merlin’s fault that Arthur’s still unable to put his personal feelings aside.

*Gwaine’s so right. I have to detach myself from him before things are getting worse.* Not that they aren’t bad already. Arthur grits his teeth and vows that this is exactly what he’s going to do. Detach himself. Soon. Very soon.

A change of subject is what’s desperately needed, and as they’re approaching their destination, Arthur needs to bring up what he intended to say since they got into the car.

“Listen, Merlin. There might be things you hear and see today, that can’t go any further.” Arthur talks very quietly, and he’s caught Merlin’s attention.

“I have to check on certain things and I’m asking you to play along, even if you don’t understand what I’m getting at. Understood?”

“Of course. You know you can rely on me.” Merlin’s deep blue eyes darken and Arthur gets momentarily lost in them before his reason pulls the brakes.

“I appreciate it.” Merlin cringes at his words, and Arthur wonders why even paying a compliment causes Merlin to react badly.

Just as well they’ve arrived and that he can leave the uncomfortable atmosphere in the car behind. When the limousine stops, a young guard opens the door immediately to then stand guard and salute Arthur with a stern face.

“Welcome to Lamia House, sir.”
Merlin automatically follows in Arthur’s footsteps. Arthur has almost had him there, in the car. He’d been squirming under his well-meaning questions like a worm left to dry in the sunshine, and he’d nearly given into those damn blue eyes and bared it all. Nearly. And thank God he hadn’t!

That phone call had spelt out in bold letters why this would have been the most idiotic thing to do. It’s brought home that whatever attention Arthur might pay him is certainly not because he favours him in any way. It’s the way Arthur talks to guys. All guys. Gay or straight.

He enjoys flirting and wrapping people round his little finger with his charm. Of course the guy who he’s seen with Arthur is no different. Of course he’d want to meet Arthur again. Of course Arthur wouldn’t turn down an offer like that. Why should he? That’s exactly his endgame.

Merlin bites his lip so hard that he flinches. Whatever Arthur’s stirred in him can’t be taken seriously. It’s a fluke, and if he gives in to it, he’ll end up as another number on Arthur’s list of conquests.

*Is that what you want?* Merlin asks rationally, to admit an instant later that he actually doesn’t know what he wants. All this has hit him with such a force and so out of the blue he’s hardly had time to digest it, and being in Arthur’s presence most of the time hasn’t actually helped.

Arthur taking him into his confidence earlier has made him feel even worse. Now he’s not only emotionally confused and angry. As if that’s not enough, shame and regret are mingling happily with it, too. Here’s Arthur bestowing his complete trust on him, relying on his integrity and loyalty to keep any information they might come across under key and lock and he … he’s lying to him every second. *Shit.* His situation has gone from complicated to bloody impossible, and he feels torn into so many different directions he’s no idea where to look first.

“Look where you’re going.” Arthur has stopped unexpectedly, and Merlin almost knocks him over because he’s not paid any attention where they’re heading.

“I’d also like you to take a good look round while I’m talking to people. Right?” he says under his breath and Merlin nods.

“And please do try to not fall over your feet,” Arthur grumbles and turns to follow the guard.

“Right up behind you, sir,” Merlin mumbles huffily and follows the two men hastily.

There are several large buildings within the confines of the prison walls and as far as Merlin can tell they’re heading towards a smaller one behind what seems to be the main prison block.

A big steel door opens, and Edwin approaches the two of them with a couple of measured steps and a smile not quite reaching his eyes.

“Arthur. I’m so pleased you’ve found the time to pay us a visit,” he says and Merlin shivers. There’s something about Edwin that instinctively repels him, that makes him cringe inside and causes his magic to recoil into the furthest corner of his being. It is the weirdest of sensations and Merlin makes a mental note that he should probably speak to Gaius about it.

“Edwin.” Arthur returns the greeting and shakes the doctor’s hand. “It’s been too long, and I’ve neglected checking on any new developments of the Serum.”
The Serum. Merlin forgets about his discomfort in a flash, and all his senses are suddenly fully alert. So it is true that Arthur’s come to see the person in Edwin’s staff as he suspected. What else could the visit to Lamia House mean after what he’d overheard the other day?

“Yes, it’s been a while, and I’m so pleased to see you,” Edwin repeats with insincere politeness followed by a cagey look. Merlin inwardly shakes his head. Surely Arthur can’t trust a man like this?

“Yes, I thought Father mentioned something about the fact you’d made a minor change to the formula?” Arthur lies and for some reason this seems to hit a sore spot with Edwin whose eyes darken with what looks like suspicion. Does he know Arthur’s leading him on? Is he going to call his bluff? Merlin unconsciously moves a step closer to Arthur.

To his surprise Edwin’s face breaks out into a beaming smile while he gestures to follow him. “Of course, Arthur! Of course! Let’s move into my office to discuss it.”

They walk down a narrow corridor, Edwin and Arthur at front making polite small talk and Merlin trailing behind them. Finally Edwin opens an inconspicuous door at the end of the corridor.

“You know my immediate staff.” Edwin waves at four younger men, clad in white coats, who lift their heads when the entourage enters the lab. “Peterson, Johnson, Reddington, Smith,” he introduces them to make sure.

“Gentlemen. I don’t mean to keep you from your work.” Arthur smiles and the four men acknowledge him before their heads go down to continue their research.

Merlin can’t believe his luck. He’s actually in the very place where the Serum has been developed and where it gets modified for “improved results” all the time. The formula must be somewhere here, and Merlin’s drinking in every little detail in the room to store it to his memory. Ah, and the joy to be in a lab again! Just to see the all the equipment and breathe in the typical smell…

“What are you doing, Merlin?” Arthur asks him with a puzzled look before Merlin realizes that he’s automatically lifted a vial on one of the sideboards to have a look at it.

“I happen to like chemistry,” Merlin mumbles defensively and puts the vial down.

“You and chemistry?” Arthur chuckles. “God have mercy on us. You’d blow us into smithereens in seconds!” And then he places his arm on Merlin’s shoulder with the intent of guiding him to the office Edwin’s just entered.

Arthur’s touch takes Merlin’s breath away. For just one moment the warmth of his body and Arthur’s scent engulf him and he almost leans into the strong arm when the vision hits him, clear and intense as never before, and for the first time it comes with a strong wave of fear. Something inside Arthur is cowering and screaming for help, Merlin can feel it as if it was him and within seconds sweat appears on his forehead and his breathing is getting short.

“Are you alright?” Arthur asks quietly with a look of confusion on his face, while he removes his arm from Merlin’s shoulder as inconspicuously as possible.

He has felt it, too. Merlin blanches at the thought. What on earth is he going to make of it? Merlin has no time to deliberate on it because they’ve now settled around Edwin’s desk.

For a second Arthur appears to be preoccupied, but then clears his throat to ask again. “So, you’re introducing changes to the Serum?” He looks at Edwin with expectation.

“We have altered one of the elements which will allow us to use the Serum even more effectively. It
reaches straight for the magic inside the sorcerer and attacks it full on as soon as it reaches the blood stream,” Edwin says and pulls up a chemical diagram on his computer.

Merlin’s heart is thumping for a completely different reason now. This must be it. The formula. Right in front of his eyes. *Fuck.* And there’s nothing he can do to get to it. With Arthur and Edwin straight next to him he won’t get even the tiniest chance to access the file in order to save it.

Merlin’s eyes scan over the formula on the computer, recognizing some parts from his own research, but there is so much else, so many additional details he can’t possibly remember after one look.

Merlin’s willing to risk everything at this moment. Getting the formula now would knock off days, if not weeks of the antidote’s production. There is no other way than to use magic. Merlin doesn’t even think twice about it. He whispers the spell to slow time inside his head and ….

When Merlin lifts his eyes in anticipation he finds to his horror that absolutely nothing has happened. What’s going on here? Why isn’t his magic working? Puzzled and irritated, he tries again, this time pushing a little bit harder and more determined, but to no avail. Startled, he looks round to find Edwin’s eyes resting on him pensively. *What the heck?*

However, Merlin has no time to consider what all this means because Edwin’s pointing at his PC, drawing Arthur into a lengthy, chemical discourse about what he’s been trying to achieve. Or at least that’s what Edwin would like them to believe. For it becomes clear to Merlin within seconds that the old doctor’s making up chemical gibberish on the spot. He’s dishing up technical sound bites galore to make his explanation sound grand, but effectively he’s saying nothing at all. It certainly sounds impressive for a layman.

Merlin, however, is no layman, and sees through him like glass. This just confirms what he’s been thinking all along. There’s something wrong about the man, he can feel it in every bone of his body. He’s got an aura of … nothingness about him that unsettles Merlin. That’s the only way he can describe it.

Edwin finally finishes, and Arthur thanks him gracefully as if he’s grasped every single word.

“Right, I’m pleased to hear of these improvements, Edwin,” Arthur remarks as an afterthought and then gets up.

“I think I wouldn’t mind inspecting the cells as well, as I am here, you know, two birds with one stone and all that.” Merlin chuckles to himself. Arthur has a real talent for tactics, he has to give it to him.

Edwin nods. “Of course. I’ll send one of my guys to take you. I have to send a report down to John anyway.” John Marshall is the Prison Supervisor. A competent man who prides himself in running a tight ship.

Merlin barely hears Arthur extending his thanks to the doctor somewhere behind him because his mind is doing somersaults. The formula, his father, Edwin…

“Merlin! Would you stop staring into space?” Arthur’s calling him impatiently, and Merlin makes an effort to clear his head. He’ll have to weigh up everything later.

“I’ll take you across to the Prison Supervisor, sir.” One of the young chemists in the front room, Peterson, if Merlin remembers correctly, gets up and offers his services.

“Thank you, Peterson.” Arthur smiles and a minute later they are heading down the corridor.
“The Supervisor’s office is in the prison block,” Peterson says, apparently out of politeness because it’s obvious that Arthur knows where it is. “I think it would be more convenient to take the back exit.” Silent understanding passes between Arthur and the young man, and Merlin realizes in a flash that this must be the guy who’s made the allegations about Edwin. Going by the petrified look on his face, he’s already regretting he’s volunteered for this.

Arthur nods and not long after they find themselves in a shadowy corner between two buildings.

Peterson’s expression changes immediately. “CCTV can’t reach us in this spot and we can speak freely,” he whispers while his eyes flicker around nervously anyway. He starts talking when he’s sure they have remained unseen, first hesitant and unsure, then more and more confident as he goes along.

“Last year, sir, there was this case against a young MU. Female, very pretty,” Peterson blushes. “I … I … kind of got interested in her … , I mean the case. She was caught selling healing drugs she’d made with magic. It didn’t seem … right that she was sentenced to nine months in prison and the Serum. I kind of … noticed which cell she was sent to, and sometimes, just by chance, I walked past to look in on her.”

Merlin can see how much embarrassment it causes the man to speak about this. Fancying an MU is not something people admit to lightly.

“I first thought the Serum would help her, you know, to get over any problems she had with magic, but then…,” Peterson’s face pales and his eyes darken with sorrow. “She got really ill after about three months. Breathing problems, blinding headaches, nightmares, exhaustion. I accompanied Edwin on his routine check-up whenever it was possible. He injected her a couple of times, and I assumed it was some form of medication, but she got weaker and weaker and one morning we found her dead.”

Peterson swallows hard and wipes a tear away that’s made its way down his cheek.

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” Arthur says quietly and Merlin almost jerks round. Arthur is sorry about the death of a sorceress? The notion sends his heart taking some wild, unrestrained leaps and makes him feel all giddy.

“What happened then?”

“I couldn’t stop thinking about what had happened and eventually decided to check her records.”

“Are those not accessible to senior staff only?” Arthur asks gravely.

“Well, yes … and no. There are restrictions of course,” Peterson blushes. “But our department’s small and you can figure out things if you put your mind to it.”

“Right.” Arthur sounds a bit miffed and Merlin knows it’s because nobody should be able to get into those files. Any transgression of security is a serious matter to him.

“I was… pretty upset… I was. And I needed to find out why she’d died. I went through her medical history with a fine toothcomb and that’s when I noticed.”

“Noticed what?” Merlin asks and holds his breath.

“She was never given any other medication at all. All she ever had was the Serum.” Peterson looks up, straight into Arthur’s eyes. “I’m sure now, sir, as sure as I could ever be, that the Serum killed her, and that Edwin knew exactly what was going on.” He finishes the last sentence with a nervous
“Did her family not enquire about her illness or request an enquiry when they found out that she’d died?” Merlin asks.

“Now that’s the thing.” Peterson is focusing on Merlin now. “Her family never got to bury her.”

“What?” Arthur’s brows furrow in disbelief. “So what happened to her body?”

“They were told that she had to be burnt because she’d died of an infectious disease.”

Arthur swivels round in anger to face Merlin as if to find some kind of explanation. His jaw’s set firmly and his eyes are blazing, and Merlin’s heart soars with pride and hope. Arthur believes Peterson. He will do something about this. He will put this right. Merlin knows Arthur well enough to recognize that look.

Yes. That look. God, Arthur’s looks gorgeous when he’s angry. Merlin gulps quietly and wonders how much more random his brain can get. While he’s busily deleting the errant thought, Arthur turns to Peterson again.

“All this happened about a year ago. So why didn’t you come to me sooner?”

Peterson’s a trembling mess now. “I couldn’t be sure then. I had no real evidence and I’ve got a good job here. A job for which I swore an oath of confidentiality.” He hangs his head in shame and makes an unsuccessful attempt to keep his twitchy fingers still.

“So why are you coming to me with it now?” Arthur’s scrutinizing the young man while he’s waiting for his answer.

“Because I think it’s happening again, sir. Maybe it’s happened before. It probably has. But this time I’m sure about it.” Peterson starts babbling as panic takes a hold of him.

“It is okay,” Merlin says. “I think you’re very brave speaking up now.”

Yes, it is courageous of the guy to come forward at all, but isn’t he taking a terrible risk speaking to Arthur? For all he knows this could be a government secret he has just blurted out.

“Why have you come to Mr. Pendragon with this?” Merlin enquires curiously.

Peterson looks from him to Arthur and back. “I have a good friend who used to attend the same university as you, sir. He told quite a few stories about you and some other celebrity students. I know he’s a good judge of character, and he never said a bad word about you.”

The young man looks openly at Arthur. “I’m sure I can trust you.” Wow. Now that is a vote of confidence. Merlin sucks in his breath. But from what he’s seen Arthur seems to inspire that kind of feeling in many people.

“And so you can,” Arthur reassures him with a little smile. “You’re saying you’ve come across another case like that?”

Peterson nods. “There’s a prisoner who was given the Serum about two and a half months ago. The boss is particularly interested in him, and he’s been down to see him regularly.” Peterson steels himself to finish his report.

“He shows exactly the same symptoms as Myria… you know the girl…”
“The same symptoms. How does Edwin explain that? Have you challenged him about it?” Merlin’s getting quite agitated. If Arthur sees at first-hand what the Serum does, if he understands how much harm it does, will he not ban using it?

“I did.” Pride is shining on Peterson’s face now. “He said it was the cold iron that effected the MUs.”

“Right, and you reckon this isn’t true?” Arthur’s suddenly turned very thoughtful and quiet. Menacingly quiet, and Merlin ponders what could be going on behind those ice blue eyes and that square forehead, behind those classical features …Shit. I’m doing it again. What the fuck is wrong with me? Merlin shrugs his shoulder in defeat and tries to concentrate again.

“I checked it out as far as I could, sir. We don’t have lot of literature about these things around. Cold iron causes nausea and a general feeling of weakness and it can kill in the long run, too. But it doesn’t have all the other side effects Myria showed.”

“Where is that prisoner? Can we see him?” Arthur’s radiating determination now.

“I’m sure the Prison Supervisor won’t have any objections,” Peterson says and leads Arthur and Merlin towards the main building where all the inmates are kept.
The prison Supervisor, John Marshall, is only too happy to show Arthur round and bring him up-to-date with the latest news at Lamia House. It’s obvious he’s a loyal employee and chuffed that the son of the Governor is taking a personal interest in his work.

Merlin’s been walking behind the two men, taking in the every-day realities of life in prison. The security measurements are impressive to say the least, even for normal inmates.

It is also the first time he’s seen Arthur act in an official role outside the Ministry and, admittedly, he’s nothing short of brilliant. He knows how to relate to the staff in a friendly, but authoritarian way and understands what questions to ask to get them to speak to him. He really is a born leader, despite his grouchy days. Merlin bites his tongue even though he hasn’t spoken the traitorous words out loud and wonders if his warped state of mind is having a detrimental effect on his subjective judgement.

“I would like to have a look at the MU section, as well, John,” Arthur says that instant and leans over to John to say something else Merlin doesn’t quite get. A couple of seconds later they’re all heading towards the basement.

This is where they keep father. Merlin swallows hard and he presses his lips into a thin line. He will be so close to Balinor, so close and yet…..

Huge metal doors open when they reach the secluded part that holds all inmates with magic. As soon as they bang shut behind them with a thunderous clank, Merlin senses it. Cold iron. It must be everywhere because a wave of nausea and weakness spreads through his body within seconds. Merlin almost yelps when his magic retreats speedily into a very dark corner of his mind and the power of the cold iron starts slithering slowly into every one of his cells. He gulps down the bile rising in his throat and summons all his energy to fight the vile sensation threatening to overcome him. He can’t imagine what it must be like to be exposed to this 24/7.

Peterson hurriedly whispered something into Arthur’s ear before he returned to the lab, and Merlin assumed that he told him what prisoner he was talking about. So far he’s been following Arthur without thinking, but what the heck?

Trepidation suddenly hits him like a sledgehammer, when he realizes they’re heading towards the cells with the higher numbers. Excitement, shock, and apprehension mingles with the nausea in his guts and the weakness in his limbs, and Merlin sways for a second. He quickly holds on to the wall and is grateful that Arthur’s too busy speaking to the Supervisor to notice.

24, 26, 28, 30. Merlin doesn’t even realize he’s hyperventilating, and that cold sweat is slowly accumulating on his forehead the closer they’re getting to the cell where Balinor is kept. And then the unthinkable happens.

They stop outside cell No. 32.

This is unreal. He never expected this to happen, and he’s completely unprepared for it. Of course it’s a stroke of luck, fate or whatever you want to call it, that he’s getting the chance to see his father, but what will he find behind that door? And what if Balinor gives him away unwittingly?

His clammy hands clench into tight fists out of their own accord while his mind is reeling. He has to remain calm and vigilant but how is he going to keep a cool head? Merlin breathes through deeply a couple of times and tells himself to relax.
“Here we are.” John Marshall swipes his electronic key over the security trigger and the door slides open.

“If you wait outside, please.” The Supervisor complies with Arthur’s request without blinking, and if he thinks this is odd he’s not letting it on. Who would contradict the Governor’s son, anyway?

Merlin’s doing his best to get his breathing and trembling hands under control, but his heart is thundering so loud now, he is sure that Arthur can hear it. And then they step into the cell.

It is small and insufficiently lit by a dangling light on the ceiling. Three pieces of furniture near fill the room: a single bed, a table and a chair, and there is also a toilet in the far end left corner. The biting smell of disinfectant is overpowering and, coupled with the oppression of the cold iron, the dull lighting and the lack of normal sunlight, it is a place of desolation.

Merlin gasps at the sight of it and can hardly hide the horror he feels. Only someone who truly hates magic could have thought of a place like this. The Serum itself is a curse and the cause of untold misery for many sorcerers, but to be exposed to THIS on top of it can only be classified as torture.

Father! Merlin calls out in his head to the man who is crumpled up on the bed under a thin blanket. Surely now that he is so close, nothing should interfere with Balinor hearing him?

Father! He whispers in anguish and moves closer.

Merlin? Balinor sounds confused and disorientated, but he has answered. Thank God! So he’s still holding on. Merlin lets out a sigh of relief as he slowly walks up to the bed. And then his father turns round and Merlin cringes.

Balinor is skinny, almost skeletal. He can’t have eaten properly for weeks and not even his full beard can hide his ashen face and sunken eyes. A web of broken blood vessels covers his skin, and his breathing’s shallow and strained.

All of a sudden Merlin doesn’t care who sees him and what the hell the consequences are. This is his father and he needs to comfort him. Looking away or pretending is unconceivable.

Father, he says in his mind one more time, and when he puts his hand on Balinor’s arm gently, his father slowly lifts his head and makes a feeble attempt at sitting up. Merlin grabs his arm and supports him while he struggles to put himself upright.

When Balinor has finally settled he looks up to face Merlin and hesitates. Recognition lights his face for a second before a shadow falls over his exhausted features again.

“Are you real?” Balinor’s shaking with the effort of talking, and he’s so hoarse Merlin’s struggling to understand him. How could anyone do this to a human being? Merlin grits his teeth in helpless frustration and anger at those who are responsible for this.

“I’m real.” Merlin’s thumb strokes calmly over Balinor’s hand. “I’m here to see you.”

A tiny smile appears on his father’s lips, and suddenly his eyes come alive.

“Balinor Emerson?” Arthur steps forward that instant to sit down on the chair and Merlin jumps at his voice. Balinor casts his eyes on Arthur and measures him for a few very long seconds before he speaks again.
“The young Pendragon,” Balinor whispers hoarsely, and he looks at Merlin wearily. Why are you with him?

I took a job at his office so I can find the formula. Balinor furrows his brows, clearly disapproving of the danger Merlin has put himself into.

What does he want from me, Merlin?

To find out what the Serum really does.

He doesn’t know? Balinor lifts his eyebrows in surprise and Merlin gives a tiny shake of his head.

Trust him, father, and tell him everything.

“I need to ask you some very sensitive questions,” Arthur says at this point and pauses, waiting for Balinor’s consent to carry on.

When Merlin’s father nods, he asks, “When did you fall ill?”

Balinor straightens his back and as his gaze pierces Arthur there’s a flicker of the powerful man he used to be.

“This illness is not an illness, Arthur. The Serum has done this to me. Nothing else. It eats away at the very soul of who we are by imprisoning the magic within us. It stops the continuous flow of our power through our body and then turns it against us. Magic needs an outlet, and as it has nowhere to go once it is confined by the Serum, it starts attacking us from the inside and destroys our bodies little by little.”

Balinor stops and sags against Merlin, exhausted by his little speech. All the talking has sparked off a coughing fit and as his breath rasps in and out of his lungs, spasms rattle his whole body. Without thinking he wipes away the drop of blood that has started trickling down his chin.

It is sheer determination that allows him to carry on. “The Serum forces our magic to kill us from the inside.”

“You saved that family to spare them this fate?” Arthur asks quietly, comprehension dawning.

Despite his plight Balinor’s eyes smile at Arthur and he nods, and then adds in an evocative voice. “They hadn’t committed any crimes. They were innocent. They didn’t deserve to be punished. The Serum kills. Look at me.”

Father! Merlin’s sobbing inside his head unwilling to believe the words that confirm what’s been on his mind ever since he set eyes on his father. The sight of Balinor, reduced to a shadow of his powerful self is tearing him apart and brings home how little time he has left to provide the antidote that can save him.

I have to save you. You can’t die. I swore it. Merlin feebly repeats in his head all over again while tears well up in his eyes before he can avert it. We are close to getting our hand on the formula.

I’m too far gone. I will not last much longer. Balinor suddenly grips Merlin’s hand tightly and their eyes lock. I am glad you’ve come, Merlin. To see you one more time means everything to me.

No father, no! Merlin cries desperately inside his head, hardly aware that his sobbing has become vocal and that a lonely tear is rolling down his cheek. I will save you. I have to save you.
I have served my purpose. Now you serve yours. Balinor squeezes his hand one more time. Now go and make me proud. And then he sighs, and completely depleted of energy, he closes his eyes to drift off, leaving Merlin sitting next to him, numb and in shock.

“Merlin?” Arthur’s voice cuts through the haze of his pain, and Merlin looks up teary-eyed in sudden realization.

Arthur. Fuck. He’s been sitting there next to him all this time, watching him fall apart for a man he’s not supposed to know.

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Arthur is trying to make sense of what he’s just witnessed.

Merlin who is usually calm and collected and very much in control of himself, is crying. Crying. What is he supposed to make of that?

To give it its due, he hadn’t been aware that the cells for MUs were that severe and, admittedly, the physical state of the sorcerer was shocking, considering how strong and fit Balinor had been at the time of his trial. Within the three months of imprisonment he’s deteriorated to a stage from where there’s no coming back unless a miracle happens.

But Merlin more than overreacted, totally losing his composure at the man’s fate as if he knew him, and he held the sorcerer’s hand while they spoke! And though they didn’t say a lot, he had the strange impression that there was something between them, like a bond or connection of some kind. Hmmmm. Arthur furrows his brow, intrigued and puzzled.

Merlin remains a mystery to him, this being a prime example how little he really knows what’s going on underneath that mop of black hair. If Merlin had been a woman he might have blamed PMT for his odd behaviour, but for obvious reasons that isn’t a valid explanation.

Something has been wrong with Merlin since the beginning of the week and maybe seeing this sorcerer’s predicament was the last straw that pushed him over the edge? Or maybe he’s simply feeling under the weather? That would at least explain his peaky face and his trembling hands. Yes, he has noticed. How could he not when his eyes are drawn to Merlin as soon as he enters a room and when all his attention centres on him whenever he’s around!

At the moment Merlin’s still sitting on Balinor’s bed, his fingers firmly wrapped around his hand. Shit, I hate seeing him distraught like this. Arthur quietly shakes his head and simply does, what any sensible person would do.

“Merlin,” he mumbles and gently disentangles Merlin’s hand from the sorcerer’s with one hand while he’s rubbing his back in small circles with the other. That warm tingling feeling he felt before when he and Merlin touched reappears in a split second, even if it is a bit softer and mellower than earlier in Edwin’s office when he had felt it surging through him like a bolt of electricity.

That had been another strange occurrence and something he’ll have to digest at another time. For now it is time to get their act together and leave.

“We really need to go,” Arthur says and pulls Merlin towards the door.

“Sorry.” Merlin’s face is bleak, but at least he has come back to his senses.
Once outside the cell, Arthur makes a few superficial pretence comments about the cell to the Supervisor who’s been waiting patiently and then takes his leave, making sure Merlin is right next to him.

Back at the car, he ushers Merlin into the back seat.

“We need some time out, Fiodor. Take us somewhere green and calm, please.” It is a beautiful, warm day and after the gloominess of the cell, he’s in desperate need of some fresh air and it’ll do Merlin good, as well.

Merlin has not said a word since they left the prison, but when the car takes off, he suddenly looks up to seek Arthur’s eyes.

“I must explain…,” he starts, but Arthur cuts him short.

“There’s nothing you have to say just now, Merlin. Just relax and take it easy”

Arthur puts his hand on Merlin’s arm to underline what he’s said, and encouraged when Merlin doesn’t immediately recoil, he runs his thumb gently over it, welcoming the tingling sensation between them like an old friend. And that is how they remain until Fiodor stops the car.

“There’s a nice gentle walk up that way, sir.” The young man waves at the path that meanders into the country park.

“Great choice. Thank you, Fiodor,” Arthur says as he gets out of the car. Fiodor automatically follows as he’s supposed to.

“I don’t need you for this, Fiodor.” Arthur is craving some privacy with Merlin and what danger could possibly lurk in this peaceful spot?

“But sir, your father…”

“Don’t forget that you’re answering to me first. We’ll be an hour at the most.”

And not expecting any more opposition, Arthur turns round to follow Merlin who has started walking up the hill slowly.

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Merlin takes a deep breath, briefly relishing the warm sunshine and the cool breeze on his face, before bad conscience takes over. How can it be fair he is here, enjoying the warmth of the air and the peace of the forest while Balinor lies in that wretched cell fighting for his life.

His father’s words are hollowing in his head all over again. Go and make me proud, he’d said. As if he’d expected to never see him again. Merlin squares his jaw. This is not going to happen if he has anything to do with it. Even if the odds are against him.

Merlin shakes his head, suppressing the tears welling up inside him again and scolds himself. God, he has given enough of his emotions away in Arthur’s presence. He has no idea what he must be thinking, but Arthur is no fool, and Merlin needs to keep up appearances.

Arthur. Something warm and all-encompassing is tugging at his heart, pushing all his dark thoughts
away. Back there in the cell and afterwards, Arthur gave him his unconditional support without asking any questions. He was kind, gentle and considerate and more sensitive than Merlin would have ever thought. His heart flutters and sighs in resignation. Arthur is not just a pretty face. Gwaine was right. There’s way more to him than meets the eye.

Arthur’s catching up with him already, and Merlin has to make a very quick decision what to do now. There’s nothing he wants more than to tell Arthur the truth. About everything. Their plan, Balinor, what all this is really about. He deserves the truth.

But Merlin can’t do that because he knows it wouldn’t be wise. For as much he appreciates Arthur and all he has done for him, for all the tangled attraction inside him that’s unravelling itself more with each passing day, for all his belief that Arthur is good and fair, he can’t be sure how he will react if he’s faced with the bare facts.

Arthur has been brought up to see magic as a force corrupting people and that it needs to be eradicated if Camelot is meant to thrive. Yes, he has shown sparks of understanding for MUs and appears more open-minded than Merlin would have ever thought. When it comes to the nitty-gritty though, reason dictates he can’t trust the son of the Governor with the full truth at this moment in time.

He’s known Arthur for almost three months, but that’s not nearly enough to understand fully what’s going on inside his brain and his heart. Merlin hates himself for being uncertain. And it does make him feel like a double-faced shit.

While Arthur didn’t hesitate for a split second to trust him with a secret on the large scale, he has to refrain from doing the same. And keep lying. Right into the face of the man he is in love with. Yes, bloody hell. I am in love with Arthur, he shouts at his common sense in spite and lets out a gasp of relief for admitting it.

“Merlin!” Arthur’s caught with him and they fall into step. Merlin has to say something, anything, has to give Arthur some kind of explanation.

“I’m sorry about earlier.” Merlin starts with a hazy plan forming in his mind.

He senses Arthur checking him from the side. “That man in the cell, he reminded me so much of my father before he died. The same look, the same build, that image of weakness.”

The lump in Merlin’s throat is thick and heavy again, not only for his grief, but also for the half-truth he’s telling Arthur.

“My father was a brilliant man. Honest and brave. And I always wanted to make him proud. In the end he died before I could prove myself to him.” A tear has broken free from Merlin’s dark lashes and when it makes its way down his cheek, he quickly wipes it off before Arthur notices.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Merlin,” Arthur answers quietly and claps his back affectionately. The vision comes and goes in a flash, and Merlin hardly takes note of it because all his senses register is Arthur’s touch and the way his warm hand gently squeezes his shoulder.

“You’ve had a rough time the last few days, haven’t you?” Arthur throws him a furtive glance and Merlin blushes at the kind words.

Up to this point he’s been convinced that all Arthur ever did was flirt with people and tease them to see how far he could go, assuming he would get what he wants in the end. It is true that he’s seen Arthur as the epitome of the eternal philanderer, as a man who relies on his looks and his charm to
get through life.

But the way Arthur behaved earlier had nothing to do with flirting. No, he acted with compassion and sensitivity without asking anything in return, although he must have been mystified by his odd behaviour. A very warm feeling spreads in his chest. Actually, Arthur acted as if he cared.

The thought throws Merlin big time, and suddenly he doesn’t know what to believe anymore. Fuck, this is all getting too much. He is emotionally exhausted and would love to stop all his feelings just for one second so he can take a breath to regroup.

Arthur has stopped at a sunny spot that offers a stunning view down into the valley and onto Camelot. The sun is beating on his face and sets his blond hair, all tousled and untidy from the slight breeze on the hill, alight. He’s opened the top two buttons of his white shirt that’s clinging at his taut muscles in all the right places and revealing the hint of a tan under wispy blond curls.

He is stunning in every way. Merlin swallows hard and blinks against the sunlight, and the urge to be close to Arthur, to be held, overwhelms him.

“Arthur,” he croaks and moves a step closer. “Thanks for being there today. For me.”

Arthur smiles and turns round to face him. No, to stare at him. One moment passes, then another and suddenly the air around them vibrates with tension.

“Anytime,” Arthur says. Why is his voice shaking and why are his eyes looking so sad?

Merlin impulsively lifts his hand and brushes gently over Arthur’s shoulder. Despite the early summer heat Arthur shivers at his touch, and unsure how to interpret it, Merlin is about to pull his hand away when Arthur takes it and holds it. Holds it that second too long and their eyes meet.

Merlin has no recollection who moves first or how it happens, but within the blink of an eye Arthur is right there in his personal space. For one heart-stopping moment Merlin’s whole world reduces to the anticipation of a kiss, but Arthur pulls him into a close hug instead, wrapping his strong arms around him.

The warmth of Arthur’s chest pressed tightly against his takes his breath away and he gasps silently when the scent of Arthur’s sun kissed skin starts filling his senses, taunting him to put his lips there to taste it. His fingers, lost on Arthur’s back, trail softly over those broad shoulders, aching to touch that blond hair and the soft curls at the nape of Arthur’s neck. And then he does, and Arthur takes a sharp intake of breath.

Merlin rests his head in the curve of Arthur’s neck as if it was the most natural thing to do and when Arthur cups the back of his head to hold him, it is as if everything around them stands still. And in that fractious moment of time Merlin’s world falls into place.

Until the little devils of guilt and shame raise their voices in the back of his mind, mocking his weakness for letting his heart rule his head. Look at you! They laugh derisively. There you are, making out with the man who allows people to be sentenced to a painful death in a dingy cell in the basement of a prison! Is that how you honour your father?

Shut up! You know that’s not who Arthur is. Merlin defends himself, angry at such a deceitful thought. It is true though, he can’t allow himself to give into his feelings and he has to stop this before he loses control completely. Actually, it has gone beyond that already. For once and for all, he should know by now that nothing, nothing, will ever come of this, so there’s no point pretending.

Deflated, Merlin zooms back to reality in supersonic speed. Shit. He’s hugging Arthur and what’s
more, he’s letting Arthur hug him in a way that’s decidedly over and above a friendly embrace between blokes. Reluctantly, he withdraws from Arthur’s arms and takes a step back, trying to find something banal to say, something to keep him from plummeting into the emotional abyss that’s trying to swallow him.

“Thanks for your support,” he manages to push out the set phrase in a jovial, business-like manner and looks away, when Arthur’s face hardens and turns blank.

As much as Merlin is tempted, and fuck, he’s tempted beyond belief, he has common sense enough to understand that he might regret later what his fragile state of mind would be happy to allow him to do just now. This is not the time and not the moment -if there ever is one.

“No problem,” Arthur snaps back gruffly and turns round to face the sun again. His expression is unreadable, almost cold, and something inside Merlin winces and urges him to reach out for Arthur again.

Instead, Merlin clears his throat, collects his thoughts, puts a plug on his emotions and brings the conversation back to the topic that’s more urgent now than ever.

“Do you believe what the sorcerer said?” he says, attempting to sound as neutral as he can, his eyes darting around, scared to face Arthur directly.

At the side of his eyes he sees Arthur stiffen and his shoulders slump for a brief moment. And then there’s silence, and all Merlin can hear are the birds singing and the wind rustling in the leaves of the trees until Arthur’s ready to answer.

“I did,” he says dead pan. “I’m going to access his records and check what medication he was given as soon as I get back to the office.”

“So you believe what Peterson told us?”

“There’s something very wrong going on in Lamia House, Merlin,” Arthur says in a more normal tone and settles on the bench behind them. “A body disappearing? People dying of the Serum? Things like that should never happen.”

Still fragile from an overload of emotions, Merlin needs all his will power not to shout out that this is exactly what’s happening, and that it’s happened for many years. So many lives have been cut short by the Serum and so much misery has been caused by it.

Arthur sighs. “From what we’ve learned so far, we can be pretty certain that Edwin is involved in this.”

“He seems to be at the centre of it,” Merlin agrees and watches Arthur who has started thrumming his fingers on the wood of the bench.

“The thing is…,” Arthur hesitates and rubs his chin nervously, and Merlin senses how reluctant he is to continue. “If Edwin’s up to something, my father might know about it, too.”

Merlin’s head snaps up in surprise. He hasn’t thought as far as that, but of course Arthur’s right. Edwin and Uther are close allies and it would be logical to assume that they work together on everything. Shit. Merlin scans Arthur’s face, unsure what his next reaction might be. It’s obvious that it pains him to raise suspicion against Uther.

“Are you going to ask him about it?” he asks tentatively.
Arthur takes a deep sigh. “It depends how bad this thing turns out to be, Merlin.” And he gives him a wry look before he leans back and continues to speak quietly, almost as if it was to himself.

“My father appears harsh and unforgiving to many people, and I agree that for a big part he’s earned his reputation.”

*I bet he doesn’t often bare his soul like this,* Merlin thinks, full of humility that Arthur is trusting him enough to open up and share some of his innermost thoughts.

“It’s true my father’s not the easiest man on earth, but I know he loves me and that he would do anything for me.”

Merlin hears the tremble in Arthur’s voice, senses the uneasiness that has come over him, and his heart goes out for him.

“I want to think that he’s not involved in this, that this is all Edwin’s doing. But I can’t.” Arthur stops and rubs his forehead. “I’ve no idea what I’m going to do if Father ….”

Arthur finds Merlin’s eyes before he continues. “I know my father. I know his strengths and his weaknesses, I can see that he makes wrong decisions at times. But at the end of the day he IS my father, and I respect him for what he has achieved, and … I don’t like disappointing him.”

“It’s what any good son would do,” Merlin assures Arthur, because that’s how he’s always felt about Balinor. But as soon as he’s said it his reason is shaking its grouchy head resolutely. *Listen to yourself! Morgana was right! You’re agreeing with him! Did you actually hear he’s just admitted that he is his father’s son?*

Merlin rubs his neck in frustration. Why is all this so bloody complicated? Merlin is asking himself yet again, but the appreciative smile Arthur gives him just then stubs out any of doubts and qualms in an instant.

“Come on, it’s time to go back, otherwise Fiodor will have a fit.” Arthur stretches and gets up.

Just then, that very second, Merlin senses the presence of magic. And danger. Somebody that doesn’t mean well. And he reacts instinctively as he lurches at Arthur and drags him onto the ground. Not a second too soon because an instant later a laser beam cuts into the bench behind them.

“Don’t move,” Merlin whispers, making sure that his body is covering Arthur’s who’s too stunned to say anything. *And ouch! What the heck was that?* Has he dislocated his shoulder when he was falling?

Another laser shot singes the bench and bores a hole through the rotten backrest. *Now that does it.* Merlin growls angrily inside. This will not go any further. Nobody will hurt Arthur when he has the means to protect him. Fully aware of Arthur’s body underneath him and his head next to his, he closes his eyes.

“Ecg ætstande!” he mumbles breathlessly to create an invisible shield around them.

Scin scire! A big blast of magic surges through the shield to bust away their attacker. *How gratifying to hear a man’s voice swearing as he thumps on the ground somewhere in the bushes behind them!* A second later he can hear his footsteps scrambling down the pebbly path as the attacker gets away.

“Now that was a close call,” Merlin says, as he pushes himself into a sitting position. To his horror the smell of burnt flesh drifts into his nose and when he looks down to check, he spots a large red stain on Arthur’s white shirt. Sudden panic overwhelms him.
“Ar..ur, are you ..kay?” His brain is flooded with so much worry, he is hardly aware he’s slurring his speech and that his eyes are struggling to focus. For a moment, dizziness makes his head spin and then, there’s suddenly nothing at all.
Hi guys. I just wanted to express my sincere thanks to all of you who are following this story every week! It makes my day! Particular thanks to all those who have given this story kudos or left their thoughts and ideas in the comments section! There is nothing more encouraging!

I would also like everyone to know that I won't be able to post next Friday. The Easter break is coming up and I'm going away for a few days. But I will not leave you high and dry for a whole two weeks. I will post again the Tuesday after, and then again on Friday the following week!

Thanks for your patience!

What an idiot! Arthur can’t believe the stupidity of his PA. Why did he get involved shielding him with his own body? And get bloody shot! And bleed like hell! And go unconscious on him!

Arthur is kneeling on the ground with Merlin’s motionless body crumpled next to him. He’s pressing his jacket on Merlin’s gushing wound in the futile attempt to stem the bleeding. Merlin’s blood is everywhere. On Arthur’s shirt, on his hands, on the jacket, and the little puddle of crimson next to him is expanding at a steady rate. He’s going to bleed to death if he doesn’t get help soon. Arthur’s shaking all over, knowing that he must stay calm and in control. Thank God, he had his Safety Chip on him. He pressed it twice to call the emergency services, and they will be here soon. They have to be.

The smell of burnt flesh is permeating the air and chokes him with every breath. Knowing that it is Merlin’s skin that’s been ripped apart by the power of the laser and singed to some unrecognizable black mess makes his stomach churn. The light beam has sliced through Merlin’s left shoulder, searing through muscles, turning skin to charcoal and leaving a deep gaping wound behind.

Arthur’s forcing himself to breathe slowly and stay in control, but he’s still numb with shock. Everything happened so quickly, he’s hardly come to terms with it.

Not that long ago he had held Merlin in his arms, feeling his warm, pliant body against his own, feeling him lean into his embrace, and fuck, the surge of hope inside his heart had almost made him dizzy. His hope that his feelings were not as unrequited as he’d thought.

Of course that bubble of optimism had burst a few moments later, when Merlin had made damn clear that all he felt was gratitude. But now all this seems so inconsequential, as Merlin’s body is lying next to him, so still, so bloody lifeless, so shockingly scarred and burnt.

Idiot. Arthur mumbles again and again, letting out a voiceless sob. Idiot. Please don’t die. Please live. Even if you’re not meant for me. I need you to live.

Seconds stretch into minutes, and it finally seems as if hours have passed before he hears the blaring siren of a police car mingled with the howling of an ambulance somewhere down the road. Not long
after, a couple of police-men appear, followed by two medics with a stretcher. While Arthur makes a statement, the emergency crew lifts Merlin into the ambulance, and then they’re whisked away to the private hospital the Pendragons usually use.

Arthur is left on his own in the waiting room outside the operating theatre, momentarily lost and insecure. There’s nothing he can do now except wait and hope. *Shit.* He really hates feeling helpless and out of control.

Arthur sinks into the soft sofa and closes his eyes, the image of Merlin’s pale face and mangled shoulder ingrained in his brain. *No.* He won’t let his thoughts run amok imagining the worst case scenario, even if it takes all his willpower to blank them out.

“Arthur!” A friendly voice rips him out of his dark mood and, when he looks up from his chair, he finds a pretty, dark-haired nurse smiling at him kindly.

“Arthur. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Arthur mumbles, almost embarrassed that he should be asked that question when Merlin is the one who people should be worried about.

“I’m Gwen.” The nurse introduces herself and sits down next to him. “I’ll be looking after Merlin once he’s out of the theatre.”

Arthur nods in acknowledgment and grits his teeth at the thought of what might be going on in the next room.

“This will take quite a while. How about freshening up and having a cup of tea?” Gwen suggests. Arthur knows it makes perfect sense, particularly when he looks down to find his clothes covered in dirt and blood. Merlin’s blood.


Arthur understands that Gwen is right, and he follows her advice without another word. An hour later he has showered and wears the change of clothes Fiodor has picked up from his flat. He’s also phoned Leon to let him know what happened and instructs him soberly to get the Pendragon PR machine into gear to keep a lid on this. Whoever has done this will not get the satisfaction of hearing about it in the media. And it will also give Leon some valuable time to investigate the attack.

Three hours later Merlin’s been stitched together, bandaged and transferred to a pristine hospital bed in one of the exclusive rooms the clinic offers to their illustrious patients.

The surgeon appears right behind him. “Arthur.” He smiles as he greets the young man he’s known since he was a boy.

“Your PA has been very lucky. Although a lot of muscle tissue’s been injured, no major arteries or important sinews were damaged. He’s basically got a very deep flesh wound and he’s lost a lot of blood. But he's going to mend.”

The relief flooding through Arthur is elating and the Mount Everest that’s been crushing him is crumbling to dust.

“Thanks,” he says. “Can I stay with him?”

“It’ll be a little while before he comes round. But there’s no harm in waiting if you want.”
A minute later Arthur collapses on the chair next to Merlin’s bed.

Thank God, you’re safe, you idiot … is all he can think. Then there’s silence and all he can hear is Merlin’s quiet breathing, the ticking of the clock on the wall and the muffled talking of some nurses in the corridor outside. And finally exhaustion takes a hold of him, and as his muscles relax, he dozes off.

Merlin hasn’t stirred an inch when Arthur wakes an hour later, and he swallows to get rid of the lump in his throat. Merlin’s as pale as death, his white face a stark contrast against his dark unruly locks. God, Arthur wonders what it would feel like to swirl that strand of hair curling round his ears around his finger and wipe the one falling onto his forehead out of his face. Without thinking Arthur takes Merlin’s hand, and his fingers start stroking it out of their own accord.

The shock of seeing Merlin covered in blood, the fear he might not make it, the guilt that Merlin put himself into mortal danger for him, is sitting deeply anchored in his bones. Merlin saved his life, nothing can take away from that and the thought makes Arthur’s heart soar. How much more can he fall in love with that man? This wonderful, stupid moron who didn’t hesitate for a second to protect him with his own body.

Suddenly a familiar tingle in the hand holding Merlin’s startles Arthur out of his thoughts and he wonders what on earth has happened to set it off now, rather than earlier. When he looks up he finds Merlin gazing at him in confusion.

“Are you okay?” Merlin whispers throatily, more or less continuing his thoughts where he’d left off before he went unconscious. Arthur’s guts twist into a tight knot. God, Merlin’s first thought after waking is for him?

“I’m fine, Merlin. Thanks to you.” Words are quite insufficient to express what Arthur really wants to say. But it’s all he’s got.

At Merlin’s blank expression, he explains a bit further. “You were shot. Up on the hill.”

“Oh,” is all Merlin utters and sinks back into his pillow. When he tries to sit up he pulls a face and stifles a moan. It’s only now he notices that his left side is heavily bandaged, and he looks down on it slightly bewildered.

“Oh,” he mumbles again and Arthur’s insides go all soft at the obvious display of vulnerability. Don’t be ridiculous! No need to go all mushy! Merlin surely would neither appreciate nor understand that.

“I didn’t realize you were so keen on dying for me,” Arthur says with a small smile.

“It was a surprise to me as well,” Merlin states tonelessly, but his eyes are starting to come alive. “And I’m not dying.”

“Not quite, but you managed to get yourself into a right mess. You’ve no idea what inconvenience you’ve been.” Warm gratification rushes through Arthur when Merlin lips twitch into a smile.

“Calling the ambulance out, filling reports in, speaking to the police, honestly it’s been non-stop while you’ve been lying around here doing nothing.”

“I was due a day off,” Merlin says meekly, but there’s a little sparkle in his eyes.

“And you ruined one of my best shirts with all that blood you were spluttering about.”
“You can afford a new one.” Merlin’s definitely smiling now, and Arthur’s beaming with delight, unwelcome tears glazing his eyes over.

“Just don’t do that again. Ever.” Arthur’s voice is faltering and, worried he’s giving too much away, he forces a grin and qualifies his comment. “I hate doctors. I’ve seen enough of them in my life time, so I’d appreciate if you stopped behaving in such an irresponsible way.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Merlin mumbles and looks at him so softly, so incredibly fond that Arthur’s knees turn into jelly in record time.

“...m tired,” Merlin says, slurring his words slightly and giving Arthur a toothy grin, and before he can say anther word, his eyes drop and he drifts off again.

Arthur carefully scans Merlin’s face with a heavy heart. I love you, you cheeky, insolent, brave, idiotic, big-eared nitwit. The thought is loud and clear, and Arthur snorts in frustration. Knowing that he’ll never have this, that Merlin’s completely out of his reach and that there’s nothing he can do about it, hurts. It hurts big time.

Does he deserve to fall in love with a straight guy who’ll never see him the way he’d like to? Maybe he does. Maybe it is fate’s revenge on the promiscuous life style he’s led for so many years. It’s rather ironic, actually. How often has he been told that there are lots of men out there who’d be with him at the drop of a hat? Yet, the only man he cares for … no chance.

Delving into this won’t do me any good either. Arthur shrugs and moves to get up, just to stop short and stare. He’s still holding Merlin’s hand. Funny that neither of them acknowledged the fact earlier or made an attempt to disentangle them. Odd that Merlin didn’t pull his hand away.

A glimpse of hope flickers in his heart for a split second, just to be swamped by desolation and bitterness a second later. Who’s the idiot now? Arthur throws one last look onto Merlin before he leaves the room, his heart thumping wildly. That’s when realization hits that he’s a hundred percent, totally and utterly buggered.

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“I can’t believe you shot him!” Morgana is pacing up and down the room like a raging bull, unable to hide how shaken the incident on the hill has left her. The meeting of the radical fraction of the FMU has become rather heated in the last few minutes, and Daegal, Tom and Cornelius and a few others are looking on as Morgana takes Alvarr to task for the latest events.

“Nobody was supposed to get hurt!” If looks could kill, Alvarr would be dead three times over. “It was supposed to be a scare, not an attack!” Morgana shouts in exasperation at the man in front of her who seems to take her outburst quite stoically.

“It’s his own fault for getting in the way.” Alvarr shakes her comments off, unimpressed, and rolls his eyes condescendingly at Morgana’s emotional reaction.

“But you weren’t supposed to aim at Arthur either!” Morgana spits out. “Merlin’s one of us. He should not be shot by his own people! He’s doing EVERYTHING he can to get to the formula.”

“You’re right about the ‘everything’ part.” The sarcasm in Alvarr’s voice and his suggestive chuckle make Morgana stop and she faces the tall, handsome man, scrunching her eyes in confusion.
“What do you mean?”

“He and Arthur looked very cosy when I found them,” Alvarr says.

“Cosy?” Morgana asks dumbfounded.

“Like lovey-dovey cosy.” Alvarr smirks, when Morgana’s eyes widen.

“Don’t be ridiculous. That’s just stupid.”

“Well, he could have fooled me, the way he was hugging Arthur.”

“Hugging?” Morgana’s voice is suddenly very quiet, and the fire in her eyes dies a sudden death.

“Like boyfriend hugging.” Alvarr clarifies to get his point across.

The comment hits Morgana like a punch in the guts. Surely, that can’t be true. Why would Merlin hug Arthur? Why would he get close up and personal like that? A wave of heat flushes her body and for a moment she’s lost for words, staring at Alvarr as he continues.

“We have to look at the possibility that Merlin is switching sides.”

Morgana’s eyes become alive again. “Merlin would never do a thing like that. He knows he’s doing this for our father and all of our kin. He would never betray us.”

Alvarr rubs his chin in thought. “But how else would you explain that he was willing to risk his own life for Arthur?”

“That’s Merlin for you,” Morgana counters. “He just does things like that out of instinct. It doesn’t have to mean a thing.”

“But we can’t be sure of that. Not with something as important as this,” Alvarr says gravely and then turns to face the group.

“I did make clear from the beginning that I was willing to wait for what Merlin would come up with, but if he hasn’t got the formula within the next six weeks, we’ll do what we have to do to get it.”

Alvarr has spoken with authority and, apart from Morgana, they all nod in agreement. They have waited at the side-lines long enough, the time for action has come.

“An ultimatum, then,” Morgana utters quietly.

“An ultimatum it is,” Alvarr confirms and then declares the meeting closed. While the crowd is leaving, he moves next to Morgana.

“Morgana,” he says in a much softer voice. “You know I’m right, don’t you? It’s what we’ve always planned and you were very happy to go along with that before.”

Morgana nods. “True, but I’m telling you again that we can trust Merlin. I’ve known him all my life, and he has every reason to hate the Pendragons as much as we do.”

“I hope so, for your sake.” Alvarr gives her a reassuring smile and then he is off, hurrying to catch up with Daegal.

Morgana is left behind and sinks into a chair with a heavy heart and a million thoughts tumbling around haphazardly in her mind.
Merlin and Arthur. No. It simply can’t be. Merlin is hers. Or eventually he will be. She’d always believed that. Right from the age of thirteen when she realized for the first time that she liked Merlin way more than a sister ever should.

It all came down to a chance event one Tuesday afternoon when she ran into Merlin outside his room. He’d come home all sweaty from a game of football and was throwing his T-shirt and shorts into the pile of washing, standing there in his pants outside his room. He was bubbling with life and it hit her out of nowhere how beautiful he was: his black wild hair was in complete disarray, his cheekbones jutting out of his face were just waiting to be caressed, not to mention the subtle muscles on his skinny frame and his slender arms, and … Morgana’s heart stuttered and she had to draw her eyes away … his pants were certainly not leaving anything to her imagination.

He’d told her about the game, and his eyes had twinkled with laughter when he described how he had scored the winning goal. When he smiled and flashed his dimples, her heart had gone wild, and the full pouty lips that laughed so easily had evoked thoughts in her that made her blush.

Morgana had run off that day, making some feeble excuse, so she didn’t have to see him again. In shock she’d hidden in her room for the rest of the day, and then had sworn quite naively to never let Merlin know and to make do with the pure, innocent brotherly love he so generously showered her with.

It had been Morgana’s secret for years and the older she’d got the more difficult it had been to keep. Merlin was amazing in every way, but his magic awed her most. It took her breath away to see him use it. Nobody compared to him – it was true what the prophets had predicted so many years ago: Merlin was the most powerful sorcerer that had ever lived, and she wanted him.

Having to live in the same house with him turned into a torture over the years. Seeing him fall in love with Freya almost killed her. When Freya had died she’d been sure that, given enough time, Merlin would see, that he would realize how much she loved him. She’d been prepared to wait for as long as it took.

And now this. She simply doesn’t understand. Merlin and Arthur? Merlin and a man?

There can be only one explanation. The one Alvarr hinted at earlier. Merlin’s using Arthur’s weakness for good-looking men to his advantage. He’s getting as close to Arthur as he can to make sure his mission will be successful. That MUST be it. She knows Merlin would go to any length for those he loved, he always has.

And yet. The last time they met she’d sensed that something about Merlin was not quite right, something that had to do with Arthur. A burst of hatred erupts in her heart. *Fuck the bloody Pendragon.* What if his seduction skills are twisting Merlin’s mind, trapping him in his net of charm and poisoning him with sweet lies?

She will not let this happen. She won’t let Arthur take Merlin away from her. And Arthur will pay for his treacherous act. Her oath is solemn and sincere.

“Just stop twitching and sit still,” Gwen scolds Merlin for the second time while she’s changing his bandage.
Merlin sighs and does his best to comply. But he can’t help it. Being out of action for the past week has been driving him round the bend. So many things need to be done, and quickly at that, and he’s been stuck feeling useless in hospital for days! His father’s weary face has haunted him between waking and sleeping ever since his visit to Lamia House and the urgency to do something to save him has made him edgier every day.

At least he managed to phone Gilli in a quiet moment while he was in hospital, but it looks like his friends have hit a wall trying to hack into Edwin’s computer. Gilli sounded a bit desperate in fact. “There’s something that simply blocks off anything. No idea what,” he’d admitted gruffly. Merlin tried to reassure him – despite the panic seizing his heart.

His conversation with Gaius hadn’t been much better. “I need some more time, Merlin. I’ve done quite a lot of research, but I want to be sure of my facts before we discuss them.” Shit. No wonder Merlin feels twitchy. Nothing is moving forward AT ALL, and being forced to idleness is the worst punishment he can imagine.

At least the hospital agreed to let him go home, well, back to his apartment next to Arthur’s, earlier that day. Merlin grins somewhat mischievously thinking back to the surprise on the surgeon’s face when he realized how speedily Merlin’s wound was healing. Merlin really had had no choice but help his recovery along a little bit with his own ‘medicine’, so he could return to his task as quickly as possible. Of course he tried not to overdo it, aware this could easily rouse suspicion, but once he’d woken properly after being knocked out by the strongest painkiller for two days, he’d done enough to recover swiftly.

“Right. That’s you.” Gwen smiles at him and gives him a hand putting his T-shirt on. Merlin returns her smile. He really likes Gwen and appreciates her help. And he’s glad the clinic’s sending her to come round once a day to check on him until he doesn’t need the bandages any more.

“It’s really amazing how good that wound looks already,” Gwen says and gives him a sideways look.

Merlin smiles at her friendly face. “Guess, I’m lucky.”


Heat spreads rapidly over Merlin’s cheeks and he holds his breath in shock. Did he give himself away? Does Gwen know? Will this compromise what he is doing?

Gwen’s clearly picked up on his predicament because she puts her hand gently on his arm. “Don’t worry, Merlin. Your secret’s safe with me.”

“How did you guess?” Merlin takes the spur of the moment decision to go with his gut feeling and trust Gwen. Not that he can really justify his decision, maybe it’s because Gwen reminds him of his mum. Warm, kind, very efficient and determined. Apart from that, she could have him reported already if she’d wanted to.

“I’m a volunteer nurse at the Ealdor Health Centre,” Gwen says, and Merlin looks at her in surprise. He’s familiar with the centre. It has existed for about ten years, providing MUs with medical advice, drugs, or psychological support (since the needs of MUs often differ from ‘normal’ people). It is run under the cover of a health centre by a group of volunteers who organize medical staff that can be trusted to help.

“I can explain…,” Merlin starts, but Gwen waves him off.
“You saved Arthur’s life, Merlin. That tells me enough about you, whatever your purpose here may be.” Gwen gets up and packs her medical kit. “If you ever need me, let me now. I’m happy to help.”

“Why are you doing it?” Merlin looks at her in wonderment.

“Helping MUs?” Gwen asks and Merlin nods.

“My best friend confided in me on the first day of High School that she had magic. Through her I learnt to see your community in a different light. She was the kindest, most gentle soul I’ve ever known.” Gwen presses her lips together tightly.

“Was?” Merlin asks quietly.

“She was caught using her magic and convicted of sorcery.” Gwen is clearly struggling to utter the words and needs to pause to compose herself.

“She died of the Serum?” Merlin suggests and when Gwen nods, he puts his good hand on her shoulder in comfort. “I’m really sorry.”

Gwen smiles at him bravely and, ready to leave, assures Merlin of her loyalty. “So anything you need, I’m here to help.”

“Ah, Gwen. You’re finished for today?” Arthur’s words make them both jump. They were so involved in their conversation that neither noticed him appearing in the door. Merlin shouldn’t really be surprised because Arthur mentioned in the morning that he would come to look in on him after work.

“He’s doing fine, Arthur. I’m just on my way out!” Gwen gives him a smile and says her good-byes, leaving Merlin staring at Arthur, wondering how much of their exchange he’d heard. What if he …?

But his worries are cut short immediately as Arthur just flops on the sofa, appearing completely unfazed. “You’re feeling alright then?”

“I’m fine,” Merlin assures him, while the same warm feeling erupts in his stomach he’s felt every time Arthur’s checked on him, and that has been a lot throughout the last week and a half. Despite the heavy commitments of his job Arthur visited him at least once a day in hospital – and made sure he was treated like a king and everything was done to make him feel comfortable.

And he’s done all this for me. Merlin thinks with a lump in his throat. There can be no doubt that Arthur’s gone way and above any employer’s effort to look after his staff. Merlin scans Arthur’s tired face and his throat tightens. He must have been zooming around like a rocket to manage it all. No wonder he looks even more exhausted than normal.

“I think I should be asking that question. You look worse than ever,” Merlin mutters, disguising the truth behind the light-hearted words.


“You know what I mean, don’t you?” Merlin insists kindly.

“I… you … it’s been very busy lately,” Arthur’s finally pushes out, and as if to underline his words he lets his head sink on the backrest of the sofa and closes his eyes.

“I know that’s been my fault,” Merlin says apologetically.
“Never think of it like that.” The intensity in Arthur’s voice almost makes Merlin jump. “I’ll never be able to repay you for what you did for me.”

“I did nothing you need to repay me for.”

“Nothing but save my life.”

“As you saved mine. I would have bled to death, if you hadn’t been there.”

“You wouldn’t have been there to start with if I hadn’t taken you.”

“Nor would you, if I hadn’t fallen apart the way I did.”

The rapid exchange comes to a sudden halt, and both take stock of what they’ve been saying, looking at each other in odd amusement.

“Is this turning into a mutual appreciation society?” Arthur finds his voice first, and the mock horror in his voice makes them both laugh.

“Guess that’s a bad sign,” Merlin retorts quickly.

“First step on the road to hell,” Arthur says, and their eyes lock. In a split second the air in the room feels thick and hot and dry, and Merlin gulps, trying unsuccessfully to clear his throat. Shit. He wishes Arthur wouldn’t look at him like that. All warm and tender and as if …

A sharp sting pierces through Merlin’s heart as he gets pulled into the blue of Arthur’s eyes, and he gasps breathlessly at what he seems to finds there. Is this really want and desire staring back at him? Merlin swallows hard, momentarily taken aback and unsure how to interpret what he sees. Surely Arthur’s affections are with Aiden?

But then the moment passes as quickly as it’s appeared, and Merlin’s sure that his muddled, half-drugged brain is conjuring things.

Arthur is the first who tears himself away. “Think I’ll leave you to have a rest,” he says huskily and motions to get off the sofa.

“Want to watch a movie?” Merlin’s reacted out of his gut, against all common sense and logic. But all he wants at this moment in time is for Arthur to stay, and this is the first thing that’s come to his mind.

I can’t believe I did that. Why the fuck did I do that? he questions himself the next second, rolling his eyes inwardly at his stupid suggestion and wishing he could turn the clock back to undo his clumsy move. When Arthur gnaws at his lips in deep thought rather than answering, he immediately retracts his words.

“It’s okay, if you don’t want to. Sorry, I know you need a good sleep, too.”

“Sleep?” The bitter tone of Arthur’s question makes Merlin flinch.

“Me and sleep!” Arthur shakes his head with a resigned smile on his face, and Merlin senses the desperation in the three words. I must find out what’s wrong with him. Merlin swears in his mind. He’s seriously affected by whatever it is. I hope Gaius finds out what’s in the bloody hypospray.

Arthur’s dithering for a second but then he smiles broadly at Merlin. “A movie? Why not! Bring it on!” His eyes are beaming at Merlin who’s glad that it’s getting too dark in the room for Arthur to
notice the tip of his ears glowing - and he knows they are because they burn like little furnaces.

Arthur retrieves the remote and squeezes Merlin’s good shoulder on the way. Merlin’s heart does a little flip and feels heat creeping all over his neck and his chest. Arthur is willing to stay. No point reading too much into that, is there? Arthur’s just being friendly, wanting to keep him company on his first night home. That’s all.

After a short deliberation what they could watch - Merlin’s more a science fiction buff while Arthur prefers thrillers and crime - they agree on the latest Sherlock movie and Arthur insists on ordering pizza on the premise that ‘movies need fast food’.

When the guard at the entrance of the apartment block sends the pizza up not long after, they settle comfortably on the sofa, Merlin with a cushion at his side to support his arm and Arthur stretching out right next to him, leaning his legs on the coffee table. They eat in companionable silence and watch the film, commenting here and there, laughing and sharing thoughts about the plot and the characters.

This feels so right. Merlin’s revelling in the domesticity of the moment and the warmth inside him makes him almost giddy. He glances at Arthur secretly from the side. The sharp profile, the curve of the shoulders and the classic line of his chin send his heart racing. Just then, to top it all, Arthur laughs heartily, throwing his head back exposing his neck and a hint of his collarbones. Shit. Merlin takes a deep breath while his heart does artistic somersaults. Bloody hell. I am a lost cause, aren’t I?

I want this. I want him. The thought reverberates in his head and Merlin closes his eyes, trying to compose himself. Unfortunately cutting out his vision has the effect that all his other senses become more acute, and out of a sudden he’s overwhelmed with everything that is Arthur. His body, so close to his, warm and vaguely smelling of some expensive cologne. His scent, so enticingly Arthur in every way. The subtle noise of his fingers thrumming on his thigh absent-mindedly. His steady breath lifting his chest in a regular rhythm.

Merlin trembles and tries to brush the thoughts away. Instead, his imagination runs wild, and his mind is peeling Arthur out of his white shirt the next second, opening button upon button, while he places little kisses on every inch of bare skin that becomes visible, his hands caressing Arthur’s sides tenderly. Just as he pictures himself over Arthur’s belly button and dipping his tongue into it, Merlin opens his eyes in shock. He is as hard as a rock, and it bloody well shows under his soft jogging bottoms.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

What on earth is he going to do now? He can hardly put his hand over his traitorous best piece, and Arthur might notice any time. Merlin’s face is burning with heat and his eyes are darting from the TV to the coffee table and back again, just anywhere but not Arthur who, so far, has been too involved in the film to pay any attention to his predicament.

Merlin tries to will his erection away, but the more he thinks about Arthur catching him like this, aroused and wanting, the worse it gets. Confessing to Arthur that HE is the reason for his compromising state is totally out of the question. He knows only too well that nothing could ever happen between them.

Not only for who they are and what they stand for, but because they come from completely different worlds and backgrounds that clash violently. And because he would betray his father. And bad conscience won’t allow it. And he has a ton of secrets he’s hiding from Arthur. And Morgana would be furious. And all his people would wonder where his loyalties lie. And … and of course Arthur is already involved. With Aiden. Fuck.
That last thought has at least some effect on his wilful cock, but to Merlin’s mortification there’s still a conspicuous bulge. Thank God, inspiration strikes.

“I think I’m getting quite tired. I’m heading off for bed.” Merlin motions to get up, carefully positioning himself in a way that gives Arthur as little view of the suspicious bump as possible and then moving behind the sofa swiftly.

Arthur’s head snaps up in surprise, clearly mystified at Merlin’s sudden retreat.

“Of course. You must have as much rest as you can,” he says, but there’s obvious disappointment in his voice. Merlin’s too embarrassed to notice and too caught up in trying to get away before he is found out.

And he doesn’t hear the little sigh that escapes Arthur. Nor does he see his lips thinning in frustration or the way his eyes linger on his figure as he disappears into his bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Just a little reminder that the next chapter will be up in a week and half!
Green monsters

Arthur wakes the next morning feeling as if he never slept. It’s not only that he was hit by his usual nightmare waking him in the early hours of the morning. Once awake his mind was going round in circles, going over the odd end to his evening with Merlin who had taken a sharp exit – that much he understood, but why?

He resigns himself to the fact that this is yet another mystery he will never solve. Just like the tingle he feels every time they touch. At times strong and sizzling, at other times a mere passing feeling – he has no inkling what it is and why it is there. The one thing he did figure out was that it didn’t happen when Merlin was unconscious. When Arthur had held his hand at the hospital the prickling had started as soon as Merlin woke up, but not before. Arthur can’t make head or tail of it, and he has no idea who to ask about it either. He’s certainly not inclined to share this with Edwin, particularly after the recent events, and who else could he ask apart from his doctor?

Merlin remains a puzzle in so many ways, and yet, Arthur’s heart aches when he enters the room and it stutters whenever Merlin is close. Last night things had been going really well. *Hell!* What is he talking about? There are no ‘things’ between him and Merlin. Although … he could have sworn at one point there was a flicker of something more than friendship in Merlin’s eyes.

_Dream on. You’re clutching at straws again._ Arthur reminds himself. He really should have learnt his lesson by now. Arthur sighs and decides to have a very hot shower.

Twenty minutes later he opens the connecting door leading from his into Merlin’s bedroom. *It’s a new day.* He thinks pushing away the last of the spider webs in his head. _Let’s treat it like that._

Merlin stirs when he hears the noise and startles when he finds Arthur in his room.

“Where the heck did you come from? Are you trying to frighten me to death now?” he mumbles drowsily and buries his head in his pillow.

“And good morning to you, too,” Arthur says, glad that they’re back to their usual way of communicating.

“I’ve come to organize breakfast, you ungrateful ass.”

That seems to get the required reaction because Merlin opens his eyes and squints at him.

“Breakfast? Are you offering?” he sounds rather shocked by the notion.

“I’m not totally incapable, you know,” Arthur says, ignoring Merlin’s sceptical grin.

“I’m recovering from a severe injury. You’re sure I can take that risk?”

“I’ve been known to make a mean cup of coffee.”

“I think I’ll have tea then.” Merlin is grinning from ear to ear now. “It’s in the cupboard over the toaster.”

Arthur rolls his eyes and is about to head for the kitchen when he turns round one more time.

“Do you feel like eating something?”

“I thought you’d never ask. What are your breakfast specials?”
“Toast,” Arthur blurts out and they both chuckle.

“Toast it is, sir.”

Arthur is almost through in the kitchen when Merlin shouts after him. “Will you manage to put butter on it?”

“Cheeky bastard,” Arthur grumbles loud enough for Merlin to hear it.

A few minutes he returns laden with two cups of tea and a pile of toast. He stops short when he enters the bedroom to see Merlin staring into space, sombre and sad. When he notices Arthur, his expression changes immediately as if he doesn’t want to get caught, and a hint of guilt crosses his face momentarily.

*There’s no point asking,* Arthur decides. If Merlin wants to tell him he will, and if he doesn’t, it isn’t up to him to pry.

“Right, here I am,” he says instead and puts the food down on the bedside table. “Are you impressed?”

“Very. You’re a man of many talents.” Merlin’s eyes have brightened up again and he digs into the toast as if he hadn’t eaten for a week. Their chat flows easily and light-hearted while they devour their breakfast.

_We have quite a lot in common._ Arthur ponders at one point. Like a similar outlook on life in general, what they value and what they don’t, and they certainly share a very similar sense of humour. _I’m just so comfortable around him. He sees right past my status and who I am out there in the public eye. I know he doesn’t give a shit about that. And he likes me. I know that, too. Just not the same way I like him._

“Don’t they need you down in the office today?” Merlin asks when Arthur starts clearing away their breakfast dishes without any haste.

“I have access to my computer and my phone in my apartment and it’ll make no bloody difference where I am today as I’ve no scheduled meetings,” Arthur explains, unwilling to admit he’s taken the day off to keep Merlin company.

For some reason that shuts Merlin up. He stares at Arthur and finally mumbles something like “any excuse to have a day off” under his breath.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Merlin. I only do this to make sure I don’t have to advertise for another PA so soon again. I have been told I’m getting a reputation for that,” Arthur says jokingly, making sure to gloss over his real reasons for staying near Merlin.

“Well, as you are here, could you give me a hand getting this T-shirt off so I can get washed,” Merlin says and blushes.

_God, he looks edible when he’s shy._ Arthur lips quirk nervously at the corner of his mouth because taking off Merlin’s T-shirt might have been just a tiny part of his latest midnight fantasy, the beginning of it to be exact. No need to explain how it ended. Which was another reason why he couldn’t find any rest. It’s not a good idea to go there just now when he’s got the real man in front of him. Arthur’s steeling himself to keep a steady hand and cool head when he walks up to Merlin to help him.

A moment later he gently pulls the T-shirt over Merlin’s head, making sure not to overstretch his
shoulder or hurt his arm. Broad shoulders on a slim frame come to light, and Arthur takes note that Merlin is surprisingly well shaped for a man so skinny. The urge to touch him is overwhelming and Arthur almost gives in, almost. There’s no harm though resting his eyes on Merlin’s chest, appreciating the dark soft chest hair and the pink erect nipples, as for the trail of curls running from his belly button down south …

“Oh no!” Merlin’s cry rips Arthur out of his pleasant daydream.

“Merlin?” Arthur asks, unsure. Merlin’s face is pale, and his hand is groping round his neck as if he’s looking for something.

“My pendant. It’s gone.” Arthur is taken aback by the anguish in his voice. That chain must be damn important to Merlin, otherwise he wouldn’t be that upset. Just then he remembers in a flash.

“Wait a second!” he shouts and rushes through the connecting door across to his room to fumble in the right pocket of one of his jackets. There it is. Triumphantly he returns to hand the chain over to Merlin.

“I’m really sorry. The nurse gave it to me to safe keep before they operated on you. I completely forget I had it in my pocket,” he says rather meekly because clearly, his forgetfulness has caused Merlin some unnecessary distress.

Merlin holds the pendant in his hand and gently rubs his thumb over the swirly pattern. Then he closes his fingers over it and lets out a gasp of relief.

“I’m sorry. I should have returned it sooner,” Arthur mumbles a bit shame-faced.

“Not to worry. I’m glad it’s not lost,” Merlin says and smiles when he looks up at Arthur. “It means a lot. Thanks for keeping it for me.”

“It’s from someone you care about?” Arthur wonders, not really expecting a straight answer.

“My girlfriend,” Merlin says absent-mindedly, and Arthur wishes he hadn’t asked.

A girl-friend. His heart plummets yet again. Why is it that every time they’re getting close something happens that draws them apart?

Merlin’s never mentioned a girl-friend so far, he’s never even hinted there’s someone for him out there. Why has he been flirting around with Sefa then? What the heck? After their easy going morning and the enjoyable evening before, less Merlin’s unexplained rush to get away, this comes as a sobering blow, reminding him for the umpteenth time what a monumental moron he is.

Merlin seems to have noticed his perplexed state and for once he’s opening up to him. “She’s dead,” he says quietly and Arthur goes through another range of emotions. Merlin is still mourning for this woman, it’s obvious. The pain of losing someone loved is something Arthur can associate with. He thinks of his mother almost every day, even if it’s just for a short moment.

“What happened?” He automatically places a comforting hand on Merlin’s arm, hoping that he won’t push him away like the last time when he was shook-up. He acknowledges the tingle between them without paying too much attention to it

“She was killed in an accident last year,” Merlin explains tonelessly, not looking up.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur says with compassion and meaning it, because Merlin deserves to be happy. Even if it’ll never be with him.
“Thanks.” Merlin sounds much more composed now. “It’s all in the past.” And then he gets off the bed, clearly drawing a line under this conversation.

“I’ll better get cleaned up then,” he says with a forced smile and disappears in the en-suite bathroom, just when there’s a knock at the door.

It is Sefa. If she’s surprised to see Arthur opening the door to Merlin’s apartment she certainly doesn’t show it. Right. Sefa. Arthur’s heart aches thoroughly once or twice before jealousy tightens its grip around it. Can he not have Merlin a whole day to himself for once?

“I come in the name of the staff.” Sefa smiles at him sweetly. “We’re all concerned for Merlin’s health. Is he alright?”

Her eyes are dark with worry and her kind words bring back home that Arthur has no right, no right at all to feel possessive about Merlin. He gulps down his frustration and behaves the way he should.

“He’s on the mend. He just needs a lot of rest.”

“Can I speak to him for a few minutes?” Sefa is desperate to see Merlin, and Arthur can’t blame her, nor can he deny her request.

“I’ve baked his favourite cake.” She holds out a carefully wrapped parcel.

So Sefa knows what Merlin’s favourite cake is. Okay. Arthur processes the fact that she evidently knows Merlin on a much more personal level than he does. It feels like a kick in his teeth when it shouldn’t and a twinge of acrimony appears like an uninvited guest. He still manages a friendly smile. At least he thinks it’s friendly.

“Sure, come in. He’s not long up.”

Arthur ushers Sefa into the living room and offers her a cup of tea to give him something to do until Merlin surfaces from the bathroom. When he finally does, Arthur helps him to get dressed and smartened up, and then they walk across to the living room.

“Merlin!” Sefa’s voice is drowning in affection as she walks towards Merlin to embrace him in a warm hug. A very warm hug. Almost hot. Or is it simply enticingly chaste? Nothing escapes Arthur’s scrutinizing gaze. He can see Sefa’s lips brushing temptingly across Merlin’s cheek before she places a kiss on it, he is aware that she holds on to Merlin a little bit longer than you would expect, and he certainly notices how comfortable Merlin is, leaning into her.

Arthur cringes on the inside.

Am I a glutton for self-punishment? Why the heck am I watching this? I shouldn’t be here.

When Merlin rewards Sefa with one of his toothy, heart-dropping, dimply smiles, Arthur can’t take anymore.

“I’ll leave you to it then.” He returns to the kitchen to clear away the rest of the dishes.

However, as the apartment is open plan, he can hardly avoid hearing Merlin and Sefa’s conversation, even if the view to the living room is blanked out by a wall. Well, there’s no official reason to assume they would like to be completely private as Sefa has come as a representative of the staff. And they both know he’s there, so it is not as if he’s eavesdropping or anything.

“Everyone’s asking for you and they’re all wishing you a speedy recovery,” Sefa says.

Arthur bets that Merlin’s smiling. That pleased little smile he shows when he’s quietly happy. The one where his lips quirk at the sides and just a hint of dimple appears on his cheeks.
“Thanks,” Merlin replies.

“Oh, and I made this for you.” Sefa sounds decidedly coy and Arthur can see the attraction of it. Girls do that kind of thing, don’t they? And men fall for it, too. And Merlin’s no exception if Arthur reads the signs right.

“You remembered hazelnut-vanilla cake is my favourite. I don’t know what to say.” Merlin is definitely touched by the thoughtful present.

“It’s okay. Anything for a hero!” Arthur can easily picture Sefa lifting her eyes to Merlin’s adoringly.

“A hero?” Merlin’s voice is tinged with disbelief.

“No need to be that modest, Merlin.” Sefa sounds a bit like Arthur feels when he thinks of what Merlin has done. Awed and full of love. “What you did was really brave. I’m sure the Governor was really grateful.”

Yes, he was. Arthur smirks at the memory of his father visiting Merlin in hospital to thank him in person for his heroic action. “The Pendragon family is in your debt, Merlin. I will never forget this,” Uther had said.

“You need to look after yourself now, you know.” Sefa’s caring, heartfelt tone is making Arthur cringe.

“It’s only a scratch. I will be up and running soon enough,” Merlin reassures her.

“Well, I’ll better leave you to rest then. We’re all looking forward to seeing you back again.”

“It’s lovely to see you, Sefa.” The smooth warmth in Merlin’s voice is driving a knife into Arthur’s chest, and he grits his teeth.

“Get better soon,” Sefa says and Arthur would bet his whole fortune that she’s kissing him. On his cheek, on his lips, he has no idea, but she’s kissing him because the silence between them gives it away.

“Thanks.” Merlin sounds soft and mellow. Just as Arthur imagined he would sound after a kiss, time and time again. And he would feel warm and pliant against his body, pressing into him…Fuck! Getting carried away again! Arthur’s heart is on the best way of dying a slow, painful death.

Why, why is fate doing this to him? He has to stop hoping, he has to start getting a grip of himself. Most of all he has to stop listening because he can’t cope with any of this a second longer.

Just as well that Sefa leaves a few minutes later, and when Arthur returns into the living room, Merlin has a huge grin on his face.

“Want some cake?” Merlin asks, as soon as he appears. “It’s an improvement on toast.”

Arthur knows it’s not meant, but it does feel as if someone has slapped his face. He feels brushed aside for something better, something he can never be, something he can’t give Merlin. How can he compete with toast when Sefa offers cake? And why is he unable to give up on Merlin when defeat is staring blaringly into his face?

“Maybe later. Need to get some work done,” Arthur mumbles and heads for his own apartment next door. He can’t face Merlin at this moment because he’s not able to keep up the pretence. Seeing the man he loves with a glow on his face for someone else is the ultimate punishment.
And he makes a promise to himself, even a vow. He will put a stop to the emotional torture he’s been exposing himself to. He will stop thinking about Merlin. He will not let this get to him any longer. 

*This has to end, he thinks. I can’t do this anymore.*

Arthur is late. Merlin stares at the clock on the wall. Well, technically he’s not really late because the official working hours at the Ministry start only at nine o’clock. It’s half past eight at the moment, but ever since Merlin’s started this job, Arthur has always been at the office before everyone else, at eight o’clock at the latest. But not recently.

Of course Merlin knows the reason for Arthur’s tardiness over the last ten days. Yes, it has been EXACTLY ten days. He should know because that’s how long he has been back to work and that’s how long Arthur has been seeing Aiden every day… and night. Actually it has been a bit longer than that. If he is correct it started two days after he got back to his apartment.

*Looks like Arthur’s catching up on the time he lost with Aiden when he was detained with me.* Merlin grits his teeth although he knows he should be glad that Arthur’s concentrating on someone else. Because he doubts he’d be able to refuse him, and THAT would be so wrong.

He hates Aiden anyway. And he hates Arthur for asking him to book a suite at a posh country hotel for the two of them for two weekends in a row. Merlin’s resentment bubbles steadily under his skin. Even though it was totally idiotic and unreasonable, he felt intensely chafed and still feels as if someone is constantly punching his stomach.

At the end of the day, reason tells him, this shouldn’t worry him. What’s really burdening his mind is that Gilli and Will have not been able to electronically penetrate Edwin’s office to get to his computer so far and that they aren’t a single step further in obtaining the formula. At least Gaius has agreed to meet him at the weekend. Hopefully he will report something of value.

“I really need to speak to you in person, Merlin,” Gaius had said, sounding rather mysterious, and they’d agreed to meet in a small café tucked away in a quiet side street in one of the suburbs of Camelot.

Merlin is also aware that Arthur had a closed meeting with the senior security staff, including Leon, Percival, John Marshall and a few others, while he was off. No doubt some issues concerning Lamia House, maybe even Edwin, were discussed at the time, but, to Merlin’s aggravation, he’s not been told anything about it.

“How are you today?” Sefa has appeared at his door, interrupting his thoughts. “Do you need any help with the typing?”

Merlin smiles and she blushes, as she always does when he gives her his full attention.

“Do you need any help with the typing?”

“Don’t think I need to do a lot of that today. I’ve only got a lot of phone calls to make.”

Sefa has come up regularly since he’s returned to work, ‘far too soon’ according to Gwen, to give him a hand with his typing because the movement still causes him pain in his shoulder. Sefa’s one of the nicest people Merlin has ever met and he knows she means well, but of course he realizes that
this has been a welcome excuse for her to come and see him more often.

He can see the affection in her eyes, and he feels like a cheat for not returning it the way she’s hoping for. Because he does like her. No, it’s actually more than liking, but it doesn’t come anywhere near to what he feels when Arthur enters the room. A few weeks earlier he would have probably asked her out, but now his heart is overcrowded with unresolved emotions for a man who is completely unavailable.

*This is not fair on her. I have to be honest before this gets out of hand.*

“Shef,” he says and deduces from the alarmed look on her face that the tone of his voice has given away that whatever is coming might not very pleasant.

“Listen. I … I don’t know how to say this, you know that I really like you. You are a wonderful, caring person and you’ve been an amazing support in the last while…”

“Guess, this sounds alarmingly like THAT conversation?!?” Sefa interrupts him, immediately latching on to his uncertainty and embarrassment. “The one where the next word you’re going to say is a massive BUT?”

Merlin bites his lip guiltily, and he doesn’t know how to continue. The tears shining in Sefa’s eyes don’t exactly help to make him feel better and the silence spreading between them makes this even more awkward.

“I thought …” Sefa shakes her head in disbelief, and then looks up to him. “Is there someone else?”

Merlin takes a deep breath and tries to be as honest as he can. Admitting his feelings to himself has been bad enough, telling someone else about them is definitely not happening.

“Yes and no. There is someone, but nothing will ever come of it.” Merlin hangs his head in shame, sensing Sefa’s bitter disappointment and her struggle to deal with his rejection. “I really am sorry, very sorry. I know you would be brilliant to be with.”

“It wouldn’t be brilliant if it’s one-sided, Merlin,” Sefa says huskily and then stops to compose herself, “… and I’m grateful for your honesty.” She wipes her eyes with her hand. “I won’t lie and say I’m not gutted. I really thought that …”

Merlin gets up and walks up to her. “Forgive me, Sefa.”

She shakes her head at him and gives him a brave little smile. “There’s nothing to forgive, Merlin. You can’t help who you fall for. Even if it isn’t convenient.”

For a second Merlin wonders if she knows exactly who he’s talking about, and he gingerly scans her face.

“To be honest, I had a funny feeling things had changed a little between us recently,” she says.

Merlin nods because he has no idea what to say or what on earth he could add to that. There’s one last thing though he needs to clarify. For himself and for her.

“It’s not that I’m expecting it, but …” Merlin looks straight at her. “Are we still friends?”

“How could I stop liking you, Merlin?” Sefa gives an exasperated chuckle. “Come here.” And at that she takes another step, opens her arms and gives him a heartfelt hug.
“Friends,” she whispers, holding him maybe a tad too tight.

_She really is wonderful. Why could I not fall in love with her?_ Merlin sighs inwardly, and gratitude for her understanding washes over him.

“Thanks,” Merlin says quietly and Sefa moves away a little so she can face him properly.

“Would you kiss me? Just the once?” she asks, blushing violently, so embarrassed by her request.

Without hesitation or another word Merlin pulls her in and places his lips on hers to kiss her chastely and warmly. He is about to pull away when she leans into him more, not ready to let him go, and Merlin who doesn’t want to hurt her feelings even more, allows the kiss to linger on.

Eventually Sefa takes a step back and brushes his cheek with her hand lightly and Merlin takes it to his lips to place a little kiss onto it, and he’s just about to say how much he appreciates her generosity, when his gaze falls on Arthur who is standing in the doorway, staring at them gloomily.

“Good morning,” he snaps rather icily. “I do hope you realize this is your place of work.” Sefa throws Merlin a mortified look and disappears hastily with a meek “Sorry, sir,” to get back to Archives.

Arthur avoids direct eye contact with Merlin and disappears in his office, leaving Merlin behind alone, shaken and angry at the same time. There was no need to dress them down like that, no need at all. He’s glad that, as the day passes, Arthur keeps himself to himself and just puts through the odd phone call.

At six o’clock Merlin is in the middle of closing down his computer for the day when a man appears at the entrance unexpectedly, and Merlin takes a sharp intake of breath. It is Aiden.

“Aiden Stone… Nice to meet you. I think Arthur mentioned you at one point.” He introduces himself and takes Merlin’s hand. _Mentioned me? At one point? Thank you very much!_

“Aiden!” Arthur voice cuts through them, as he hurries towards them, glancing from one man to the other apprehensively. “What are you doing here?”

“You left your jacket in my car.” Aiden hands it over, and Arthur beams a soft smile.

“God, you went to all the trouble of coming here for that,” he says incredulously and full of wonderment as if Aiden had done something monumental. He waves his boyfriend into his office without acknowledging Merlin’s presence. And that’s where they remain for twenty minutes and
three seconds before the door opens slightly.

“See you tomorrow,” Arthur says his voice dripping with affection, and Merlin’s wall of self-deceit is starting to crumble.

“Yeap.” Aiden doesn’t waste his energy on words and leans into Arthur to kiss him, and judging by the groan the kiss is really hot. It’s not that they’re flaunting it, but Merlin’s chair is placed at an angle where he can peek into the room if the door’s slightly ajar. And although he doesn’t see their parting kiss, his mind is filling all the blanks. Arthur moaning quietly with desire and Aiden gasping “Arthur!” under his breath.

Merlin is starting to arrange all the items on his desk with fervour. His pens, the papers in the in-tray, the note-pad,…

When he looks up against better judgement he gets a clear view of Arthur’s hands gripping Aiden’s arse and squeezing it hard and wanting. Merlin closes his eyes and turns away, calming his pounding heart and laboured breathing by sheer willpower.

He hates that he’s so affected by what he’s seeing and loathes himself for being too weak to brush it aside. I’m such an idiot rejecting someone genuine like Sefa for …. this. Bitterly, he clenches his teeth and tidies his desk for the second time out of pure frustration.

A moment later Aiden rushes past him and out of the door with a huge smile on his face, and Merlin prepares to leave when Arthur calls him. “A word, Merlin.”

Merlin enters Arthur’s room with trepidation. What does he want now? It is past working time, and he has got every right to call it a day.

Arthur’s busy at his computer, ignoring him and letting him wait for a minute before he speaks. Arrogant ass. Merlin’s resentment has been bubbling steadily all day and having to watch Arthur displaying his affections for Aiden hasn’t improved his mood. All he wants is to get back to his apartment and open a bottle of wine. And yet, he notices how haggard Arthur looks and how exhausted. Obviously shagging too much, is his begrudging response.

“What do you want?” he asks curtly. “I’m off for today.”

Arthur sends him a caustic look. “You know fine you’re supposed to be available at any time. “

“Always at your service. Of course. How could I forget?” Merlin spits out, meaning it sarcastically, but aware it comes out more spiteful than anything else.

“Manners, Merlin. Watch your manners.” Arthur has put on his quietly threatening voice, the one he tends to use if he wants to intimidate someone to get the upper hand.

Bloody cheek! Merlin can’t believe that Arthur would try this on him. “And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” he adds, blood rushing through his veins double quick.

“Getting off with your girlfriend in my office is a bloody disgrace, Merlin. Take it fucking somewhere else!” Arthur’s voice has risen and he’s shaking with anger, or whatever it is, and when he gets up he sways and has to steady himself on the desk.

Merlin takes note of it, but he’s too annoyed to give it any consideration. “You watch your own manners before you criticize mine,” he snaps back.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Arthur spits back, as if he has no idea what Merlin is
referring to. What a laugh!

“After what you pulled off just now with your ‘boyfriend’ (and his voice is mocking), you can hardly tick ME off. You double faced prat! You’re just a giant hypocrite!”

“Jealous, Merlin?” Arthur gives him a poisonous look, and Merlin has no idea where the Arthur he’s fallen in love with has disappeared to. This is a different man, one who thinks nothing of slashing out without thought, one who is simply not Arthur.

“You wish,” Merlin says with an angry snort because he’s fed up with this whole situation and, maybe this will finish it once and for all, clarifying where they stand and leave his heart at peace to get on with his life.

“Never forget that I’m the boss here and I can do what I like, while you are just … just … a useless employee who I’m paying to do as I say and who means nothing. Nothing!” Arthur snarls, his face ashen and his lips twisting.

Merlin can’t be sure whether the last word is suffocated by a suppressed sob or by well controlled contempt, but he’s certain about the message in Arthur’s eyes. Those eyes who looked at him so fondly not long ago are burning with distaste, or is it anguish?

“Sorry, for forgetting that, sir,” Merlin says sarcastically, his voice cold and bitter. “I’m done here.” Then he turns on his heels and leaves the office before Arthur can make another comment.

“Get back here, you idiot!” Arthur shouts after him angrily, but Merlin couldn’t care less at this moment in time.

How could Arthur say a thing like that? How could he be so arrogant and patronizing and deliberately hurtful? He will always be his father’s son. Morgana’s voice whispers in the back of his mind, and of course she’s been right all along. Deep down Arthur is a Pendragon at heart. And nothing will ever change that.

Merlin takes a deep breath of air, ready to bury his feelings under a pile of excuses. Almost out in the corridor, a crash, the noisy clattering of things breaking and an ominous thump in Arthur’s office followed by silence make him stop. And before his brain has time to speculate whether he should go back, his feet are already taking him there
Home run

Merlin’s annoyance and resentment evaporate in a puff of air when he finds Arthur lying face down next to his desk, surrounded by a variety of items he must have ripped down with him when he collapsed.

“Arthur!” Merlin gasps and kneels down at his side, his legs as wobbly as jelly. No! Did I do that? Merlin’s fingers are trembling when he checks Arthur’s pulse on his neck. Thank God! It’s there, even if it flutters unsteadily.

Merlin quickly inspects Arthur’s limbs and head for any injuries. There aren’t any. Arthur’s been lucky that most of him ended up on the lush, extra thick rug in front of his sofa. Just to make sure that Arthur’s okay Merlin rolls him around gently to put him into recovery position.

Shit. He feels so guilty about provoking Arthur earlier. This wouldn’t have happened if he had kept his mouth shut. When he thinks back now he does recognize that Arthur looked particularly dreadful all day, even more drawn and fatigued than usual. Merlin out of all people should have noticed the signs and ignored Arthur’s bickering rather than react to it like a bull to a red rag.

Although Arthur seems unhurt physically, there’s no telling what has caused him to pass out. He needs a doctor as quickly as possible. Merlin dials Edwin’s number with utter reluctance. He’s the last person he wants here at this moment in time, but he IS the family physician and the emergency contact for Arthur and Uther. When there’s no answer after the sixth ring Merlin lets out a sigh of relief, abandons the call and phones Percival next. He should have a list of doctors on call.

“Edwin’s away for two days,” Percival quickly explains. “I’ll organize someone else. You just stay there! I’ll be up in a minute.”

Where else would Merlin go? Tightly in the grip of guilt and worry, he sits down next to Arthur on the floor, watching his chest rise and fall while listening intently to his shallow breathing. What if Arthur had a stroke? Or some other kind of brain malfunction caused by stress and tiredness? Merlin would never forgive himself because it was him who triggered the collapse, him who riled Arthur so much that his body shut down.

Merlin stares into space while his hand strokes over Arthur’s blond hair of its own accord, and the urge to be as close to him as possible takes a hold of him. He needs the comfort of Arthur’s warm skin to assure him he is alive, and so he bends down and brushes Arthur’s cheek with his lips.

“Hmmm?” Merlin’s head shoots up at the noise to find Gwaine at his side who is obviously trying to make his presence known. Merlin’s been far too involved with his own thoughts to notice him.

“Didn’t mean to startle you.” Gwaine checks out Merlin, curious and questioning, and heat spreads over Merlin’s face while he removes his hand from Arthur’s head as naturally as possible.

“Just worried for him, that’s all,” he says quickly and promptly changes the topic. “Where did YOU come from?”

“I was still in, and Percival sent me up to give you some moral support.”

Merlin nods, embarrassment still written all over his face. “Thanks.”
"How long has he been out for?" Gwaine enquires almost casually, too casually. It immediately sends alarm bells ringing and Merlin’s eyes flit apprehensively between Arthur on the floor and Gwaine who has settled next to him.

“About ten to fifteen minutes. Is that a bad sign?”

“I’m not a doctor.” Gwaine shrugs his shoulders and puts his hand to Arthur’s face and then his hands. “He’s pretty cold, maybe we should cover him with something?”

Merlin jumps up, annoyed at himself for failing to notice such a basic need and, charged with nervous energy, gets a blanket from the bathroom. Where is that bloody doctor? Why has Arthur not come round? He’s immensely grateful that Gwaine is here, offering him quiet support, but he can’t help his hands from shaking when he puts the warm fleece round Arthur.

“He’s quite a toughie, you know,” Gwaine says, clearly attempting to console Merlin. Instead, the kind words cause Merlin to tear up, taking him on the brink of losing his composure.

“We had an argument, and …,” he blurs out, but his confession is interrupted by Percival arriving with a tall silver-haired man in tow. Merlin takes note that Percival, being the Head of Security, does a quick once over of the room and of him, but then Merlin’s eyes are diverted to the doctor examining Arthur who hasn’t moved or shown any signs of gaining consciousness so far. Merlin dreads the verdict that’s about to come, dreads what the man is going to say, dreads that he has pushed Arthur over an edge from where there’s no return.

Finally the physician looks up. “His heart is a bit erratic and his breathing could be steadier, but that’s it. It looks like his body shut down from pure exhaustion.”

Merlin swallows hard. “Why is he still unconscious then?”

“His body probably does what it needs most. Sleep.” The doctor doesn’t sound particularly alarmed, but that doesn’t mean anything. Doctors are used to these kinds of things after all. “But you’re right. I would feel happier if I can wake him up.”

And at that the man takes Arthur’s shoulder and gently shakes him. “Arthur!” He shouts and shakes him again. “Arthur! Wake up!”

Merlin’s heart starts thumping like thunder, and he momentarily loses control over his arms and legs when Arthur remains unresponsive. His fingers grip the edge of the sofa table so hard his knuckles turn white, while his mind repeats the same sentence like a prayer all over again and again. Wake up. Please wake up. Please be okay.

“Arthur!” The doctor doesn’t give up easily and slaps Arthur’s cheeks lightly. This time a small groan escapes Arthur’s mouth.

“Arthur!” Merlin’s body is trembling from a heady mixture of relief and guilt.

But his voice has a definite effect on Arthur who makes a genuine attempt to open his eyes. “Me..n,” he mumbles, his eye lids half closed, before his head sinks against the doctor’s chest with a monumental grunt.

“That’s better!” The doctor is visibly pleased. “I think we can transfer him to his bed now. I’ll leave some painkillers in case he needs them later, but the most important thing is that he rests as long as possible.”

With the promise to look in on Arthur the following morning and making sure they know he is
available all night in case he’s needed, the doctor takes his leave.

Percival and Gwaine lift a very drowsy Arthur up and, supporting him by the shoulders, more or less carry him to the lift and into his apartment. A few minutes later Arthur’s on his bed, curling up in his sheets and snuggling into his pillow.

Percival excuses himself because he should have been back home at least half an hour earlier to take his wife out to celebrate her birthday, but Gwaine stays on for a while longer, helping Merlin to undress a hardly conscious Arthur and put him into sleep wear which turns out rather tedious because Arthur, in his half-conscious state, seems to think he has to defend himself against the hands that are trying to help.

“Now that wasn’t easy,” Gwaine admits afterwards and falls into the sofa in Arthur’s living room with a heartfelt sigh.

“As heavy as a rock,” Merlin mumbles in agreement and settles on a chair opposite him. “And as stubborn as a mule.” Neither comment comes across particularly vindictive. In fact, if Merlin could hear himself, he’d find that they sound more like terms of endearment.

Merlin can feel Gwaine’s eyes on his face and tries to ignore it single-mindedly, but Gwaine is insistent and finally Merlin takes a deep breath of air and gives in. “What?”

“Tell me what’s going on.” A smile twitches around Gwaine’s lips. He leans back, his arms behind his head, and waits for Merlin’s answer.

“Going on? What the heck are you talking about?” Merlin feigns innocence, but he’s aware he isn’t making a good job of it. He’s always been a dreadful liar.

“Merlin!” Gwaine’s getting impatient now. “I’ve seen the way you looked at him earlier, the way you touched him. Not to talk about the ki…”

“Stop.” Merlin closes his eyes, his mind in wild panic about what to say and not to say.

“Please, stop.” Merlin has no choice but to face Arthur’s best friend, and when he does, his gaze must give away more than he’s intended because Gwaine’s eyebrows snap up in astonishment.

“Bugger me! So I AM right!” He shouts out perplexed. “How did that happen?”

Merlin sinks back into the plush sofa seat, trying to avoid blushing furiously without any success. But he knows his game is up and it would be ridiculous to keep pretending. “I don’t quite get it myself, Gwaine. And I’d prefer not to talk about it. Right?”

“Does Arthur know?” Gwaine is far too perceptive for his own good, getting straight to the sore point of this whole lousy affair.

Merlin shakes his head, pressing his lips into a thin line. “No point.”

“Why not?” Merlin can see that Gwaine isn’t going to let this go easily and so he gives in.

“It just wouldn’t work between us,” Merlin pushes out, unable to take the hurt out of his voice, and he adds rather bitterly, “Apart from that, it might not have escaped your attention that he’s dating someone else.”

Gwaine chuckles in disbelief. “Aiden? For fuck’s sake! Have you ever wondered why Arthur’s going out with a guy that could be your twin?”
Yes, that had crossed Merlin’s mind more than once, but he’d always come to the conclusion it was either pure chance or that Arthur liked his guys tall, lean and dark-haired, and he says as much to the man opposite him.

Gwaine throws him a rather exasperated, incredulous look. “You reckon?” he mumbles more to himself than to Merlin, rolling his eyes as if Merlin had just failed to understand that two plus two makes four.

“Right, mate.” Gwaine gets up in a sudden move. “I think I’ll leave you to figure this out yourself.”

“See you tomorrow Gwaine,” Merlin says a bit dazed, “Thanks for your help.”

Gwaine gives him a conspiratorial smile, and when the door closes behind him, silence engulfs Merlin, which is in stark contrast to what’s going on inside his head. It is as plain as day what Gwaine implied, and Merlin’s brain seizes to function for a few seconds. Then an avalanche of confusion buries whatever brain power is left to figure this out rationally. If this is true … If this is true … Shit. Will anything change, if this is true?

Merlin’s mind races over the last few weeks, picking out things stuck in his memory. Arthur mumbling his name when he was dreaming, the heated looks he has thrown him at times, Arthur caring for him after he got shot and staying with him on his first day back from hospital, to mention a few.

His head is buzzing with so many ifs and buts, it feels like a beehive on a busy day. God, is he tired and emotionally worn! Everything’s so hellishly complicated. What happened to the pleasant life he used to have? And while his mind’s working overtime, his body, tired from the events of the day, starts to relax into the cosy sofa chair after and before he knows it, he’s dozed off.

“NO!” A high pitched scream rips Merlin out of his sleep not long after and he looks around disorientated. What’s happening? Where did that scream come from?

A low moan from Arthur’s bedroom followed by another scream catapult Merlin into action. He zooms through the door to find Arthur thrashing around in his bed in terror, his arms over his head and sweat on his brow.

“No. Please! Stop! Stop it! Nooooo!” Arthur sobs and slashes out with his hands, as if to fend off an imaginary opponent.

For a moment Merlin isn’t sure how to handle this. Is he supposed to wake Arthur up or calm him down, or what? Instinctively he decides on the latter and walks up to him to sit on the edge of the bed. He attempts to take Arthur’s hand, but almost gets punched in the procedure. That’s obviously NOT the way to get to him. A sign to deploy plan B.

“Beslæpan!” His eyes flash golden, while his thumbs rub gentle circles around Arthur’s temples. “It’s only a dream. Let it go. Sleep,” Merlin whispers, and Arthur stops twitching and twisting and gradually relaxes his body against Merlin’s touch. Merlin feels a tinge of guilt because he wouldn’t normally use magic on somebody without their consent, but the doctor has ordered Arthur should sleep as much as possible, and all Merlin has done is to ensure that this is going to happen.

When Arthur’s breathing steadies and his chest moves in a regular rhythm again Merlin slowly takes his hands off Arthur’s face. That must have been a hell of a nightmare. If Arthur’s suffering from disrupted sleep like this more often, it’s no wonder he often looks like the walking dead.

“Typical to be difficult even when you’re asleep,” Merlin mutters affectionately and lets his fingertips
run casually along Arthur’s neck, wondering in passing why he hasn’t felt the familiar tingle when he touched Arthur. Actually he hasn’t felt it since Arthur’s been knocked out.

_I must speak to Gaius about this and Arthur’s illness on Sunday. Hope he can shine a light on it._

Merlin yawns. Watching Arthur sleeping and breathing in a steady rhythm decidedly has a soporific effect on him. And this bed is huge, probably even larger than King’s size. It is Arthur-sized. Merlin grins to himself.

_I really shouldn’t leave him alone._ Merlin reckons there’s plenty of room to sleep here without disturbing Arthur and being close enough to make sure he’s alright.

Merlin climbs on top of the sheets fully clothed and let his head fall on the pillows. Yeah. This is a comfy bed. _Wouldn’t have expected anything else._ It is Merlin’s last thought before he falls asleep.

When Arthur wakes up, a number of observations pop into his head almost simultaneously before he gets as far as opening his eyes.

1. He’s in his bed and he has no idea how he got there.
2. He’s wearing pyjamas he didn’t put on himself.
3. He’s really hot, but his body feels blissfully relaxed.
4. He feels totally dehydrated and desperately needs a drink.

He forces his eyes open reluctantly to find a glass of water sitting on the bedside table. Evidently somebody’s been anticipating his needs. He takes a couple of huge gulps and falls back onto the bed.

That’s when his memory comes flooding back and his heart stops for one terrifying moment. _Oh fuck._ Sefa. The argument. Him saying the most awful things to Merlin. And Merlin not taking any of his shit and giving him as good as he got.

Arthur cringes when he goes over the exact words he actually used. He even has the grace to blush which is pointless because nobody can see him anyway. How could he? How could he be such an ass? To Merlin who had done nothing but kiss his girlfriend. Arthur’s throat tightens with guilt because he knows precisely why he lost his temper that badly and insulted Merlin in a most inexcusable way.

On the one hand, he felt totally sapped over the last three weeks. Since the attack on the hill it’s been exhaustion and nightmares all the way, and exerting himself beyond his limits by spending countless nights with Aiden and going out almost every evening hasn’t helped to improve his poor condition, either.

On the other hand, it’s become clear that his self-prescribed Merlin Replacement Therapy isn’t working. Aiden is a lovely guy, full of wit and intelligence, and a pleasant lover, too. Arthur’s told himself exactly that at least ten times a day. Aiden has got everything going for him, with the one exception … he is NOT Merlin. When Arthur saw Merlin snogging Sefa right before his eyes, something in his brain just fused and he couldn’t think straight any longer.

Sudden panic seizes Arthur’s heart when he recalls Merlin’s last words before he stomped out of the office. “I’m done here,” he said, leaving him behind, red faced and mortified. After that Arthur can’t remember a single thing and now he’s here, in his bed. At 9.52. p.m. He must have slept for about
Arthur’s straining his brain to jog a memory for those missing three hours, but to no avail. Frustrated, he sweats and rolls round in his bed, grabbing the pillow next to his in a pretend hug to bury his face in it. And then he freezes. There’s no mistaking that this pillow smells of Merlin. Merlin has been on his bed, lying next to him? His cock twitches at the mere thought of it, but what’s that supposed to mean?

With many a weird theories in his head, Arthur resolves to get up. A grumble in his stomach reminds him that his body has other needs, too, not to mention the call of nature urging him to find a bathroom. Five minutes later he’s heading towards the kitchen, and, just as he is about to turn the corner, a tall figure appears out of nowhere and makes Arthur jump out of his skin.

“What the fuck!” he roars and then immediately goes all silent. Because the man who’s been dominating his thoughts since he woke up is right here, in front of him. The warm, concerned look in his blue eyes makes Arthur heart thud like mad, but it also baffles him to the bone.

“Merlin?” he gasps questioningly.

“Well spotted, Arthur. Seems you have all your wits together again,” Merlin says drily, and when Arthur looks increasingly confused, he adds, “Welcome back to the land of the living.”

“What? I only slept for about three hours. You can hardly knock me for that,” Arthur mumbles indignantly, but at the same time ridiculously relieved Merlin is here and that they are seemingly still on speaking terms.

“Add another twenty-four, and you’re getting it right.” Merlin throws him a coy look from the side, and Arthur’s too distracted by it for a second to let Merlin’s words sink in. He’s supposed to have slept that long? Arthur shakes his head incredulously. That’s unheard of and totally impossible.

“You’ve been out for a count for over a day, Arthur,” Merlin says.

“And you’ve been here all this time?” Arthur asks hoarsely.

Merlin chuckles. “Well, you did say you might need me 24/7 when I took this job, so I reckoned that staying here with you was in my job description.”

Of course. Arthur swallows down the lump of disappointment. Merlin’s being efficient. Doing what he thinks was expected of him. Why else would he have stayed? He’s got a girlfriend to go to after all. Arthur drags himself back into reality. A reality he has to face. Which brings him right back to a few things he needs to say.

“I think I owe you an apology,” Arthur starts, but Merlin interrupts him immediately.

“It’s me who’s sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed you the way I did.”

“No wonder the prat I was. My behaviour was inexcusable.”

“I shouldn’t have reacted to it.”

“Anyone would.”

“But I know you well enough not to.”

“This one’s on me, Merlin. Let’s leave it at that.” Arthur finishes before he asks the question he
probably would have asked first if apologizing to Merlin hadn’t been his priority.

“What happened after you left my office?”

Merlin explains it in a few sentences and ends with, “… and the doctor was here this morning and advised us to let you sleep as long as you want.”

Arthur clenches his teeth so hard his jaws are hurting. So he collapsed. Edwin had warned him ages ago that this might happen. Which indicates his condition is getting worse. Blank out like he did is definitely not a good sign. Sounds very much like the beginning of the end. And suddenly Arthur’s frustration, anger and hurt that his life has been blighted by this damn ‘illness’ overwhelms him. He’s had enough of all this shit. More than enough. He just wants to be ‘normal’.

Arthur doesn’t realize his eyes have misted over, and that his Adam’s apple is bobbing up and down with the effort of keeping a lid on his despair. He can feel Merlin’s eyes on him before he confirms it with a quick glance aside. It’s a shock to find Merlin inches away from him, right in his personal space, looking at him with so much compassion and so much kindness it’s twisting his insides into thousands of tiny knots.

This is the last thing Arthur can face at this moment. He’s wanted Merlin so badly for so many weeks, he’s denied himself with such ferocity for so long, he can’t bear the unexpected proximity. It brings home that he will always be the one outside looking in, and that he’ll never have this man. He can’t for so many reasons it’s making his head dizzy.

“Hey.” Merlin stretches out his arm and gives Arthur’s shoulder a friendly squeeze, making him shiver from the tingle running through his body.

“Please, don’t.” Arthur almost begs and moves back with supernatural willpower to get to a safe distance, away from the warmth he craves, away from those arms he’s desperate to feel around him, away from the smile that’s brightening his day.

“Why not?” Instead of listening, Merlin makes up the distance, leaving virtually no space between them, and Arthur is oh so aware that their bodies are almost touching. God, Merlin’s so close, so close the heat of his body and the delicious smell of his skin are making him woozy.

And suddenly an explosion of desperation erupts inside Arthur, and he buckles under the intensity of it. All this, his life curtailed by his illness, stealing away his vigour bit by bit over the years, his love that will remain unrequited, the irony that someone who should lead a privileged life of happiness could be so bloody, bloody miserable, is suddenly more than he can cope with.

And he tries, God, he tries to stop falling into that big black hole that’s gaping underneath him, but he can’t control his emotions any longer. His vision blurs with unshed tears and his body starts trembling so hard he needs to hold on to the wall not to fall over, and fuck, he hates the feeling of helplessness consuming him and he hates even more that he finds himself sobbing quietly, unable to suppress his weakness.

“Hey, hey.” He can hear Merlin’s soft voice, trying to sooth him from somewhere, and Arthur’s overwhelmed by want and need.

“Come here,” Merlin whispers into his ear, and then Arthur is suddenly wrapped in Merlin’s arms and it’s like an anchor keeping him afloat during a bad storm. God, he feels so much at home, so right where he is, he lets all his tension go and loses control completely. Arthur can’t remember ever crying like this, and certainly not in somebody’s arms. He buries his head in the nook of Merlin’s shoulder, and all the pain and anguish he’s kept inside him for so many years break free. And he
clings on to the man he loves as if he was a rock keeping him from drowning in the dark waters of desolation.

Eventually his sobbing subsides, and he becomes aware that Merlin’s holding him tight, so tight, he can feel every muscle of his body against his own. One of Merlin’s hands rubs steadying circles on his lower back while the other one runs gently through his hair. This feels so good, so amazing, so right.

A wave of heat and a shudder of desire flash through Arthur’s body like wildfire. His body leans even more into Merlin like on auto pilot, and he’s startled to feel Merlin responding the same way. Confused, he pulls back to see, to understand what’s happening, when the wild rumbling of his empty stomach interrupts him in the worst of timings and lands him with a thudding crash back in reality.

Apparently Merlin’s heard it, too, because he lets Arthur go and looks at him with an understanding smile in his gorgeous eyes.

“Think your body is trying to tell you something!”

“I’m starving,” Arthur voice crackles, and, drained from his emotional outburst, he’s glad to concentrate on something as simple as that.

“I’ve got some food waiting for you. You want to freshen up before you eat?” Merlin’s suddenly all mothering, and Arthur’s insides melt into puddles.

Arthur becomes painfully aware in an instant that he is in a state of total disgrace: his hair is messed up and sticking into all directions, the scruff on his chin is plentiful, not to talk about the musky smell of his body, no doubt a result of too much sweating and lying in bed for too long.

“I’ll have a quick shower,” he says, before his embarrassment becomes too obvious and disappears into the bathroom double quick.

Ten minutes and a wonderfully hot, refreshing shower later Arthur throws on some casual clothes and follows the smell of food that leads him into the kitchen. Merlin is busy at the microwave, reheating something.

“It’s lasagne. I hope you like it,” he says without turning round, his fingers tapping the door of the microwave restlessly.

“Sounds great!” Arthur’s so ravenous he would eat anything at this stage and lasagne sounds heavenly. But this is not all he is hungry for and his heart is thumping when he thinks of Merlin’s hug earlier. That had been way more than a friendly embrace!

“Want a glass of wine with that?” Merlin points at the open bottle of red on the kitchen worktop.

“Thanks and I’ll have some water, too.” Arthur throws a furtive glance at Merlin, trying to figure out what he might think or feel, but he isn’t giving anything away. But then does he really want to know? He simply couldn’t bear to be disappointed yet again. However, there can be no doubt there’s tension between them, he can sense it clearly, but he’s not sure if he interprets its cause correctly.

When the food is ready Arthur decides to take his plate to the sofa to eat, while Merlin brings the drinks and settles next to him, keeping him company and filling Arthur in on other things that have happened while he’s been conked out.

“Oh, and your father came in by to make sure you were okay,” Merlin says. “And Aiden phoned
when you didn’t turn up for your date last night.” Does Merlin’s voice sound strained? Arthur looks up, but Merlin’s facing away from him when he continues, so he can’t draw any firm conclusions. “I told him you would contact him as soon as you’re up and about again.”

“Great. Merlin. Thanks,” Arthur says, quivering on the inside for some untold reason. He takes another bite of lasagne and sighs in appreciation. Once he’s finished he can’t stand the pressure any longer. He has to know, has to find out what this thing between him and Merlin is.

“You don’t need to stay any longer now, Merlin,” he says quietly, putting as much conviction into his voice as he can possibly muster. “I really appreciate your help, but I wouldn’t like to impose on you further. I’m sure you have better places to be.”

Merlin’s clearly taken aback, and his mouth goes straight and tight for a moment. “If that’s what you want,” he says almost gruffly and gets up with the intention to leave. “You’re the boss here.” It sounds abrupt and hurt, and the tiny tremble in Merlin’s voice makes Arthur’s stomach lurch.

“No, it isn’t,” Arthur stammers quickly, heat spreading over his face and neck rapidly. When Merlin turns round, their eyes lock, and Arthur whispers barely audible. “Stay… Please.”

Merlin’s gaze is burning into Arthur’s soul like fire, and it takes his breath away. But there’s something else there. Something that Arthur would have never dared to hope for, and as his heart starts pounding faster, time slows down and all Arthur can focus on is Merlin who’s moving towards him as if pulled by a magnet. Arthur gets up and takes a couple of unsure steps towards him.

And then they’re suddenly just centimetres apart and, before Arthur can think any further or analyse it in his mind, Merlin leans in, brackets Arthur’s head between his hands and, without breaking their glance once, places a gentle, conscious kiss on his mouth.

Despite the tingle racing through his body, Arthur’s mind is too stunned to react. Merlin’s just kissed him. Arthur runs his tongue over his lips in shocked disbelief. Merlin has kissed him. Merlin who’s looking at him with increasing worry because Arthur’s too awestruck to think or to act.

“Arthur,” Merlin mumbles and feathers his right thumb over Arthur’s cheek. The shiver that follows rips Arthur’s out of his consternation, and then recognition strikes.

Arthur lets out a choked moan, cups Merlin’s face and presses his lips on Merlin’s almost reverently. The kiss is soft and chaste and heart-stoppingly delicious, and Arthur pours all his love into it. God, these lips taste even better than he imagined in his wildest dreams, and they move over his, searching, probing and willing to open when Arthur starts licking into Merlin’s mouth.

Merlin whimpers, a stifled groan vibrating in his chest, and that’s what drives Arthur over the edge. With an almost feral growl he lunges at Merlin, crowding him against the wall, and kisses him as if there was no tomorrow. Tongues entwine in a passionate dance, and their bodies grind against each other in an attempt to get as close to the other as possible. Arthur’s sure that fireworks are going off somewhere around him, and he is utterly blinded by them.

Just one thought, one earth-shattering thought is even brighter than that: Merlin wants me. He wants me, too.
Time has turned into an undistinguishable blur, and Merlin has no idea how long they have been standing there, pressed tightly against each other, totally lost in exploring each other, both holding on to the other for support as hands tug at hair and lips crush together so hard it’s bound to leave bruising.

Merlin can hardly believe that all this is real. When Gwaine had hinted at … well … that Arthur might like him, he’d been stunned and thrown into a completely different purgatory. He’d had a whole day to think about it while Arthur was sleeping, arguing for and against his feelings, debating the issue from every possible angle and agonizing what to do.

In the end, it was easy. When Arthur stood before him, agitated and distraught, unable to swallow down his bitter tears any longer, he’d allowed Merlin to see him at his most vulnerable, and he’d been unable to hide his conflicted emotions for Merlin any longer.

At that moment, they ceased to be whoever they were by status or birth, they’d just been Arthur and Merlin, nothing more and nothing less, and all of Merlin’s doubts, his guilt and inhibitions had melted away, leaving only his love and want for Arthur to see.

And now Arthur’s lips, demanding and claiming for one second, sweet and gentle the next, are driving him crazy, and he responds in kind, kissing him back, desperate and messy as if his life depended on it. When they break apart reluctantly, gasping for air, Arthur searches Merlin’s eyes, his pupils blown open wide.

“This is impossible. You’re … straight,” he says, eyes full of uncertainty and bewilderment, still unsure whether to trust what their kiss expressed so vividly. “But you and Sefa …?”

“We’re friends.”

“I don’t understand. Friends don’t kiss like the two of you did,” Arthur insists hoarsely.

“What you saw was a good bye to what might have been,” Merlin says.

“Might have been?” Arthur asks tentatively, “So you never were … a couple?”

Merlin quietly shakes his head. “I got waylaid before it came to that.”

“By what?”

“Rather by whom,” Merlin mumbles affectionately and Arthur’s eyes widen in understanding.

“God, Merlin,” Arthur says, shaking his head dumbfounded. “I can’t believe it…” and then he simply brackets Merlin’s face with his hands and lets his lips do the talking. The kiss is brimming with so much affection that Merlin struggles not to cave under it.

His heart wells over like a rain barrel in a heavy thunderstorm, and, choked by the sincerity in Arthur’s voice and the tenderness of his touch, he quips, half serious, half joking, “So you like me, then?”

“Idiot,” Arthur mumbles under his breath.

“Prat,” Merlin chuckles throatily and playfully brushes his lips against Arthur’s, nipping teasingly at
the firm bottom lip. Arthur gasps at the fleeting contact and impatiently pulls Merlin’s head closer, peppering his neck with hot little kisses. Arthur’s body-shudder shakes Merlin right to the core, and the heat between them, the urgent need, the craving for more is making his head dizzy.

Arthur groans in frustration when Merlin pulls away to gape at him, and, God, the man in his arms is a sight to behold. Arthur’s eyes are closed, his face tilted backwards in complete bliss, and his lips are red and kiss-bruised.

“You’re gorgeous,” Merlin whispers, and Arthur’s lips hitch into a smile.

“You’re not bad yourself,” he teases quietly and runs his index finger appreciatively over Merlin’s cheekbone. Merlin leans into the hand and lets out a contented moan. When Arthur pulls him into a full body hug, Merlin’s blood starts racing.

“Arthur.” Merlin wants to let himself fall into the abyss of feelings that have developed between them, but to his annoyance a thought, a question, pulls the brakes on just then. He knows he has to ask before he goes any further. He knows he has to get this sorted before he commits himself.

“And Aiden?” he asks.

Arthur draws a deep breath and a wave of guilt crosses his face, then his eyes grow distant for a second. “Aiden,” he says eventually, and looks openly at Merlin, ”Aiden isn’t you. He never was and never will be. It’s always been you, right from the first day we met.”

“You hated my guts!” Merlin says, full of surprise.

Arthur chuckles. “My brain did, but my heart …” He breaks the sentence off, blushing violently and bites his lips in embarrassment, as if he thinks that he’s said too much, but Merlin gets it anyway. His heart does a huge somersault backwards, followed swiftly by a triple Lutz, and something gloriously warm starts spreading inside him.

“You’re sure about this?” Arthur asks, nodding between the two of them. Merlin nearly laughs at the question because there’s nothing he’s ever wanted more, but it is endearingly sweet and honest, and he answers earnestly.

“Very sure.” Merlin whispers as he bends forward to place a tender kiss on the corner of Arthur’s mouth. He flicks his tongue along his upper lip and is immediately rewarded by a guttural groan. A split second later Arthur dives in for another deep, stomach-flipping kiss. Their bodies melt together, hot and wanting and just when Merlin thinks this can’t get any better, Arthur wedges his thigh between Merlin’s legs, squeezing against his straining arousal. Merlin knees almost fail him and he’s near to losing it completely.

Suddenly their movements become more urgent and needy. Hands start tugging at T-shirts, grappling with shorts, pushing and pulling, satisfied momentarily when all their clothes bar their briefs and Merlin’s shoulder bandage lie scattered around them.

Merlin can’t help staring at Arthur’s beautifully toned body. No need to touch that up for a picture in the papers. Suddenly, out of nowhere, he feels painfully inadequate. Arthur’s not only incredibly handsome, he’s also sexually way more experienced than him. What if I’m going to disappoint him? Without thinking Merlin shyly pulls one arm across his chest. He feels Arthur’s assessing eyes and nervously avoids his gaze.

“You can’t be serious,” Arthur whispers hoarsely, evidently reading Merlin’s body language correctly. He puts a finger under Merlin’s chin to lift his face. “You’re simply stunning. In every

“Arthur.” Merlin’s voice is barely audible as the one word comes out in a choked moan, and then their hands are everywhere, touching, skimming, rubbing and stroking every part of naked skin they can reach. Arthur’s erection is pressed firmly against his and he lets out a throaty moan when Merlin palms it with a little squeeze.

“Bed,” they say it almost simultaneously and share a grin over it. Without letting go of each other they stumble through the corridor into the bedroom, still kissing and groping, and finally dragging each other down on to the huge bed with a big thump.

The cool silky linen underneath them slows their touches, makes them more conscious, more deliberate and, for a moment, like the stillness before the storm, they calm, just holding each other.

“Oh!” Merlin half sits up in a sudden movement, and Arthur’s eyes are instantly clouding with worry. “Should you be really doing this? The doctor … you’re not supposed to …”

“Try and stop me,” Arthur says with a low growl and cuts him off unceremoniously with a kiss. A few breath-taking moments later he disentangles himself from Merlin’s arms and slips his fingers under the hem of Merlin’s briefs to pull them off slowly. Merlin exhales a pleasured groan, more than ready, more than desperate for Arthur’s touch. Arthur’s fingers are teasing him in all the right places, touching him endlessly and exploring every nook and cranny of his body.

Merlin aches with desire inside and out. “I want to see you,” he whispers fervently, and Arthur leans back, his arms over his head, offering himself in surrender with a sweltering look. With a pounding heart Merlin decides to give Arthur as good as he got and gently runs his finger over the inside of his legs, the soft curves of his hips, the taut muscles on his chest, the soft curls around his nipples, and he strokes and licks until Arthur buckles under his hands.

“Youre trying to kill me?” Arthur mumbles impatiently. “Get on with it.”

Merlin laughs softly, incredibly pleased that he is the one who has that effect on Arthur, and that it’s his hands turning Arthur into a gooey mess. And then, in one swift move, he gets rid of the single piece of cloth still parting them.

Before he knows it Arthur flips him over and straddles him, pinning him down with his hands above his head. “Getting my own back,” he grins and a second later their mouths collide in a rough kiss that turns messy, then indulgent and so filthy they both pant breathlessly when they let go, lips raw and aching, sweat on their forehead and both painfully hard for each other.

Merlin, impatient for more friction, pulls Arthur down against him. Their hips start bucking against each other almost out of their own accord, while tongues get busy and fingers imaginative.

When Arthur’s hand slides between them and wraps it around both of them, Merlin cries out, pushing into the tight grip and his whole world reducing to that feeling, that moment in time. As their cocks brush together effortlessly, slick and hot, Arthur sets a rhythm, first in steady strokes, but then increasingly more ragged and desperate and needy, until Merlin can’t hold on any longer.

His magic is rippling under his skin and it swirls round as if it was urging him on. It reaches out to Arthur, tries to cocoon him and draw him close and closer. Merlin is near combustion and when

way.” The compliment sends a wave of heat over Merlin’s body and his skin takes on a hue of pink. And then their eyes lock and Merlin’s mouth goes dry, passion tightening his throat. When he finds the intense desire wrecking his insides reflected back just the same, his heart takes a giant leap.

The compliment sends a wave of heat over Merlin’s body and his skin takes on a hue of pink. And then their eyes lock and Merlin’s mouth goes dry, passion tightening his throat. When he finds the intense desire wrecking his insides reflected back just the same, his heart takes a giant leap.
Arthur twists his hand one more time, he comes undone with a choked cry, nearly breaking apart. While he rides out wave after wave of utter bliss, his body is shattered by a buzzing flash, a tingle so strong, he almost blanks out.

The vision hits him fully out of nowhere, and he knows Arthur can feel it too, because his whole body shudders and vibrates for an instant, and then, pushed over by the fierce sensation, he comes, warm and wet and very vocal. And it’s as if something clicks between them, a bond, a connection, a link, and for that moment the dark veil lifts and Merlin can see, sees what’s underneath it, and the revelation is about as heart-stopping as his release.

Arthur flops on top of Merlin, shaking, completely drained and incapable of moving even the slightest inch.

“Fuck, Merlin,” he mumbles incoherently. “What the heck was that?”

Merlin hears his question, but it doesn’t really reach him. Thunderstruck by his discovery and utterly spaced out by the dazzling afterglow his brain resembles a gaping vacuum. He takes a couple of deep breaths and stares into space with void eyes, until Arthur pushes himself off him to search Merlin’s face.

“Hey. You alright?” he asks, looking concerned, and when Merlin nods, he repeats his question. “What the heck was that?”

“As far as I know they call it sex?” Of course Merlin knows what Arthur’s referring to, but sarcasm seems a good way to avoid the subject, as least as long as he needs to get his little grey cells online again.

“Ohh. Cheeky?” Arthur’s lips are twitching. “Sounds like I need to teach you some manners!”

“You? Teach manners to me! Now that’s a laugh.”

“Rude again, just proving my point,” Arthur grumbles with a fond smile.

“Arrogant bastard,” Merlin says and buries his face in Arthur’s hair, laughing under his breath.

“See! There you go! You give me no respect!”

“So what are you going to do about it?” Merlin asks, his eyebrows raised and challenge in his voice.

“You’re grounded with me day and night, so I can enlighten you.”

“Not sure I deserve to be landed with …” But before Merlin can finish, Arthur’s mouth is on him one more time, tender and gentle and loving, and neither lets go until the need to breathe gets the better of them.

“Ass,” Merlin mumbles softly, “Is that all you got?”

Arthur nips his ear instead of answering.

“Ouch, you bully! That’s physical abuse!” Merlin rubs the sore spot and retaliates with a playful punch.

Arthur sighs in mock exasperation, his eyes soft and affectionate. “This looks like a long term-project.”

Merlin searches Arthur’s gaze and his expression says it all. He really means what I thought he
meant. God, I would love that. Merlin swallows the lump in his throat, and his eyes glaze over. I would love to be with him. I would. But … The BUT is huge, capitalized and printed in bold, and Merlin angrily pushes the unwelcome thought away with fervour. No, he doesn’t want this moment spoiled. He needs to have a little bit of this, just for a short while.

“Sounds like a threat.” Merlin barely manages the tease. Torn between what his heart wants and what reality tells him to be true, he’s unable to disguise his anguish. Suddenly Arthur goes very still, and stiffens in all the wrong places.

“I … Of course … I didn’t mean to make assumptions. I …,” Arthur stammers, uncertain and rattled, clearly misinterpreting Merlin’s reaction.

“Arthur. Look at me,” Merlin says, and when Arthur does, he beams at him, putting all his feelings on his sleeve. “Nothing, nothing at all, would make me happier, right?”

Merlin hears the sigh of relief that escapes Arthur and feels his body relax against his own. And for a few minutes they just lie there motionless, ignoring the stickiness between their bodies, but fully aware of their hearts beating and their breathing falling into a mutual rhythm.

“You’re feeling it, too, aren’t you? The tingle,” Arthur eventually asks, and Merlin inwardly swears at Arthur’s persistence. He knows that this time he has no choice but to answer.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s been there from the first time we touched.”

“And any idea what it is? I’ve never experienced this before with anyone else.”

Merlin’s heart drops. The vision earlier has given him a major clue what the cause of the tingle could be. But there’s no way he could confront Arthur with that just now. It’s not only too early because he has to make hundred percent sure he’s right before he tells Arthur, but he also knows when he does, it will become blatantly clear who and what he is. And that would end everything that’s just started blossoming between them.

And Merlin refuses to put the happiness that soars inside him on the line so soon, because even if he accepts that the time they have together is most likely limited, he wants to make it last as long as he can. I can’t give him up already. I’ve hardly found him, he sobs inside his head.

Which for the moment leaves him with no other option than tell another lie, and he answers as light hearted as he possibly can. “Not a scoobie.”

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Edwin is walking towards the wooden cabin he knows like the back of his hand, and a plethora of memories comes flooding back. Damn! How often had they come here to relax and make plans! Nimueh, Uther and him. It seems so long ago. It IS long ago, he decides. It lies well in the past and goes back to those days when he was still unsure about himself, about what he could do, about his goals in life.

But now, everything he’s worked for is coming together steadily. He can feel it under his skin and it feels bloody good. Edwin grins, a smug smile on his face. The last few months have been very productive, indeed, and he’s incredibly pleased the way things are going. The meeting with his right hand man has been overdue for at least two weeks, but he thought it wise to be extra cautious after
the attack went wrong.

Edwin opens the front door and the familiar smell of wood, dust and stale air greet him. And HER picture above the sideboard in the hall. He put it there after her death, and, as usual, he tenderly thumbs over her face. Hello, gorgeous. Edwin whispers in his mind, sure that somewhere between heaven and earth, she’ll be able to hear him. We’ll soon have our revenge. Just as I promised you.

Nimueh. So beautiful. So bright. So powerful. Edwin stares at her delicate features framed by gorgeous, black locks curling sumptuously over her shoulder. She should have been his, but she’d chosen Uther instead. Handsome, charismatic, oozing self-confidence and definitely on the way up, women had been drawn to him like flies in those early days. Nimueh had been no exception. Even when Uther fell for Ygraine and married her after only a month of courtship, she didn’t give up on him.

It was Edwin who picked up the pieces, comforted her and held her hand when she was heartbroken. And yet, she never saw more than a friend in him and an accomplice in the big scheme the three of them had dreamt up to gain the ultimate power over Camelot and Albion.

Then Ygraine’s accident happened. Edwin chuckles derisively. That’s what Uther called it, anyway. Nimueh still wanted him, even after that, even after she knew what he’d done. And with Ygraine out of the equation and Uther crazy with hurt and guilt, Nimueh went for what she wanted, the only way she knew she could. And she had Uther for almost three years, until he found out.

Her betrayal fuelled Uther’s hatred of magic even more, if that was actually possible, and in his outrage, he declared her a criminal, got her tried and convicted. Of course Edwin had tried to fight her sentence, had argued and begged with Uther to spare her from the Serum, to banish her instead for the sake of their child, but Uther was not for turning. Before Edwin could work out a plan to save the woman he loved, Uther had her injected behind his back.

She died in his arms, here in the cabin. “Avenge me!” she’d whispered with her last breath. “Get my baby to safety. Protect her from her father.” And he’d promised to do as she asked. Edwin clenches his jaws at the hurt that has been gnawing at him for over two decades. Even after all these years the pain is there, the anguish still as fresh as the day she died.

Edwin walks up to the patio doors, opens them wide to let the warm summer air rush into the room and takes a deep breath. Today is the day, gorgeous. Today I’ll get the ball rolling that’s going to crush the Pendragon government. It seems fitting the decision will be made here, where Nimueh’s life slipped away.

Ahhh, the gratification to see Uther suffer when he realizes his power is slipping away just the same! The satisfaction to witness his pain when HE loses the person he loves most. This is a momentous day, indeed!

Edwin settles on the sofa, leans back and closes his eyes. He has a few minutes to relax before the man who’s been instrumental in putting his plans into action arrives, and he takes time to bask in his achievements. I’ve got all of them in the palm of my hand. And they have no idea what’s going to hit them.

Edwin’s lips twitch into a smug smile and excitement stirs in his heart. He loves the irony that Uther’s downfall is going to be caused by the exactly the same thing that got him to power – the fear of magic.

The press have recently started taking note that Camelot is not as safe as it used to be. Well, it’s not so much they took note, but that Edwin had an informer ‘leak’ some information.
Malicious attack on The Governor!

MU attacker gets away!

Security at Lamia House compromised Again!

Three killed by MUs in bank robbery!

And this is only the beginning. The beginning of the end for Uther. There are going to be many more of those in the coming few months. Anything to destabilize the city, to unsettle the citizens, to make them worry about their security is one step further to his end game.

Edwin grins. He’s particularly looking forward to the next headline that’s going to hit the city. The one he’s about to organize later on. It’s going to be a big one. One that’s going to rattle the people of Camelot so deeply they will sit up and take note that Uther Pendragon isn’t their ultimate protector anymore.

It won’t be long before he completes his research and of course then …. A light knock at the door interrupts his thoughts.

“Come in!” Edwin shouts and gets up to meet the man he’s shared all his ambitions with. “Alvarr! It’s been too long.”

The two men shake hands and get straight down to business.

“You still got a tab on your little group of rebels?” Edwin draws out the last word condescendingly.

Alvarr laughs out loud. “Absolutely. Keeping them in the dark. They’ve no idea what they’re really doing.”

Edwin gives Alvarr an appreciative clap on the shoulder. “Good man.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get Merlin,” Alvarr blurts out, looking distraught. “He must have sensed me before I could aim properly, and he moved like lightning.”

“I assume he used magic to defend himself?”

“He did, and there was nothing I could do once he cast his spells,” Alvarr says, and then his head sinks onto his chest. “I’ve failed you, Edwin. Merlin should be dead by now, and it’s my fault he’s still round Arthur.”

Edwin puts a hand on his friend’s arm. “I’m grateful you didn’t.”

Alvarr looks at Edwin in surprise. “But you wanted him out of the way because you were worried he might interfere with our plans?”

“I did because I thought he might find out to what was going on.” Edwin chuckles mockingly. “Powerful or not. He certainly hasn’t got a clue. He trails after Arthur like a sheep and when he tried to use magic in my office, he couldn’t figure out why it didn’t work.”

Edwin’s eyes light up with schadenfreude. “I’ve found a much better purpose for Merlin!”

Alvarr raises his eyebrows in anticipation as Edwin continues.
“Imagine, if the public finds out that a sorcerer, and - if what you heard from Morgana is correct - a powerful one at that, has been able to infiltrate the Ministry of Justice? If they hear he’s managed to get really close to the one man who’s in charge of the security of Camelot? How would THAT reflect on a government that prides itself in protecting its citizens from magic?” Edwin’s voice is singing with elation.

“Imagine, if the good people of Camelot find out that this sorcerer is also responsible for all the magic attacks that they have been suffering from for so many months! How will they react when they see that sorcery’s been able to operate right under Uther’s nose, and he has done NOTHING about it?”

Alvarr’s smile is rapidly turning into a broad grin. “You’re planning to frame Merlin for all our work?”

“He’s going to be the scapegoat for everything MUs have ever done to the population of Camelot and become the symbol for Uther’s weakness, for his incapability to keep the city and the country safe from the ‘ever present danger of magic’!”

“And…” Edwin’s cheeks are heating with excitement. “…Merlin will be also be found guilty of the most daring crime a sorcerer has ever committed.”

“What’s that?” Alvarr’s completely enthralled.

“That’s what we are here to discuss today.”

Merlin’s been awake for a half an hour, and he’s spent the time idly watching Arthur sleep. He does deserve a lie-in, not only because it’s Sunday, but also because he was troubled with another nightmare in the small hours of the morning. Unable to fall asleep again, he’d been restless and twitchy, until Merlin prescribed him a relaxation remedy of his own, by wrapping himself round him and distracting him in a more pleasant way.

Arthur’s nightmares – Yes, they do fit into the conspiracy theory Merlin’s slowly put together over the last three days. He has high hopes that he’ll find out whether his idea is right when he meets Gaius later. And if it’s true what he suspects, if this is really true, … Fuck. Merlin has no idea what it would mean. One thing’s for sure though, it would open a sack full of very unpleasant questions. To say the least.

Arthur stirs, instinctively moving closer to Merlin and settles only when his body’s flush against his and their legs are entwined. He puffs out a rush of air and wraps his arm round Merlin who catches himself with a smile on his lips as he cuddles into Arthur’s solid warmth. Merlin closes his eyes in content and revels in the moment.

It’s been three days, and they’ve spent most of that time together. Admittedly quite a large percentage of it has gone on the exploration of their bodies. Not that Merlin is complaining or anything. He’s unable to express in words what he feels when he’s with Arthur, when he falls apart under his hands and their breaths mingle at the height of their passion. All he knows is that he doesn’t want this to end, that he wants to suspend time and make that ridiculously giddy feeling inside him last forever.

They’ve also spent quite a few hours getting to know each other better. And Merlin has been truthful
with most of it, recounting funny stories from his youth, confessing little weaknesses (like his hates of dirty dishes cluttering the kitchen, not to speak of his collection of unusual pants) and sharing his general views on the important things in life.

And yet, the knowledge he has to conceal so much about himself, that he can’t share anything to do with his family hurts. In fact, it makes him feel like shit. And the more time he’s spent with Arthur, the heavier the burden on his conscience has been. This charade has to stop. *I have to tell him the truth, particularly if what I’ve seen in the vision is true.*

“Hey, you awake?” Arthur mumbles as he turns around in his arms to gaze at him sleepily.

“For ages,” Merlin says and kisses the tip of Arthur’s nose. “Just waited for you lazy git to wake up.”

“Rude again,” Arthur mumbles drowsily and finds Merlin’s lips as sure as a guided missile. “Hmm,” he relaxes into the kiss with enthusiasm, and seconds later Merlin feels Arthur’s body come alive.

“Rising quickly to a challenge, I see,” he teases and bucking his hips against Arthur’s.

“Thought I tired you out last night.” Arthur’s definitely more compos mentis now.

“Don’t think you’ve got what it takes.”

“Insolent little …,” Arthur groans, but seems to lose the will to complete his sentence, when Merlin’s hand easily finds what it’s been looking for.

“Prove it,” Merlin whispers and sucks on the soft hollow over Arthur’s collarbones, slowly licking his way down his chest, eliciting moan after moan out of Arthur’s mouth. When he flicks his tongue at Arthur nipples and grazes over them with his teeth, Arthur arches into him impatiently.

“Just you wait,” are his last coherent words before he makes sure Merlin knows he’s a man of his word.

Half an hour later they’re sitting on the sofa, freshly showered and indulging in coffee and croissants.

“Do you really need to go out today?” Arthur asks casually.

“You realize this is the third time you’ve mentioned this?” Merlin sighs and throws Arthur a sideway glance. If speaking to Gaius wasn’t so urgent, he would happily throw the meeting, but so much depends on their conversation, he really has to see him. “And yes, I’ve got to go.”

Arthur pouts and leans back into the sofa. “So you leave me here all alone…”

“For a couple of hours. I’m sure you’ll manage.” Merlin grins, tinkled pink at Arthur’s persistence.


“You know those rectangular things that have got thin sheets of paper inside them? Words on every page?” The cushion hits Merlin like a lightning, and Arthur lurches on top of him shortly after, tickling and teasing wherever he gets a hold of.

“That’ll teach you,” Arthur mumbles and ruffles Merlin’s hair affectionately.

“Definitely a book about manners.” Merlin’s in stitches now, not only because he’s extremely ticklish, but because there’s nothing better than winding Arthur up. As Arthur hasn’t given up his torture, Merlin’s writhing underneath him, trying to get away, until Arthur suddenly stills, a heartfelt
sigh erupting from his chest.

“You’re incredible.” Arthur’s voice is very quiet, and yet, the emotion swinging in the words is unmistakable, and Merlin swallows hard. He knows he’s fallen for Arthur big time. He’s utterly and totally gone, to be exact. There’s no point denying it. He loved Freya, and she will always hold a special place in his heart, but this? This is like connecting on every single level of his being, and when they are together every fibre of his body and mind is vibrating and humming in content. Being with Arthur makes him feel whole and right, and it’s all he could ever wish for. But can he really wish for it?

Merlin knows he can’t vocalize his feelings at this moment. Not when there’s so much uncertainty between them, so instead of saying anything, he pulls Arthur into a warm kiss, hoping that all the love inside him transcends into it and that Arthur understands what his lips are trying to tell him.

“I need to go,” he whispers into Arthur’s ear eventually, and soon after he is on his way to meet Gaius.

The café they have chosen is in a quiet street in the suburbs of Camelot, and as it happens they both arrive at the same time.

“My dear boy.” Gaius opens his arms and hugs him heartily. “I’m so glad to see you. Your mother sends her love.”

Regret washes over Merlin. Gilli and Will have been contacting Hunith regularly to let her know he was okay, but maybe he should have contacted her himself, calmed her nerves, and …

“No, Merlin. Don’t think about it.” As usual Gaius is an expert on reading Merlin’s mind. “She knows it’s too risky for you to contact her in whatever way.”

Merlin nods and they settle at the table furthest in the back of the room.

“Has mum been allowed any visits at Lamia House?” Merlin deliberately chooses not to mention Balinor’s name. Not only for safety’s sake but also because he can’t without having an emotional outburst.

Gaius shakes his head. “According to the sentence she should have been, but she’s been told he’s lost his right to receive visitors because he violated some of the prison rules.”

Merlin pales and just like that, within mere seconds, he’s dumped back crudely into reality. It’s not that he’s forgotten his father’s plight. On the contrary. It’s always at the back of his mind, and he’s been desperately frustrated that his mission has slowed to almost a halt. He knows Arthur spoke to Leon and Percival about what happened in Lamia House when he was off work, but Arthur never mentioned any of it, and then, before he could figure out what they’d discussed, Arthur whisked him off his feet. And he’s blown your brain so thoroughly you’ve put everything else on hold. A little devil whispers cruelly inside his head.

In a way he’s glad Hunith hasn’t seen his father’s awful state. He knows it would have utterly destroyed her. Merlin’s throat tightens, but this isn’t the time for wallowing in anguish. He needs to tell Gaius everything that’s happened since he last contacted his friends. Well, maybe not quite everything.

“So Balinor was in bad shape?” Gaius is clearly upset.

Merlin only nods and adds quietly, ”And that was almost four weeks ago.”
“You haven’t heard anything since?”

“No, I’d hoped to go back, but the opportunity never arose.” Merlin stares into space, wondering for a fleeting moment if this is the end, but then lifts his head to look straight at Gaius. "Have Will and Gilli got any further?"

The old doctor shakes his head. “Afraid not. It seems some very powerful magic is guarding Edwin’s office.”


“He must use some kind of concealment spell,” Gaius says. “Dark magic offers many ways to hide your identity.”

“I felt uneasy in his company right from the start.” Merlin nods his head. “He gave me the creeps when he shook my hand.”

“Quite a natural reaction to dark magic,” Gaius explains.

“Did you ever meet Edwin, way back when you were friendly with Uther?”

“I’d heard about him through the grapevine, but our paths never really crossed. I had no idea he had magic, not even then.” Gaius is as flabbergasted as Merlin.

“But if Edwin’s a sorcerer he surely must know that I have magic, too?”

“It would be strange if he didn’t. Even the most ungifted MU couldn’t miss the power you emanate.”

Merlin tries to follow the thought through, but ends up nowhere. Why would Uther have someone with dark magic working for him? And if Edwin knows about him, why didn’t he reveal his secret? Isn’t that what a loyal employee and friend would do? What reason for Edwin’s silence could there be? Merlin brushes the thoughts aside to concentrate on the essentials. “So that means the only way to get the formula is to go there physically and retrieve it.”

Gaius throws Merlin a worried look. “This is more than dangerous, Merlin. I’m sure Hunith wouldn’t want you to risk your life like that. She has enough on her plate as it is.”

“I can’t see any other solution to this.” Merlin has more or less made up his mind. He needs to meet Gilli and Will and think this through.

“I also brought you other news,” Gaius says and Merlin’s head snaps up.

“I researched the strange reaction between Arthur and you, and I managed to analyse the hypospray you sent me.”

Merlin bites his lip frantically and tries unsuccessfully to stop his fingers from twitching.

“I had to scour through a whole pile of ancient books for your first problem, but as they say - he who searches finds!” Gaius looks decidedly pleased with himself.

Merlin nervously taps his right foot on the ground, unaware he’s holding his breath when Gaius starts to explain his findings.
Perception

Percival is slowly tiring. He shouldn’t have left his Sunday jog that late. Darn. By now the sun has warmed the fresh morning air considerably, and heat has started to reflect off the roads and pavements. Percival’s glad that the last bit of his run leads through the leafy suburb he passes on the way home.

As usual he’s heading towards his wife’s favourite café to pick up some of the delicious vanilla pastries Karyn’s so fond of. Just as he turns into the small side street where the café’s tucked away, two men emerge from the nearby coffee house.

*Oh. That’s Merlin!* Percival immediately recognizes the tall, lanky shape before he can make out his face. What is he doing here? For nothing else but gut feeling, Percival stops, leaning against the shady wall of the house front and watches Merlin and his friend saying good-bye. Because that’s what they’re evidently doing.

*Hold on!* That’s Merlin’s former employer. Percival remembers checking him out a few days after Merlin started working at the Ministry. For a second he’s straining his brain and then the name comes back to him: Gaius Richardson. He’s sure that’s right.

*Seems that Merlin’s a lot more than merely a past employee,* Percival thinks, as he watches Gaius hugging Merlin tightly, leaving his hand on the younger man’s arm like a father while they talk. He did say that Gaius was a family friend. Percival has always had an uncanny way of retrieving facts he’s heard before which ultimately makes him good at what he does.

Although Percival is too far away to hear Merlin and Gaius, it’s apparent by their animated body language that they’re not just having a friendly conversation. Their faces are serious, even grave. There’s something about the whole scene, its setting and the people in it, that doesn’t sit right with Percival. Of course he could imagine multiple reasons why Merlin’s met up with the old man in a hidden away café on a Sunday. And yet, the intensity of their movements, the animated talk, their serious faces suggest there’s more to this meeting. Odd.

Percival is a man who’s cautious by nature, conscientious, precise and unforgiving in his research once he gets his teeth into a case. He remembers Arthur calling him off early when he was researching Merlin a few months ago, something he hadn’t been overly happy with at the time. It’s not that he doesn’t like Merlin. On the contrary. He could almost swear he’s a totally genuine guy. But...there’s something about him Percival can’t put his finger on. It’s the feeling that Merlin’s withholding something, that there’s more to him than meets the eye.

Percival takes a deep breath. Merlin and Gaius have parted now, and luckily Merlin is walking in the other direction, while Gaius is heading straight towards him. Percival quickly bends down, pretending to tie his laces until Gaius has passed, and then takes the split decision to follow the man. Not an easy job, considering his size and the slow pace of the old man. But Percival is patient and clever, and he’s trained for this sort of thing.

Twenty-five minutes later his perseverance is rewarded when Gaius stops outside a three-bedroomed house with a pretty front garden to ring the bell. A few moments later a middle aged woman opens the door and lets him in.

*Right, let’s see what we have here.* Percival walks past the house inconspicuously. He isn’t able to spot a name anywhere on the house, but he does take note of the address: It’s 25 Ascetir Drive and as far as he’s aware, this is the Ealdor Estate.
Now why does that ring a bell?

“Are you alright?” Arthur asks casually as he throws Merlin a sideway glance. Merlin has been oddly withdrawn since he’s returned from his meeting earlier.

“I’m fine.” Merlin gives him a half-smile. “Just tired.” And as if to prove his words he lets himself fall onto the sofa with a sigh.

Yeah. Right. Arthur may not be the most sensitive of souls at times, but even he can tell that something’s bothering Merlin. “You know you can talk to me,” he offers gingerly, and busies himself with tidying some glasses away. He would like Merlin to confide in him, to trust him with something that’s evidently close to his heart because, if he thinks about it, Merlin seems to know a lot more about him than the other way round.

Yes, they’ve shared a lot of personal information in the past few days, but at least twice Merlin clammed up unexpectedly when they were talking about their respective families, or just got quiet all of a sudden for no apparent reason. Arthur hadn’t paid a lot of attention to it at the time, but Merlin’s mystery meeting brought it all up again.

Instead of opening up Merlin’s gaze grows even more distant for a second and then settles on him with a pensive smile. “Thanks for offering. Sorry for being a nuisance,” he apologizes, but he still doesn’t divulge any further.

Arthur swallows hard, disappointment tugging at his heart for a moment. Doesn’t he trust me? Why is he so secretive?

“I can’t talk about this just now, Arthur,” Merlin says quietly, as if he’d read his mind, and then he’s suddenly next to him, touching his arm. The familiar tingle connects them immediately, and they look at each other and smile in recognition. “I will, when the time is right, okay?”

Merlin’s eyes are asking him to be patient, and how can Arthur deny him a wish as simple as that? Slightly guilty for jumping to conclusions too quickly, he embraces Merlin and draws him close. “I don’t like seeing you troubled,” he mumbles into Merlin’s hair, and side tracked by the delicious scent of Merlin’s sun-kissed skin, he can’t resist nuzzling into the nape of Merlin’s neck.

“Feeling better already,” Merlin murmurs, clinging on to him, as if he was going to disappear any second. As they stand there in silence, holding on to each other affectionately, their pulses beating in a steady rhythm and their body-heat mingling, Arthur is overwhelmed by the intensity of the feeling erupting inside him.

This is it. I don’t want this to end. He is all I want. It’s not as if he hasn’t known before that Merlin means more to him than any other man he’s let into his life, but the depths of his feelings by far exceed anything he thought he was capable of. We’re like two halves melting into a whole when we’re together, he thinks almost reverently and shudders, just to chuckle at himself an instant later. Good God! How cheesy was that!

“Are YOU alright?” Merlin asks teasingly in response to Arthur’s physical reaction.

“More than.” Arthur trails his fingertips over Merlin’s cheekbones and then searches his eyes.
“We’re good together, aren’t we?”

“We are.” Merlin leans his forehead against Arthur’s and although Merlin doesn’t say anything else, Arthur just knows that Merlin’s aware of the bond between them, too.

Arthur’s mobile rips them out of their hug. “Oh. It’s time for my medication. I set an alarm to remind me because I’ve been too distracted to remember recently,” he says with a broad grin and gets a bottle of hypospray out of the chic sideboard.

Merlin watches him with a frown when he pushes the button to release the medicine into his bloodstream. “Why do you have to take it?”

The question hurts, Arthur can’t help it. It’s something he’s wanted to know for so many years, and nobody’s ever given him a satisfactory answer. It also reminds him how weak he’s been recently, not to mention his collapse. Merlin deserves to know the truth. He can’t expect him to go into this blindfolded, and so he tells him every little detail of the whole sordid story.

Merlin says nothing when Arthur finishes, and the longer the silence spread, the more uneasy Arthur gets. Why isn’t he saying anything? Is he disappointed? Or put off? What if he’s going to change his mind? *Then I have to accept and bear it.* Arthur panics for a moment, but then decides to be brave and honest and do the honourable thing, ignoring his heart screaming and kicking like mad.

“I understand if all this is too much,” he says hoarsely, fumbling with the hem of his T-shirt. “There are no guarantees for my health in the future. The way things are going at the moment, it could deteriorate at any time.” And when Merlin still doesn’t respond, he goes for the final push, voicing what’s been troubling him the most. “It’s possible I might end up as an invalid, too weak to move, relying on help from others. I would never expect you to …”

“Arthur.” The word is barely a breath, but Arthur stops in mid-sentence, flinching at the gruff tone. “I will not let it come that far.”

“What?” Arthur gapes, completely caught unawares by Merlin’s odd reaction.

Merlin takes a step closer to him, seemingly struggling with what to say next.

“Listen to me, Arthur.” And at that Merlin catches Arthur’s gaze. “I know this probably sounds conceited or ignorant, but I think I know someone who might be able to help you.”

“But I’ve seen the best doctors in Albion.”

“I didn’t expect anything else. But maybe you need to seek the help of some more unusual therapists.”

“Like alternative medicine?” Arthur asks perplexed, unsure where Merlin is going with this.

“Something along those lines,” Merlin says and wraps his arm round Arthur’s waist. “Would you be willing to try?”

Arthur is a bit out of his depths here. He’s not exactly a supporter of airy-fairy healing methods and has never given them a thought. “Maybe, if I know exactly what’s involved before-hand.”

Merlin nods and lets out a deep sigh. “Sure, but I’d like you to consider it, okay?” Then he fully wraps himself round Arthur and places a warm kiss on his cheek. “And as for your last question …”

Arthur pulls a bit away so he can face Merlin full-on as he continues.
“I am where I want to be, and I’m not scared off that easily. The only way to get rid of me is for you to leave me first.” Arthur hears the implied question, sees the anguish in Merlin’s eyes and wonders what could have caused it. He’s only too keen to pacify the gorgeous man in his arms.

“Then it’s never going to happen,” Arthur mumbles and finds Merlin’s mouth. And just as their lips come crushing together, a couple of muffled words hover between them for a split second, before they get swallowed in the passion of their kiss. Arthur can’t be certain, but it sure sounds like “I wish”.

This is getting out of hand. How can I possibly find a way out of this without losing him? Merlin lies wide awake in Arthur’s bed, the aforesaid for once snoring happily next to him. For the hundredth time Merlin casts his eyes on Arthur’s sleeping form.

I don’t want to lose you. He mouths in Arthur’s direction and stares into the shadows of the billowing curtains. The cool night air is refreshing, but he’s still burning up on the inside. Gaius’ words and what they figured out together has been bearing down on him like a fully grown elephant. His mind has been on it non-stop and it’s almost unreal it was only yesterday that he talked to Gaius. He’s certainly not come any further digesting the news and has been replaying their conversation like a broken record player. Just like now.

“It really hasn’t been easy to find a mention of this.” Gaius said the afternoon before and his right eye brow shot up. “A sensation that happens only at first touch. A tingling, a spark of some kind, as you said. Am I summing this up correctly?”

Merlin nodded, his heart thumping in anticipation as he leaned forward to listen to his old friend.

“I think I must have gone through, well, at least twenty books before this one fell into my hands.” He pulled out a book of his large beaten-up leather bag.

“This looks ancient,” Merlin said in awe, running his index finger along its spine, spying at its title ‘The Old Religion’.

“As you can see, this is not where I would have thought to find an answer to your problem. Some kind of answer anyway.” Gaius carefully opened the fragile book and slowly turned the brittle pages.

“The Old Religion?” Merlin asked Gaius, rather perplexed.

“That is what they used to call magic many hundreds of years ago.”

“So this sensation, other people have felt it, too?”

Gaius nodded. “There have been some, but it’s very rare indeed.”

“So why does it happen? Is it explained?” Merlin was tapping his fingers on the table, trying to find an outlet for the nervous energy surging through him.

“It was first mentioned by a sorcerer called Ambrosius. He described a physical reaction to the mere touch of another person just like you did: a prickle under the skin similar to the burn of a nettle at its most extreme, a tingle all over your body, a shiver down your spine.”
It was Merlin’s turn to lift his brow. Now that sounded familiar. “Who was the other person?”

“A young noble woman he met at the court of his king.”

Merlin started sucking the inside of his cheek, while his mind went into overdrive. But he didn’t want to voice what he was thinking at the moment. He needed to find out more before he drew any conclusions. “Were they in love?”

“I guess they were, because they got married, despite their different social status.”

“So, is it as simple as that? Love?” Merlin gasped in shock, feeling the tips of his ears heat in embarrassment.

“No. It isn’t,” Gaius said as he searched Merlin’s face thoughtfully. “It’s a bit more complex than that, although the love Ambrosius and his wife felt for each other seemed to heighten the sensation.” Gaius stopped and momentarily stared into space.

“Gaius?” Merlin felt as tense as a string pulled tight. He looked at his old friend in exasperation. “Would you come to the point, please?”

Gaius chuckled silently. “The impatience of youth!” and threw Merlin a fatherly look. “I’ll certainly never get there if you keep interrupting me!”

Merlin rolled his eyes, but he bit his lips because the suspense had become almost unbearable.

“There are people in this world destined for greatness, Merlin. People who change the world for the better, people who make a difference on a large scale.”

Merlin was sure his whole face resembled a giant question mark at this stage. “That’s …nice.”

“Sometimes one person alone can change history favourably, but at other times it needs two people working together to achieve a greater goal. Two people whose fate has been foretold by centuries, both chosen by destiny to play their part in the everlasting cycle of life and death.” Gaius paused and checked whether Merlin was following.

“Ambrosius and his wife were two such people,” Gaius said quietly. “They were destined to bring peace and happiness to a land torn apart by war and hatred.”

“Did they?” Merlin asked.

“Yes, they brought about an era of order and affluence.”

Merlin took a deep breath, trying to make sense of all this. “But what has that got to do with Arthur and me?”

“It seems …,” Gaius said, gently patting the book, “…that those chosen to share a joint path laid out by destiny form a connection beyond that of personal friendship or love. It is a spiritual bond between two souls, so deep and strong it manifests itself in a physical way.”

Merlin processed the information for a minute, and suddenly frowned. “I can’t see how that can apply to us. It sounds very similar, but Arthur and I, we certainly don’t have a common cause.”

“Don’t you?” Gaius gives him a prodding stare.

Merlin’s mind goes haywire for a couple of seconds, and then a wave of heat flushes through him. He knows what he wants for his kin, what he has dreamt of ever since he was a boy. To live in
freedom and unburdened by the threat of the Serum. And from what he’s seen so far, Arthur is an honest man, striving for justice and ready to investigate when he thinks a wrong has been done.

“You think, Arthur and I are destined to free magic in Albion?” he pushes out breathlessly in complete disbelief. Surely, this is goobledegook!

“It would make sense, Merlin,” Gaius replied in a measure way. “However, there’s still one detail that doesn’t fit the idea that a shared fate is indeed what causes that intense sensation between the two of you.”

“I think I know what you mean,” Merlin said. “If all this is true then surely hundreds of men and women who changed the world for the better in the course of history should have felt it, too. But you said earlier that it’s rare!”

“There is that. Which brings me straight to the crunch point here,” Gaius said and paused dramatically before he continued, his eyes piercing straight at Merlin. “That feeling you describe, that sensation Ambrosius talked about, has only ever been experienced between those touched by magic.”

Merlin felt like getting sucked into a black hole and spit out again. For a couple of moments he didn’t breathe, or at least it felt like that. A rush of blood flushed his body and burnt his face, while the thudding of his heart echoed inside his head like bongo drums.

So it’s true, is all he can think. It IS true what I saw in the vision on our first night together. This is the confirmation I’ve been looking for. And bloody hell, he really needed to hear this from someone else because the notion was so preposterous, so mind-blowingly outrageous he’d started thinking afterwards that his mind had been playing tricks on him.

Merlin stared at Gaius, pupils blown wide open, listening to the words he’d been incapable of voicing.

“It means that by the laws of logic Arthur must have magic.”

Hearing it loud still took his breath away, and a rapid interchange between hot and cold running amok inside his body made him shiver.

“I’ve seen it, Gaius,” he whispered tonelessly. “I’ve seen it in the visions.”

“Seen what?”

“Arthur’s magic. There was a moment … there was a second when we …” Shit! How can he possibly explain this to Gaius without giving away too many personal details? “I saw his magic in a moment of clarity,” he finally said. “I couldn’t believe it.” Merlin shook his head vigorously and swiftly modified the tense of his comment. “I CAN’T believe it.”

Both men paused, staring at each other utterly aghast, too dumbfounded to think coherently.

“So this is what your visions have been about?” Gaius found his voice first.

“God, yes,” Merlin gasped in realization. “Yes,” he repeated senselessly, before his brain started up in first gear again. “I’ve seen his magic all along, it’s been reaching out to me for all this time and I didn’t get it. How could I have been such an idiot?”

“Well, it’s not exactly something you would have expected, is it?” Gaius clapped Merlin’s arm, trying to pacify him.
“It’s there and it’s suffering.” Merlin’s eyes suddenly snapped up to Gaius’s. “Arthur’s magic – it’s trapped under a veil of darkness. There’s something that keeps it from flourishing as it should, something that locks it inside his…”

Merlin’s eyes went wide with shock in realization. “Oh fuck!” and he fell back into the backrest of his chair. “Sorry, Gaius,” he apologized for his outburst with the next breath, but his mind was reeling with the magnitude of his discovery. “The hypospray…there’s Serum in it, isn’t there?”

Gaius only nodded to confirm Merlin’s worst fear. “I rechecked the chemical analysis at least three times to make sure I wasn’t wrong. There’s definitely a very small percentage of Serum in Arthur’s medication.”

It seemed like a whole jigsaw of unexplained facts suddenly clicked into place. Arthur’s symptoms! How could have Merlin overlooked that? Particularly after Peterson giving a fair account what the Serum did. Merlin shook his head in complete disbelief. The Serum is killing Arthur slowly. He has taken that poison for over twenty years! Fuck. How is he even still alive?

“They must have started him out on a very small dose when he was young and built it up slowly,” Gaius explained, anticipating where Merlin’s reasoning would be heading.

“But now it’s catching up on Arthur. He collapsed a few days ago. And I’m more than sure that the Serum was cause of that!”

“Maybe his system is finally starting to shut down,” Gaius said quietly.

A surge of intense loathing almost prevented Merlin from speaking. “It’s Edwin. It’s him all over again. The bastard is systematically running Arthur into the ground.” Merlin’s stomach turned at the thought of Edwin being in charge of the hypospray, right where he could finish Arthur off with a snap of his fingers without even raising suspicion.

For a couple of minutes silence spread between them, yet again.

“I need a little bit of time to think all this through,” Merlin said eventually. ”But I can promise you one thing, Gaius. I will find the bloody formula, and we’re going to produce an antidote. If it’s the last thing I do.”

A sudden noise next to him snaps Merlin back to the present. Arthur has turned in his sleep with a giant grunt and thrown an arm over Merlin’s waist. Merlin snuggles into Arthur’s warmth and tries to relax. But how the heck can he, when the lives of the two men he loves most depend on his success?

For a second the picture of Arthur pumping the hypospray into his arm in front of him the evening before sends him into a quiet rage. Again. It had been crucifying to watch Arthur poisoning himself further in good faith, and it had taken all his will power not to scream ‘No!’ at the top of his voice.

And his father…Merlin’s almost scared to visualize what Balinor looked like almost four weeks ago. His father must be near death and something has to happen. It has. But he still hasn’t got a bloody clue how to get to the formula.

*I think it’s time for desperate measures*, Merlin thinks before his weary body yields to the soporific heat of Arthur’s body and his mind shuts down from exhaustion.

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“I’ve asked all my senior security staff to attend a meeting this morning,” Arthur says to Merlin in passing while they’re walking towards the office the next morning. Arthur has refused to stay off work for a second longer, and Merlin knows there’s no point contradicting him once he’s made his mind up. “I want you to join us.”

“Sure. You want me to take the minutes?”

“That won’t be necessary. I just want you to be there.”

Another sign of infinite trust. Merlin’s guilt momentarily rockets off the Richter scale. I will tell him everything as soon as I can. I have to. I can’t bear this charade any longer, he thinks, gritting his teeth, doing his utmost to keep a calm outside.

Half an hour later, Leon, Percival, Gwaine and John Marshall have settled round the big desk in the interview room next to Arthur’s office. Merlin was surprised when Arthur mentioned that the prison supervisor was part of this team, but his mind was put to rest immediately.

“John Marshall is a good man,” Arthur explained, “He and Leon go back a long way, and Percival vetted him when he applied for the job at the prison, so I feel pretty safe including him here.”

Just now Arthur looks around the group. “Thank you all for turning up despite the short notice and I’m not going to beat about the bush. I told you at our last meeting that recent events and revelations have convinced me that something seriously foul is going on in Camelot: bodies disappearing, records being tampered with, the Serum used as a deadly weapon, interference with the security at Lamia House, attacks on both my father’s and my life, apart from a sudden explosion of petty crime in and around Camelot.”

Arthur pauses for a second. “I think we agree it’s too much of a coincidence that so many things should happen out of a sudden in such a short space of time.”

Merlin can’t deny he’s impressed. Whereas he’s been focussing on the Serum side of this mystery, Arthur has looked at the whole picture, drawn his conclusions and is in the procedure of doing something about it. Maybe Gaius is right. Maybe it does take both of us to get to the bottom of this. Maybe there is something about that whole destiny thing.

Arthur continues promptly, “John, I know you’ve got another meeting on this morning, so I’ll start with you. Anything new about those disappearing bodies?”

John Marshall is as keen as ever to please Arthur. It’s easy to spot he feels honoured to have been asked to be part of this small, exclusive group, considering he’s held his position for only nine months. “I checked the records as far back as five years ago, Arthur. I told you at our last meeting that recent events and revelations have convinced me that something seriously foul is going on in Camelot: bodies disappearing, records being tampered with, the Serum used as a deadly weapon, interference with the security at Lamia House, attacks on both my father’s and my life, apart from a sudden explosion of petty crime in and around Camelot.”

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“And yet, these bodies must have gone somewhere,” Leon ponders.

“Whoever’s responsible can’t have acted alone,” Percival cuts in. “So there must be someone somewhere who knows what happened.”

“You’re right, Percival,” Arthur says, “There must be more than one person involved.”

“I’ve no idea how my predecessor didn’t catch on to this at the time,” John says sounding baffled.
“Can we not call him in for an interview?”

Arthur, Leon and Percival share a look. “That’s not going to be possible. Cedric Delaney died in an accident soon after stepping down.”

“There’s definitely something fishy about this,” Leon sounds very determined now. “I’m going to have a look into the circumstances of his death.”

“You do that, Leon. As for you, John,” Arthur says, “I’d like you to keep your eyes open, maybe throw some questions to the staff that’s been there for the last five years. Maybe somebody’s heard or seen something, however trivial, that could help us along.”

John nods and says his good-byes a couple of minutes later, leaving the rest of the group to their discussion.

“Don’t you think it’s obvious who’s behind this?” Merlin can’t help blurting out as soon as the door has closed behind the Prison Supervisor.

Arthur throws Merlin a measured look. “Of course it is, Merlin. We all agreed last time there’s an above average chance that Edwin’s behind this. Peterson’s evidence clearly points to it. But suspicions won’t get us anywhere. We have to get proof before we can confront Edwin.”

“If we can trace who’s been tampering with the security system at Lamia House back to him, we would have something to nail him down,” Gwaine cuts in. “I’m sure the constant electronic complications are down to sabotage. Can’t be anything else. If Edwin is up to mischief, he might be behind that as well.”

“Is there any way somebody could access the system from the outside?” Arthur asks a frown creasing on his forehead.

“We’ve protected all our data from unauthorized access, disruption and modification with the best there is,” Gwaine says. “And the security’s been regularly updated.”

“I’m aware of that, Gwaine. And I’m also aware that you’re one of the most talented guys I know in that department. But is our security really fool-proof?”

Gwaine presses his lips together tightly. “No system is, Arthur. Even if you want to believe it. Eventually there will always be someone who finds a way round it if he’s really looking for it.”

“So there’s a chance that somebody’s been trying to compromise Lamia House from the outside?”

“A small chance, Arthur. But the frequency and complexity of the problems suggest otherwise. Only people with insider knowledge can cause such a lot of hassle.”

“Which brings us back to Edwin,” Leon concludes, rubbing his chin in thought. “You realize though that all this has one big flaw?”

They look at the Police Chief in anticipation. “What is Edwin’s motive? Why would he risk his position? What would he do with all those corpses? And if he’s really responsible for that, how does that link in with sabotaging Lamia House?”

They all fall silent, none of them able to find a logical answer.

“I have no idea.” Arthur sighs heavily. “I guess this is what we need to find out.”
“Maybe it’s to do with the Serum,” Merlin says, convinced by gut feeling that this has to be at the bottom of Edwin’s actions. “There must be a reason why he picks certain MUs and injects them with Serum more than once. Like that MU woman Peterson spoke about or the sorcerer Arthur and I saw when we visited last time.”

“Yes, that’s another angle we can investigate.” Arthur says, clearly pleased at Merlin’s input. Their eyes meet and Arthur’s smile sends Merlin’s heart tumbling. He beams back, unable to hide his affection, and regrets it the next second when he finds both, Percival and Gwaine, darting their eyes back and forth between Arthur and him in sudden understanding. Merlin can feel himself blushing as heat rises from his neck all over his face. *Shit! If I haven’t been obvious enough, I’ve certainly made it clear now that there’s something between us.* Arthur, however, remains totally unfazed, his mind apparently occupied otherwise.

Merlin drags his brain back to their discussion and, to his own surprise, that’s when inspiration strikes. Maybe he can combine his own task with this much bigger one? Kill two birds with one stone? “Wouldn’t it be prudent to check out the formula of the Serum? It might hold some clues what he wants with it?”

Arthur smiles again like a proud parent. “Excellent idea, Merlin. I’ll see to that.”

“You mean you’re just going to ask him for the formula? Will that not be suspicious?” Merlin asks, unable to believe this stroke of luck.

“Nope. I usually keep a copy of the Serum formula in a hidden file on my PC just for records. It gets updated every other year or so, and the latest version is due in a few weeks anyway. Edwin can hardly turn my request for the formula down.”

“You’re sure this isn’t a bit too rash at this stage, Arthur?” Percival’s been quiet for most of their conversation, just observing and listening.

“You’re advising me to hold off for a while?” Arthur asks.

“Assuming Edwin IS involved in some sinister plot, your request, as valid as it maybe, could warn him off,” Percival says, throwing a casual look into Merlin’s direction.

“Possible,” Arthur says and looks lost in thought for a moment. ”I still think Merlin’s got a point. We have enough evidence to suspect that Edwin is meddling with the Serum, and if we know what’s in it, we might be able to determine what he’s up to. So the sooner we find out, the better.”

Percival accepts Arthur’s decision without further comment. “No problem, just thought I’d bring it up.”

“Thanks Percival, there’s nobody more cautious than you!” Arthur smiles warmly at his friend, and then concludes the meeting.

While Leon involves Percival in a conversation, Gwaine makes his way to Arthur and Merlin, smiling broadly.

“I see there are congratulations in order?” he asks, his eyes twinkling with mischief. Merlin, sensing where Gwaine is heading with this conversation, shifts from foot to foot, feeling suddenly shy and awkward. Of course Gwaine immediately twigs on to his discomfort, because his grin broadens even further.

“Hey, no bother, Merlin,” he says clapping Merlin’s back. “Just glad my little hint reaped its rewards!”
“Hint?” Arthur looks from one to the other, mystified.

“Well, I just pointed Merlin in the right direction, while you were out for a count.”

“You TOLD Merlin that I…” It’s Arthur’s turn to blush now. “I can’t believe you did that, Gwaine.”

“You know me, Arthur. Ever the helpful friend.” Gwaine raises his eyebrows as if to challenge Arthur to tell him off. “You’re not complaining, are you?”

Arthur laughs out loud. “I owe you one, mate.”

Merlin grins sheepishly, not quite sure where to look. It’s only been what? Five days, they’ve been together, and outing themselves as a couple so soon hasn’t really been on his mind. Not that it bothers him. Not at all. He loves that Arthur acknowledges their relationship so assuredly. He’s just a bit insecure about all this, considering all the secrets he’s carrying around.

His gaze wonders to Leon and Percival who are in deep conversation. Suddenly Percival looks up and their eyes meet. For a second Percival scrunches his eyes as if he’s assessing Merlin, but then he quickly turns his head back to Leon.

The exchange leaves Merlin feeling odd and ill at ease. Strange. He’s always got on well with Percival, and they had plenty of laughs together at Clumsy’s. But that look was … Merlin fumbles for the right word … yeah, that look had suspicion written all over it.
A storm brewing

Fear grips his heart so tight he can barely breathe. He cowers behind the huge oak bed, his arms thrown over his head and his body shaking with the eerie knowledge that evil is in the air. He presses his hands firmly on his ears hoping to blank out the fierce argument raging somewhere in the room beyond his hide-away.

He hears the words that are spoken, but their meaning doesn’t reach his brain. It takes all he’s got to concentrate on keeping the panic at bay. He knows, he simply KNOWS that something bad is going to happen. Something really bad.

The last rays of the setting sun throw long shadows on the wall behind him. And as the comforting light fades, the room is tinged into ghostly semi-darkness. The blonde boy hears the softer voice out of the two crying out gently, explaining, begging, shouting, and begging all over again.

The darker voice is cold, full of resentment and hate. Not that the boy could have put a name on these sentiments, he simply feels and understands. Stop it! Stop it! He shouts inside his head, barely aware of salty tears streaming down his heated face.

The voices get louder, more agitated, escalating into a crescendo until it all culminates in a high-pitched scream. Then, an ominous thud, followed by accusing silence. The boy is too terrified to move, to even breathe, but he feels compelled to open the eyes he so desperately squeezed shut all along, and when his blurry vision snaps into focus, his blood freezes.

The body on the floor is motionless and a white arm sticks out under it like a broken twig. Noooo! Horror takes completely a hold of him, paralyzing his legs and rendering him helpless to the person who is approaching with heavy steps. Closer and closer.

The blonde boy’s gagging for air, desperate and lonely in his plight, aware that it’ll be only seconds before he’s caught. Before he’ll be punished. Before he’ll feel the wrath of the man in front of him. The shadow of a tall figure falls on the floor next to him, and suddenly all his fear, his shock, his dread bundle together and he screams. He screams like he has never screamed before and something inside him bursts free, comes alive and then …

Arthur startles awake, his heart pounding and his body drenched in sweat as if he’d just finished a full marathon in record time. His chest is heaving rapidly and his mouth has dried from hyperventilating. Slowly his senses return and his brain is getting into gear.

Bloody nightmare! Arthur realizes he’s still trembling, and he clenches his teeth, willing himself to calm, forcing his body to respond to his command. But it’s been getting harder and harder to brush the nightmares away, and over the last few months it’s become a task in itself to draw himself back to reality once he has woken.

Suddenly a warm hand grips his own and squeezes tightly. Not too soft to remain just a gentle touch, not too hard to alarm him further, and it grounds him in a way he’s never known before. The tingle runs up his arm and spreads all over, relaxing his muscles and steadying his thumping heart.

Arthur groans and holds on tight, pushing the last remains of his nightmare into the depths of his unconscious. When he finally opens his eyes, he finds Merlin’s blue eyes piercing into his intently.

“You’ve been dreaming.” Merlin says as if he had to, and Arthur can’t help smiling at the rhetorical statement.
“Sorry I woke you,” Arthur mumbles drowsily, aware he’s still holding onto Merlin’s hand as if it was a life belt keeping him afloat. Instead of answering, Merlin rubs his thumb over Arthur’s hand, then draws it to his lips and places a warm kiss onto it. “You’re way too hot,” he says quietly, and Arthur’s lips twitch into a huge sleepy grin.

“I know. Can’t help it.”

Merlin slaps him playfully on his arm. “Big headed git,” he says affectionately and heads towards the bathroom to return with a warm wet cloth.

“Let’s get your T-shirt off,” Merlin says and motions Arthur to lift his arms.

“Sounds good to me.” Arthur smiles suggestively as Merlin pulls his sweat stained T-shirt over his head. He immediately pulls Merlin back onto his chest and is surprised to find him resisting.

“Nope, you’re nowhere near ready for that, sir,” Merlin chuckles and sits up. “Just relax.”

Perplexed, Arthur does as he’s told and closes his eyes again, a sharp intake of breath on his lips when the warm cloth makes contact with his skin. Merlin wipes down his chest with slow deliberate movements, and circulating gently over his chest, his shoulders, his collarbones, his abs, his tight stomach, his hips...

“Ahhh. That’s so good,” Arthur moans quietly with pleasure.

“Turn round,” Merlin says after a while, and when Arthur’s complied, he repeats the same procedure on his back, rubbing down each muscle, every inch of his skin until his body starts cooling down. Arthur groans with the pleasure of it. It’s not only the massage and the cleansing feeling itself that sends him on cloud nine.

Nobody has ever looked after him like that. Not since he’s been a young boy anyway. People tend to expect him to be the one in charge. The one who makes sure that everyone’s alright. Having Merlin take over, telling him what to do and taking care of him is incredibly liberating and soothing on body and mind.

Once Merlin’s finished cleaning every trace of sticky sweat, he cradles beside Arthur and kneads the tense muscles on his back in confident, expert moves.

“Ahhh. Where did you learn how to do that?” Arthur mumbles, totally blissed out by the sweep of relaxation leaving him in a pliant mess.

“My mum used to work as a physiotherapist.”

“Make sure I’ll thank her for passing her knowledge on to you.” Arthur’s hardly finished the words when he feels Merlin tensing up above him. What has he said wrong now? But before Arthur can linger on the thought, Merlin changes the topic with the ease of a politician.

“You want to talk about it?” Merlin asks quietly, and of course Arthur understands immediately what he means.

Can he talk about it? He’s never confided in anyone about this before. Not his father and certainly not Edwin. Although he seems to remember that Uther sometimes asked him what he saw in his nightmares when he was younger. But Merlin? Arthur lets out a deep sigh. Merlin’s seen him at his worst, has helped him through the dark hours after his collapse and been there for him whenever he’s needed support since they’ve met. Of course he can trust him.
And while Merlin keeps rubbing his back, he slowly recounts his dream and shudders when he reaches the end.

“Can you see who the boy is?” Merlin asks.

“Sometimes it all feels like a vague memory, other times it’s just like a movie, watching somebody else’s nightmare,” Arthur says. He doesn’t really understand why, but talking about this has made him feel lighter. Speaking out loud what causes him so much distress at night time has allowed him to see his dream in the cold light of the day, and suddenly the dread he has associated with it, the undeniable fear he’s attached to it seems less threatening.

“You’re a miracle worker,” he mumbles and hears Merlin chuckle.

“Can I take that in writing?”

Arthur turns round in a swift move and pulls Merlin down next to him, making him yelp with surprise. “Your hands are like magic,” he whispers and then searches his eyes. “YOU are magic.”

Merlin’s body tenses for a second and his pupils go wide as if he’s in shock. For a tiny fraction of time Arthur has the impression he might bolt. “Fuck, Merlin. That was a compliment. Am I such a bastard that you don’t know when I try to flatter you?”

Merlin blushes violently and his eyelashes flutter nervously before he buries his face in Arthur’s shoulder. “Not used to it,” he says peevishly and nips at the soft hollow over Arthur’s collarbone.

In answer Arthur gently pulls his face up and kisses him with all the pent up emotion that’s been building inside him since he woke, and Merlin responds with a desperation taking his breath away. A while later they part, their lips red and chafed, but a satisfied smile on their faces.

“They’re predicting a scorching weekend,” Arthur says after a few minutes. “We have got a weekend cottage on Lake Avalon, and I thought we maybe could…” Why the heck does he feel so blooming self-conscious out of a sudden? Like a teenage boy asking someone out for their first date? For fuck’s sake, he’s dated more men than he cares to remember! When Merlin looks at him questioningly he gives himself an inner push and finishes his question.

“I was wondering if you’d like to spend the weekend with me out there. It’s a great place to chill out when it is hot. The house and its grounds are totally secluded, even the water. Our part of the lake is completely cordoned off from the public, so you’ll never get anyone prying when you’re trying to relax. You can do whatever you like and be totally private. Once the weather gets better, the house is usually stocked up with food so it’s always ready if Father or I want to use it. Of course I know you might have plans already, and I fully understand if you…”

At that point Merlin throws him an exasperated look. “Shut up, Arthur,” he grins and then brushes his lips teasingly. “Of course I’d like to come.”

“Merlin’s six weeks are almost up,” Alavarr declares and looks round the group, “…and he has nothing to show for it.”
Most young men, and a couple of women, nod their heads in agreement. Morgana realizes that everyone’s getting itchy to do something. So far they’ve been all talk and no action, and many of the young lads are itching to get down to something more concrete, and, to be honest, so is she, but she still can’t help taking a stance for Merlin.

“I’ve heard from Gaius that he’s not completely recovered from the wound you caused him. So what did you expect him to do?”

“We did agree on giving him six more weeks at the last meeting,” Alvarr says. “He’s had plenty of time to do something. Seems he’s been side-lined with more ... pressing matters”. He smirks and wiggles his eyebrows.

Morgana swallows hard. She’s aware that Alvarr is doing his best to rile her. But there’s been no proof whatsoever that Merlin’s been jumping the boat, and as for Alvarr hinting at other things … Morgana shakes her head vigorously. Absolute rubbish!

“Just spare us your filthy innuendos, Alvarr,” she spits out. “I know for a fact that Merlin’s asked Gilli and Will to see if they can get plans to break into Lamia House.”

“Too little, too late.” Alvarr sounds quite final. “We’ve had enough of pussy footing around the issue. The formula of the Serum needs to be retrieved now. There’s no point waiting for any other hare-brained schemes your brother might pull out of the hat! Surely you know your father won’t last much longer!”

Heat spreads over Morgana’s face. Of course she knows. Every day, every night she’s been thinking of Balinor, helplessly exposed to a drug that’s going to kill him if they don’t react soon. Every time she talks to Hunith and witnesses her anguish and desperation she wants to lash out at those who have been doing this to her family.

Damn! She does want the same things as Alvarr, but she’s also not very comfortable acting against Merlin’s efforts to get to the formula. However, Balinor’s been at Lamia House for over four months now. The Serum’s bound to have already harmed and damaged him in ways they can only guess. Something HAS to happen now.

“What do you suggest?” she asks, and as everybody listens, Alvarr tells the rebels exactly what he has in mind.

Later on, when Morgana gets back to her flat, she’s pacing up and down for the best of fifteen minutes before she makes her decision. She’s got to speak to Merlin, she’s got to warn him at least and convince him that what they’re about to do is the only way forward. She needs to get him out of the Ministry and Arthur’s clutches before he gets too entangled in all this intrigue. And that means that she has to speak to him in person.

Merlin gave strict instruction never to contact him on his private mobile while he stays in the Ministry for the fear of getting traced. But this is an emergency. His life could depend on it, and right now Morgana couldn’t give a toss about anything else. She dials his number, her leg tapping nervously on the floor.

It rings. Thank God! At least Merlin hasn’t switched his phone off completely. It rings again and again, and Morgana’s near panicking when Merlin finally answers.

“Hi, are you alright?” are his first words, and Morgana almost sobs with the relief of hearing him. “You know not to phone me on this number. Anyone could …”
“I really need to talk to you.” Morgana’s voice is urgent. “As soon as you can.”

“Is there something wrong?” Merlin asks, his voice wrought with concern, and Morgana knows instantly that Merlin’s caught onto the worry hidden in her words.

“I can’t speak on the phone, for obvious reasons. I have to meet you. In person. Later today.” Morgana’s rushing her words, her heart pounding furiously. Merlin needs to hear her out and then he can decide how to proceed.

The silence on the phone startles her. “Merlin? When can I see you?”

“I can’t meet you today, Morgana,” he says quietly.

“But surely you can take a walk in the evening and meet me at Gaius’s café or somewhere similar?” Morgana’s getting desperate now. Why is Merlin so bloody difficult? “This is really important!” she insists again. “For all of us! You have to come.”

There’s another pause and Morgana can hear Merlin breathing rapidly. “I’m unable to meet you because I’m just about to leave Camelot.”

Morgana’s head is buzzing at the news. Where’s Merlin going? What the heck? “Where the fuck are you going?” She shouts down the phone, worried and irritated to the same degree.

“Lake Avalon,” Merlin pushes out. Why does he sound so bloody embarrassed? As if he’s done something wrong? Suddenly it hits Morgana.

“You’re going away with Arthur, aren’t you?” she whispers aghast.

“He’s decided to take work out there to catch up on some important documents.” The excuse comes quickly and swiftly. Too swiftly. Shit. Morgana knows when Merlin’s fibbing. She’s always known. He’s a terrible liar. She can hear the tiny tremble in his voice, the different intonation, the slight breathlessness in the words. Double shit.

Of course Merlin might just suffer from bad conscious for not being there for her when she needs him. Of course he might feel awkward telling her because of what she’d said when they met last time. Of course, it is easily possible that Arthur’s overworking him, expecting him to work at the weekend, too, and that he’s got no choice but to go.

“When will you be back?” Morgana’s decided to hedge her bet.

“Sunday evening,” Merlin answers monosyllabically.

Morgana inwardly swears. That’ll be cutting it to a fine line. Alvarr’s planning the attack for the beginning of the next week. But it’s better than nothing.

“Sunday evening, then. Nine o’clock? The café?” Morgana rushes out.

“That sounds fine. Listen, I need to go.” Merlin says, sounding distinctly alarmed. And then the connection’s gone.

Morgana lets out a deep sigh. Her initial relief turns into flustered concern a few minutes later. She was wrong. Sunday evening is too late. Merlin will have no time to take any precautions, he’ll not have time to think and could get entangled in a way that might endanger him. She has to act and make sure this doesn’t happen.
Lake Avalon isn’t that far away. If she leaves this minute she could be there in an hour and a half, maybe a little longer, taking Friday’s rush hour into account. And then she’s going to find a way to speak to him. Morgana’s down the stairs and in her car before she’s finished thinking this through.

“...” Arthur’s voice rips Merlin out of his thoughts, and he becomes aware that he’s been staring out of the window for quite a while. No wonder! His mind has been preoccupied with Morgana’s phone call. Something serious must have happened. Otherwise she wouldn’t have sounded so urgent and insistent, and he’s been playing countless scenarios through his mind.

“You’re not still concerned about Aiden?” Arthur asks and throws him a furtive glance. “I’ve spoken to him and explained that I can’t see him any longer.”

“I’m fine with Aiden, Merlin thinks. He’s actually quite a nice guy as long as he keeps his hands off you and stays away from him forever. But something’s happening and I’ve no idea what and it worries me sick.

Merlin shakes his head guiltily and makes the next best excuse he can think of. “I just think the heat’s getting to me.” He sends an apologetic smile to the blond man next to him, running his eyes appreciatively over his profile. Hell, how didn’t he notice that Arthur looks pretty uptight?

“Are you having second thoughts about this?” Arthur mumbles, pointedly keeping his eyes on the traffic.

“About what?” Merlin asks dumbfounded.

“The weekend. Me.” Arthur hesitates and hoarsely adds the last word. “Us.”

Merlin lets out a quiet, startled laugh. Why on earth would Arthur come up with a thought like that? Surely, if anyone needed to be insecure about their relationship, it’s him. Who still has a bagful of unpleasant truths to spill. And I will do that, this weekend. I can’t keep all those secrets any longer. It’s killing me inside to lie to him every single minute.

“Remember what I said to you before? About us?”

Arthur nods. “That I can only get rid of you by leaving you first.”

“Still mean it, always will.” Merlin reaches over and kisses Arthur’s cheek tenderly. “What brought that one on?”

Arthur bites his lips nervously, his eyes fixed to the road, and clearly hesitating before he finally finds his voice. “There are times when I feel that you withdraw into yourself. Like shutters coming down. Or you go quiet or tense up when it’s totally unexpected. Just like the last half an hour. I just don’t know what to make of it. Guess I always assume that I’m the problem.”

Merlin clenches his teeth. Shit. I’m not as good at hiding my feelings as I thought, he thinks, guilt overwhelming him. Momentarily his throat is too tight to get even the tiniest tone across his lips. He takes a deep breath to compose himself.
“That’s just me, Arthur,” Merlin says, his voice crackling, “nothing to do with you whatsoever. Okay?” And he puts his hand on Arthur’s on the steering wheel to squeeze it reassuringly. This is not the time nor the place for revelations on a major scale. Soon, Merlin swears to himself. Soon, I’ll tell you everything.

Arthur nods and rubs his thumb over Merlin’s fingers gently. When he quickly turns his head to send Merlin one of his heart-stopping smiles, Merlin knows it’s time to change the topic.

“How did you persuade Fiodor not to accompany us for the weekend?”

Arthur chuckles. “With great difficulty. But he understands I need a day or two off sometimes to have complete privacy. He knows the security system at The Cottage is state of the art, and he gave me clear instructions to put it on as soon as we get there.”

An hour later they arrive at their destination. Merlin takes one look and bursts into laughter. “Cottage? Looks like you reinterpreted that term.”

The glass and steel complex is defined by simple, clear lines, and looks like a text book example for modern, minimal architecture. Merlin expects much the same on the inside but stop short in surprise when he enters the main room. The oak floor stands in direct contrast to the huge glass windows and the whitened walls, and gives the room warmth, while the soft lush sofas and chairs in hues of yellow and red, covered in a multitude of coloured cushions, immediately invite to relax. The stylish wooden furniture, a plethora of pictures, bookshelves and lots of personal items create an atmosphere of warmth and cosiness to what could have been clinical and cold.

“This is lovely,” Merlin says, and he can see in Arthur’s eyes that he’s pleased about the compliment.

“I helped design the house and furnished it all by myself. I just love it here.”

“Those huge windows are genius,” Merlin says, not only because he revels in seeing Arthur so happy, but also because he genuinely thinks so. “They really draw the outside into this space.”

“The glass allows you see outside but nobody can look in. It’s perfect.” Arthur explains before he excuses himself to put the alarm system on. “Make yourself at home.”

So Arthur brought me into his space. Where he feels most comfortable. Merlin’s heart swells like a river after a heavy thunderstorm.

He wants to show me a part of him that I haven’t seen. Merlin fights the lump in his throat and tries to distract himself by checking out the far wall that’s covered in photographs and pictures.

Merlin can’t help smiling, looking at them one after the other. Arthur as a young boy, sun tanned and grinning from ear to ear, Arthur and his friends from university – Merlin recognizes a young Gwaine and Leon there – and many others Merlin remembers from his research.

Suddenly a larger photo in the middle of the display catches his eye. There’s Edwin, his hair still dark and thick, looking young and cheerful, with a lean and handsome Uther next to him who’s smiling down on his son who is holding his hand. Arthur must be about six or seven in the picture, even blonder than now and already impossibly cute. But it is neither of the three causing Merlin’s heart to stop. The woman that is holding Arthur’s other hand is slim and delicate and her long black curls frame a stunningly beautiful face. Merlin walks up to the photo a little bit closer to scan her features in detail. Yes, there can be no doubt about it. This woman is the spitting image of Morgana.

This can be no coincidence! This must be Morgana’s mother! Surely. People do have doppelgängers in this world, but the resemblance is too close, too refined. Merlin head starts swimming, unable to
process the onslaught of questions.

If this IS Morgana’s mother, who is her father? Merlin’s eyes flick nervously between the two men in the picture and his blood runs cold. Uther? Edwin? Oh shit. Spoilt for choice here. Hold on! Merlin stops himself before he’s jumping to conclusions. Just because they’re all in a photo together doesn’t have to mean a thing. Although … she is holding Arthur’s hand as if she’s part of the family and the way she looks at Uther... Oh God, Morgana.

Totally immersed in his thoughts Merlin hasn’t heard Arthur appearing behind him and startles for a second when he wraps his arms round him from behind, causing the tingle to flash through his body.

“What are you looking at?” Arthur asks and places a tiny kiss on Merlin’s temple.

“Who’s that?”

“That’s Nimueh. She used to work with Father and Edwin when they were all starting out. This was taken on my seventh birthday. They took me to a funfair to cheer me up after my mum’s accident.”

“So Nimueh, she was just a friend of the family?” Merlin asks.

Arthur chuckles quietly. “That’s what Father wanted me to believe. They never openly acknowledged their relationship, not in private and certainly not in public, but I’m pretty sure that they were an item for quite a while. I think Father needed someone to hold onto after my mum died.”

“What happened to her?” Merlin wonders, his mind reeling with possibilities.

“I only have a hazy recollection of that. Guess my father also did his best to keep me in the dark about these kinds of things. But I seem to remember that she was tried for treason of some kind, and somehow got away to be never seen again.”

“Oh,” is all Merlin can say. Because he’s pretty speechless. Of course he can’t be sure about this, but it bloody well looks like as if there’s a good chance that he’s onto a major discovery here.

Somebody, somewhere has to know more about this, and he vows to find out. But that is for later, not for now.

Merlin points at a picture of a tall, slim, blond woman who laughs heartily as she embraces a young Arthur.

“Your mum?” he asks and Arthur nods. “She’s very beautiful.”

Arthur’s grip tightens for a second, and Merlin senses he has to bring himself to answer quite casually. “Yes, many people say I’m taking after her.”

“Those with impaired sight, I assume?” Merlin retorts, deliberately keeping the conversation light because this is what Arthur obviously wants.

Arthur chuckles into his ear, and his hot breath sends a shiver down Merlin’s spine. He gasps silently when Arthur slips his hands under his T-shirt and starts running circles over the supple skin underneath, while he starts sucking the soft spot under his ear lazily.

“Hmmm.” Merlin instinctively leans back into Arthur, giving himself up to his tender caresses, his knees reduced to jelly when Arthur starts nibbling the outer shell of his ear. Damn! Ever since Arthur’s found out that his ears are ridiculously sensitive and that every touch goes straight down south, he’s made a point of using the knowledge to his advantage. Merlin’s whole body is buzzing with pleasure, his skin tingling all over and his briefs suddenly all too tight.
“Arthur,” he mumbles in heady delight, when the blonde cups his bulge with a light squeeze. He’s completely unprepared when Arthur swivels him round to peck a highly unromantic kiss onto his cheek, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Payback!” He grins and heads for the patio door, pulling his T-shirt over his head and losing his pants and shorts as he charges towards the lake.

“Bloody cock tease!” Merlin shouts after him, groaning inwardly first, but then following Arthur’s example. He hits the water seconds after Arthur, gasping as the cold hits him, but revelling in it just an instant later.

“Serves you right for being cheeky!” Arthur splashes Merlin thoroughly with water and points to the small island not far off the shore. “First one there gets what he wants!”

Merlin rolls his eyes and watches as Arthur slides through the water like an Olympic gold medallist. Even if he’d been given a head start he’d never have had any chance of catching up, so he decides to take it easy and paddles after Arthur leisurely.

When he reaches the pebbly beach, Arthur’s already lying on one of the two wooden sunbeds, eyes closed and arms stretched over his head, shamelessly flaunting every part of his masculinity.

Merlin’s eyes rake hungrily over Arthur’s sculpted body. The soft light of the late afternoon sun highlights the peaks of Arthur’s taut muscles, painting a golden glow on his tanned skin and accentuating his features as if done by a master’s hand. The chiselled chin, the full lips, the classic nose. A little noise escapes Merlin’s mouth that sounds embarrassingly like a whimper. Shit. Arthur knows exactly how to push his buttons, teasing him mercilessly to get him wound up. Merlin couldn’t care less though, on the contrary. No force in this world could get him to drag his gaze off the glorious sight in front of him.

Irregular rivulets of water trickle off Arthur’s arms and legs, and as the high summer heat, still sweltering at this time of the day, starts drying his skin off and the blond fluff on his limbs and his chest perks up like an invite. Merlin’s rock solid by the time his eyes follow the undulating path of Arthur’s happy trail straight towards his cock which rests heavily on his belly, flushed and fully erect as if to challenge him.

“Not so ugly after all then,” Arthur mumbles, his eyes still closed and his lips quirking a little at the sides. “Admit you’re ogling.”

A flush of desire and want threatens to incinerate Merlin’s insides. He lets out a frustrated growl as he jumps up and straddles Arthur before the blond can utter another syllable. Both shudder when the spark of their connection rushes through their bodies.

“You won. Name your prize,” Merlin whispers hoarsely, stroking Arthur’s cool skin with hot hands, running his fingers over the sides, trailing along the chest and then along the swerve of his butt, ending just above the belly button. Arthur shudders and goose bumps appear all over his limbs.

The blond opens his eyes and stares directly into Merlin’s. “I already got it.” Merlin’s heart hammers at the willing capitulation and the heated desire looking back at him. And there’s something else, something Merlin’s scared to name, but recognizes nonetheless because he can feel it, too.

Merlin holds Arthur’s gaze while he bends forward and pushes himself so hard against his body not even the finest tissue paper would fit between them. When he dives into an earth-shattering kiss Arthur groans into his mouth with content. Their lips wrestle, while tongues push, tangle and entwine in an effort to outdo each other, neither seeking the glory of winning, but relishing the fight
A throaty moan escapes Merlin when Arthur jerks his hips upwards, grinding his leaking heat against Merlin’s. Desperate for more friction, Merlin rubs against Arthur in circling movements while he greedily laps up the last droplets of water speckling his chest, dragging his tongue over the sensitive skin.

“Merlin.” Arthur is writhing under Merlin hands and mouth, urging him to work his way further south. A moan vibrates in his chest when Merlin takes him into his mouth, encasing his hard length in the wet warmth for a second before he flicks his tongue at the smooth skin. Arthur runs his finger through his hair, pulling it hard when Merlin swallows him down as far as he can. All Merlin can think about is how much he wants to mark Arthur as his own, making sure he belongs to him, hoping, hoping, hoping …

He has never felt so much for one person, has never felt so desperate because he fears what will happen in the future, has never felt the need to drive another person to complete oblivion. But he does now. When his fingers cup Arthur’s balls, stroking and teasing while his mouth works Arthur in every possible way at the same time, he’s rewarded with Arthur’s complete surrender. One more twist, one more flick, and Arthur comes undone, repeating Merlin’s name all over again in the husky, low voice Merlin wants to claim as his for all times.

Arthur stills, panting breathlessly, and then, after a minute or two, pulls Merlin up to bury his face in his unruly hair. “Merlin,” he says one more time and all the emotion condensed in that one word is more than Merlin’s ever hoped for.

He kisses Arthur chastely, lingering a bit at the end, attempting to express everything he’s unable to say at this moment in action rather than words. Arthur responds enthusiastically, and Merlin holds him tight to his chest, overwhelmed by the intensity of the feeling washing over him.

“Hey,” Arthur mumbles eventually, stroking Merlin’s back lazily. And Merlin loves how raspy and graveling he sounds. “You’re a fast learner.”

“Taught by the best.” Merlin smiles against Arthur’s chest, chuffed he’s succeeded in pleasing him, considering this is only the second time he’s put his mouth to Arthur.

“Sure.” Merlin feels more than sees the self-satisfied grin on Arthur’s face.

“I could suggest a couple of improvements on certain aspects, though.”

Merlin pinches Arthur’s bottom to make him flinch. “Is that right now?”

“Sure, let me show you,” Arthur mumbles sensuously, and that is exactly what he does.

When Arthur and Merlin disappear inside the house, Morgana turns round and sinks against the smooth bark of the ancient beech she’s been using as her shelter. The binoculars she’s been holding so hard that they’ve left marks on her fingers slip out of her grip and fall onto the soft forest ground without a sound.

She remains motionless, staring into space until the cawing of a nearby bird startles her out of her stupor. She reminds herself how to breathe. Breathe. Breathe.
A chill sends shivers down her spine and cold emptiness spreads through and through. Until her brain recounts what she has witnessed. Merlin and the Pendragon. Together. Definitely together. Morgana isn’t an idiot. What she saw was not just a random act of lust, some casual sex to stave of some bodily needs.

No, she’s very clear about that. The way Merlin touched Arthur, the way he looked at him, the way they held each other, soft and gentle and lovingly afterwards. Morgana knows she should have listened to the voice inside her head screaming ‘Stalker!’ on top of its voice and turned away once she realized what was going to happen. But she couldn’t.

The bitter shock of betrayal is all encompassing. Merlin and Arthur. Merlin and a man! No. It can’t be. Merlin is hers. She’s waited for him all this time. He’s supposed to fall for her and realize how much she’s loved him for so many years. That’s the way it was supposed to happen. Not this.

Fuck the bloody Pendragon! Shock turns into vitriolic anger with the snap of a finger. Arthur’s the one to blame. He’s turned Merlin in every possible way, twisting his mind, using his charm and good looks, and brainwashing him until he had what he wanted. Merlin’s never had a chance and now he’s helplessly trapped in the tendrils of his deceit like a fly caught in a spider’s web.

Arthur will not get away with this. He deserves to be taught a lesson. A lesson telling him that he can’t have everyone. Despite his status and his power. Despite being a Pendragon.

Morgana smirks as a plan forms in her mind. This location is perfect for Avarr’s plan. Way better than what he suggested earlier this morning, and a lot less risky for everyone involved. No people around, no Justice Squad, most likely just some kind of security system. They can deal with that.

Merlin told her he would stay until Sunday, which gives them all Saturday to prepare. Morgana’s starting to feel marginally better. Yes, that’s what they’ll do. She’s certain that Avarr will agree.

And once Merlin is ripped from Arthur’s side he’ll come to his senses. He’ll wake up and realize how misguided he was, and how harmful and repugnant his actions have been. Morgana grins. At the very least, Merlin’s going to have a reality check when Arthur finds out about him, who he is and what he has been doing. Because there’s no way their relationship is going to survive that.

Merlin’s going to see that Arthur could never love him for who he really is. That he is just another notch on Arthur’s bed post. That Arthur will drop him like a hot potato when the truth comes out. And when Merlin falls, hard and unrelenting, she will be there to catch him.
High and low

Chapter Notes

It is high time again to thank all of you who have been following story for so many weeks, left kudos and so many lovely comments! I can assure you this really makes my day!

I would also like to say a huge thank you to my beta readers at this point. Elena A., you rock! What would I do without your eagle eye and your ability to spot the illogical! Jenniferdebs, your constant support is most valued, as are our brainstorming sessions! This story wouldn't be anywhere without the two of you!

Percival has been staring at his phone for at least ten minutes, and he’s still not sure what to do. Not that he’s indecisive by nature, no, not at all. But what he’s supposed to do really sucks. His duty is tearing him into one direction, while his friendship pulls him into the opposite one. Of course Arthur needs to know, that fact stands, no discussion necessary. The question is how and when, and it’s the ‘when’ that bothers Percival most.

It’s Saturday evening and he’s not long wrapped up his investigation. Although he feels a sense of achievement at having solved a puzzle that’s been niggling him, he wishes for other reasons that he’d never followed Gaius Richardson the previous Sunday. It would have saved him sitting here, undecided, conscious-smitten on the one hand, deeply worried on the other.

And so Percival reflects on the events of the last two weeks for the tenth time.

When he’d met with Arthur, Leon and John to discuss Edwin that Monday morning all he had was a suspicion, a gut feeling, that something about Merlin wasn’t quite as it should be, and he’d tried to nudge Arthur into being cautious to follow any of his PA’s suggestions. Right after the meeting he’d buckled down and mapped out a plan for his inquiry.

As a preliminary task he’d run Gaius Richardson’s details through the system to find out the basics. He’d already been aware that Gaius was one of the most acclaimed bio chemists in Albion and currently the director of the prestigious Institute. He worked his way up to this position slowly and his illustrious career spanned over a few decades. Gaius had no convictions of any sort, no rumours attached to his name, not even the tiniest fleck of dirt on his records. As far as Percival was concerned, he could tick Merlin’s previous employer off his list.

25 Ascetir Drive was next on his task sheet and that proved a lot more interesting. The residents’ role of Camelot showed four people registered to that address: Balinor Emerson, his wife Hunith and their children, Morgana and Mervin.

Balinor Emerson. That sounded distinctively familiar. A quick run through the system identified the man as a sorcerer, convicted of murder a few months earlier. Of course! That’s when Percival also heard the address mentioned! He often accompanied Arthur to Court as his body-guard, and as Arthur had been particularly interested in this case, they’d attended all the court sessions. Naturally the address of the defendant had been read out on a few occasions, and Percival being Percival had stored that information somewhere in the back of his brain.
Percival could pinpoint that this was the moment when he’d started feeling edgy. So, - Merlin knew Gaius, who knew Balinor’s wife, who he had visited at her house after talking to Merlin. Right. Something seemed to click into place there. And: Emerson? Emrys? Mervin? Merlin? Of course this similarity could be a mere coincidence. Life was like that.

But if Merlin WAS the same as Mervin and indeed related to Balinor … Percival swallowed hard. Merlin had been appointed not long after Balinor’s trial. The son of a convicted MU as Arthur’s PA? Alarm bells started ringing quietly in Percival’s head. But before he’d let them chime at full volume he needed to prove hundred percent that Merlin was connected to the Emerson family, and for that he had to dig a little bit deeper.

Percival knew the security tests he’d run on Merlin when he had joined the Ministry had been tight and conclusive. All the information Merlin had given had checked out, which meant that either everything was fine or somebody had done a hell of a job creating a new identity for him. So if he couldn’t rely on technology to produce any conclusive results, a little bit of old fashioned detective work might just do the trick. Percival couldn’t help smiling. Now that was something he hadn’t done in a long time.

“Hello, I’m looking for this man.” Percival handed the receptionist of The Institute a picture of Merlin. The stocky man looked at it shortly and hesitated, furrowing his brows as if he had to think about it. Percival, however, could read his face like a book. It was pretty obvious the receptionist had recognized Merlin, but was unwilling to give information away before he had an idea what was going on.

“What do you need him for?” The man asked, studying Percival from top to toe.

Of course Percival had been prepared for all eventualities and happily flashed a fake ID. “Sorry, my apologies. I’m Ryan Butler from Lots Insurances. We’re working an inheritance and we’ve been trying to locate this guy for weeks. Somebody pointed us in this direction.” Percival deliberately paused and waited, making sure the guy didn’t feel pushed and his patience paid off.

“Right. In that case…,” the man said,”…All I can tell you is that he worked here until a few months ago. Don’t know where he’s employed now. But Mr. Richardson up in Biochemistry should know.”

“That’s great!” Percival smiled at the guy broadly, hoping to get more than stuff he already knew. “Before I follow that up,” Percival gave the guy a jovial grin, ”this IS Merlin Emrys, isn’t it?”

The receptionist chuckled. “Not much of detectives, you guys. His name is Merlin Emerson.”

Percival feigned complete surprise. “Emerson? Shit. Looks like somebody at the office made a right mess here.”

“Definitely Merlin Emerson,” the man confirmed and asked nosily, “Is there a lot of money involved?”

Percival raised his eyebrows in silent agreement. “You know what it’s like – rich uncles and the lot.”

The receptionist shook his head. “I wish! But anyway, I hope you’ll find him. It couldn’t happen to a nicer guy. And bright, too. Top chemist here, you know. One of our finest. Mr.Richardson was right disappointed to lose him. I know that much.”

Percival’s been trained to keep a poker face, and just as well. This was getting more mysterious by the second. Merlin had not only lied about his name, but also about his profession.

Later on, when he checked the employment log of The Institute, he could hardly believe his eyes
when a list of entries as long as his arm popped up. “Merlin Emerson – 1st prize in research. Merlin Emerson – the most gifted bio chemist of the decade. Merlin Emerson – hailed the future director” were just a few. Merlin was quite a guy when it came to chemistry. So why the heck was he working as a PA?

Under normal circumstances Percival would have gone to Arthur with his findings immediately. But he’d seen that Monday morning how deeply Arthur had fallen for Merlin. Had noticed how happy he’d looked every time he laid eyes on the other man. That complicated things. A lot. Percival knew he had to tread carefully and be painstakingly thorough, covering this case from all angles before he presented any suspicions to his boss. Confirming that Merlin was Balinor’s son beyond any doubt whatsoever was his first priority.

A day later Percival rang the bell at 25 Ascetir Drive.

“How can I help you?” The same woman who had spoken to Gaius opened the door and smiled. Percival easily identified her as Balinor’s wife.

“I’m looking for Merlin. This IS his home address?” Percival said and recounted a fabricated story of old university friends, good times and forgotten books, pointing to a bundle of chemistry textbooks under his arm.

Although Hunith had thrown him some pretty searching looks he’d eventually won her over with charm. She asked him in, presented him with a cup of tea and chocolate biscuits and made polite conversation for half an hour. It was all Percival needed. The family photos on the wall gave away everything: Merlin was indeed Balinor’s son. And a bio chemist. Who had lied his way into Arthur’s life and heart.

Yeap. And how exactly had he done that? It had all started with saving Uther. Back at his office Percival pulled up the CCTV records of that day and went through the whole incident frame by frame. He watched the young man in the hoodie approach Uther, and Merlin following the sorcerer to tackle him just in time before he could get to the Governor. And then … Percival froze and then replayed the same frame again and again. There could be no doubt, no doubt at all. Merlin’s eyes definitely turned golden to help the sorcerer get away.

Merlin had magic. He was a sorcerer like his father. Percival’s stomach churned at the mere thought of it. Did that mean that Merlin and the young sorcerer had worked together? To give Merlin an opportunity to ‘save’ Uther? In the hope to get into the Governor’s graces? It was possible, and if that had been their plan, it had certainly paid off.

Percival scratched his head at the conundrum. What the heck was Merlin up to? And what did he want with Arthur? There had to be something sinister at the bottom of all this.

That’s what Percival has been asking himself ever since, and he’s asking it now, while he’s sitting at his desk staring at his mobile, wondering whether to phone Arthur or wait until Monday when the next meeting with Leon and John has been scheduled.

Fiodor let him know that Arthur took Merlin to the Lake Cottage for the weekend. So Arthur is alone with a sorcerer. Okay, so far, Merlin hasn’t acted out of turn, but that doesn’t mean it’s not going to happen. Percival is the man in charge of Arthur’s security and it’s his bloody duty to tell him immediately.

And yet, Percival hates to be the bringer of misery and heartache to a man who has done him so much good. Karyn wouldn’t be here without Arthur. If he hadn’t stepped in and paid for her treatment he would have lost her. And now Percival’s supposed to rip away the only happiness
Arthur’s known for a long time. It hurts having to shoot down Arthur like that. Shit. Life’s choices sometimes stink.

In the end Percival sadly shakes his head, fully aware that in reality he never had a choice of options. There’s only one thing he can do, so he picks up the phone and dials.

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Merlin has been dozing on the sun lounger for most of the day, merely interrupted by a bit of swimming, eating and making out with Arthur.

This is the epitome of a pink bubble. It’s brilliant to suspend reality and pretend that the outside world doesn’t exist. Merlin sighs contentedly and rolls to his side to look at Arthur through half-lidded eyes. The blond lies on another sun bed right next to him, curled up into a ball, fast asleep. He looks so young, just like the boy in the pictures. Merlin grins when Arthur grunts in his sleep and then starts snoring quietly. He does have a snoring problem even if he doesn’t admit to it.

At least Arthur’s been sleeping better since they’ve been together. Maybe his magic is reacting a little bit with mine. As much as it can. Merlin wonders. Every time they make love, Merlin reaches out to the gold under the veil. Acknowledging it, calling it, trying to strengthen it. At times he thought he’d felt a flicker in return, but maybe that was a figment of his imagination, stirred up by wishful thinking.

The peace surrounding him is surreal, the happiness radiating inside him staggering. I wish it could be like this all the time. Him and me, together, like this. Merlin’s heart suddenly feels heavy with the knowledge that he’s asking for too much. Whatever Gaius says about fate and destiny – I can’t see how that’s going to pan out. Merlin’s honest enough with himself to understand that the bubble they’ve created is bound to burst. And very soon, too. Most likely with the loudest of pops.

We’ve almost come to the end of our time. After a lot of stalling Edwin’s promised to send the formula to Arthur on Tuesday. And then? Merlin swallows hard. He promised himself to tell Arthur everything this weekend. It is now Saturday late afternoon and so far he’s chickened out like a measly coward. How on earth is he supposed to bring the topic up?

By now Merlin’s worked his way through a plethora of ideas, ending up throwing them all into the wind. None seems fitting for what he has to admit. Starting with the fate bearing “Arthur, there’s something I have to tell you.” to the casual “Hey, look! What’s that?” whilst pointing at the Pendragon emblem appearing in the evening sky, magically created out of fire sparks.

He dismissed the lecture version “You know, not all sorcerers are bad. Some of them are actually pretty decent people” as quickly as it popped into his head. The romantic idea of conjuring up colourful, exotic butterflies out of thin air to prove magic can be quite fluffy felt out of place considering the severity of his admission.

The ‘all or nothing’ approach “You know, you have magic and so do I” held up for as long as an hour before Merlin discarded it as too much into the face. His latest concoction includes magic fireworks going off all around them while he sinks to his knees before Arthur, begging him for forgiveness. Merlin shakes his head. He can’t see it going that way either.

In the end Merlin knows there is no good way of saying this. Particularly when it’s followed by
“And I took this job to get to the formula because my father’s dying from it. You know, the sorcerer at Lamia House.” Fuck. Merlin scowls, filled with trepidation and his heart is pulled and pushed between love and guilt until it hurts. Time is running through his fingers like sand through a wormhole sized funnel.

*Arthur might understand. He did help MUs before. He does believe in justice.* Merlin buoyed himself up. Maybe all this will turn out so much better than he fears. Arthur was quite taken with the idea of checking the Serum out. Maybe …The thought remains unfinished as a thump on his biceps hits him out of nowhere and drops him back into reality with a whack.

“Hey, you’re looking as if you’d swallowed your pet rat.” Arthur has woken and grins at him mischievously, looking as fit as a fiddle. “What’s wrong?”

“Guess I’m hungry.” Merlin fibs, desperately trying to figure out how he can bring the dreaded topic up.

“So am I,” Arthur mumbles. “But not for food.” With that he slides over to Merlin like a lithe cat to pin him in a tight embrace a moment later. When their lips collide and nothing but love, want and Arthur’s scent fill Merlin’s senses, the best of his intentions die a happy death, leaving him to helplessly vow “tomorrow” in his head.

Arthur’s mobile ringing inside the house breaks them apart. Cursing a frustrated “Should have switched the bloody phone off,” under his breath, Arthur jumps up and rushes inside. Merlin puffs some air out and sinks back onto the lounger, intent on enjoying this as long as he has a chance.

He hears Arthur talking to someone on the phone, his voice getting more agitated as the conversation moves along. Merlin can’t make out the words, but it sure sounds as if something unpleasant has happened. When Arthur returns, his whole demeanour has changed. His features are grave and sombre, his eyes dark and serious.

Absentmindedly Arthur settles down next to Merlin, staring into space, not uttering a sound. He’s breathing’s heavy and there’s an edge to his jawline that wasn’t there before. Arthur sits at his side without a word, averting his gaze for a minute or two. Too long, Merlin reckons and suddenly panics.

“Arthur?” he asks gingerly, his voice trembling.

“Merlin.” Arthur’s voice is hoarse and sad. “I’m so sorry, Merlin,” he says and faces him.

Merlin’s heart drops like a nuclear missile ready to detonate. “What… happened?”

Arthur sighs deeply. “Bad news,” he mutters and Merlin blanches because he dreads to think what Arthur’s about to reveal.

“What is it?”

Arthur visibly pushes himself to talk. “That was John Marshall.”

Merlin gulps, and an iron hand seems to tighten round his neck. “And?”

“I’m not sure how to say this…” Arthur hesitates before he continues. “I know you really felt for the sorcerer we saw at Lamia House.” Arthur’s eyes lock with his. “He died this afternoon.”

The world around drops away from Merlin’s view as soon as the words sink in. Every sound dies off as if someone had flicked a switch and every thought is smothered by the vacuum that’s spreading
inside him. He’s aware of struggling for breath, gasping for air in panic, his chest crushed by hurt, his heart tormented by an unforgiving wave of guilt.


“Merlin.” Arthur’s voice reaches him from somewhere far away, and when Merlin focuses, he finds Arthur’s worried eyes searching his face. Arthur. Balinor. Merlin’s surprised that his screaming heart isn’t shattering the glass windows of the house. Suddenly everything’s too much. How can love hurt so much?

Merlin gets up and stumbles away from Arthur, heading towards the lake with no particular sense of purpose. All he wants to do is get away. Get away from the searing pain that’s slicing up his heart. Get away from Arthur who can’t possibly understand his reaction, and who he doesn’t want to see the tears welling up in his eyes relentlessly.

Merlin runs, runs to the lake as if his life depended on it, jumps in and swims. He doesn’t really register where he’s going. The aim is to get away, to drown the grief and sorrow consuming him.

Images of Balinor flash through his head, the way his father looked, what he said that last time. Make me proud. Make me proud. The words reverberate inside his head like in a vast empty hall. PROUD! What an irony! Sobs are coming steady now, strangled and choked, and hot tears mingle with the cool water of the lake.

Merlin keeps swimming because he has to do SOMETHING, and unwittingly moves further and further out into the lake. His body is shaking with anguish, while his arms and legs struggle to maintain the frantic rhythm he’s forcing on them. It is as if he’s trying to punish his body, subconsciously translating his emotional pain into physical torture. Blinded by his heartbreak he’s unaware how distant the shore already is.

“Merlin!” Arthur’s voice sounds closer than he would have expected. That’s odd. “Merlin! Stop!” Why would he stop? “Merlin! Turn round!” The urgency of the words brings Merlin round and he listens.

“Undercurrents!” Arthur pants, even closer.

The same second the word registers with Merlin, he can feel it. A force pulling from below, strong and steady, tugging at his body. His limbs are exhausted by his ferocious swim, and mentally numb, Merlin’s completely caught off guard when an undertow gets a hold on him and drags him under water.

Instinctively Merlin paddles fiercely, putting the little strength he’s got left into fighting it. Never thought this could be that powerful. The surprise keeps him from reacting for one long second, but then his brain gets into gear. He mumbles a spell, and as his eyes turn golden, the current lets him go.

Just then a strong hand grabs his and helps to pull him above the water. As Merlin hits the surface of the lake, he’s spluttering profusely and sucking in the mellow evening air greedily. “Merlin.” The desperation in Arthur’s voice is almost as intense as his own.

Merlin stares at Arthur in wonderment. Where the heck did he come from? “You okay?” Arthur gulps, panic written all over his face. Merlin nods, unable to spare even half a breath for talking.

“Hold onto me for a minute.” Arthur calms from one second to the next, slipping into the leader’s role effortlessly. “We’re going back slowly. Take a rest when you need it.”
Merlin does as he’s been told, while his mind starts focusing again. Shit, that was close! What an idiot not to look out where he was heading. Arthur mentioned the day before that they had to watch out not to go too far out into the waters because of the strong undercurrents in the middle of the lake. Fuck. Arthur must believe he’s totally lost his mind. There will be no escaping an explanation now.

When they get back to the beach in front of the house they flop on the grass, arms and legs stretched to the side, both huffing and puffing, and trying to get back their breath.

“You bloody scared the hell out of me,” Arthur presses out, sounding worried and annoyed at the same time. “You promised me in hospital you’d never do that again.”

“Sorry.” Merlin’s head is spinning and he’s amazed he’s actually managing to speak. Lost in an avalanche of emotions Merlin closes his eyes, consciously steadying his breathing. “You risked your life for me.”

“Guess that makes us even,” Arthur mumbles, and then adds huskily, “I thought for a second I’d lost you.”

Merlin bites his bottom lip, embarrassed for losing his composure as he did and endangering another person by his carelessness. I would have never forgiven myself if something had happened to him. The mere idea sends a shiver down Merlin’s spine, and brings him right back to why all this happened.

Strange. How can his heart feel so empty when desolation fills him up to the brim? Merlin’s thoughts are swarming in hundred different directions simultaneously. What happened to his father’s body? Was it still there at Lamia House? And what about Hunith and Morgana? Do they already know? Have they been told? Can he ask Arthur or would that arouse suspicion? He needs to be there for his mother and sister once they’ve found out. Has to.

And as his mind is going round in circles, the tears he’s been trying to swallow threaten to suffocate him. In the effort of keeping his emotions under control, he presses his lips together tightly, burying his grief for Arthur’s sake. Causing another scene is really the last thing he wants.

Merlin almost jumps when he finds Arthur next to him all of a sudden, opening his arms to pull him in.

“Come here,” he whispers almost inaudibly, and in desperate need of some comfort Merlin cuddles into Arthur’s, relishing the strength of his hold and the warmth of his chest. Merlin’s guilt rockets sky-high. Arthur has been nothing except kind and understanding and Merlin more than owes him an honest explanation, apart from a long list of other things that need clarification.

They lie huddled together in the grass for a while. Why isn’t he asking me to explain my stupid behaviour? He must wonder why on earth I acted like a total moron! Merlin lifts his head to find Arthur looking at him in deep thought, a frown on his forehead and confusion in his eyes.

But he doesn’t ask the obvious, and Merlin doesn’t offer. Not now. He’s just lost his father, and the image of Balinor, dead and lifeless, in that mingy cell at Lamia House, is tearing his heart out. He can’t, he simply can’t risk losing Arthur on the same day.

“I promise I’ll explain,” he says, his eyes pleading for more patience. “Tomorrow.”

Arthur just nods and places a chaste kiss on Merlin’s lips. And then Arthur’s kissing his cheeks, his chin, his eyes, peppering his face with tiny pecks in the most affectionate way. Merlin lets out a heartfelt sigh and, feeling warm, safe and loved, his guard drops and quiet tears start rolling down
“Hey.” Arthur wipes the dampness off his cheeks, and gently massages his back with his other hand, just letting him be. Merlin melts into Arthur’s embrace, grateful of his consoling presence. The comfort to be held by his strong arms, in acceptance, no questions asked or conditions attached, is balm for Merlin’s battered heart and soul.

I love you. And whatever happens, that’s not going to change. Merlin brushes his lips against Arthur’s shoulder. “Thank you,” he mumbles, and lifts his hand to run it over Arthur’s jawline. “Thank you.” Overcome by emotions as opposite as matter and antimatter, Merlin shudders.

“Looks like you could do with a warm shower,” Arthur says in response to Merlin’s goose bumps and rubs his back with the palm of his hand.

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Arthur watches Merlin disappear in the house to follow his advice. He silently shakes his head. What the heck has just happened? Arthur can’t make head or tail of it. That’s for sure. He had kind of expected that Merlin wouldn’t take the news lightly, considering the way he’d reacted to Balinor’s plight before. But this? Merlin’s breakdown was mind-boggling.

He actually acted as if he’d known the man personally, as if the sorcerer had been someone dear. Which is ridiculous for obvious reasons. There’s something Merlin’s been keeping close to his chest. Arthur’s more than sure about that now. Something Merlin finds difficult to talk about. He should know he can tell me anything. Arthur takes a deep breath. After all I’ve confided some of my most private thoughts in him.

Merlin’s put him off until tomorrow. He promised he would explain himself. Arthur has no idea why Merlin can’t come clean with him right now and here. It leaves him feeling odd and uneasy, but he isn’t prepared to let this spoil what’s been the best weekend of his life. Merlin means more to him than anyone else, and he’s never ever been as happy as this. Outrageously happy to be honest. Surely he can muster the patience to give the man he loves the time he needs! He presses his lips together as he decides. Yes, I can wait.

Arthur gets up to follow Merlin inside when a thought hits him. He really should remind John Marshall to keep an eye out for any suspicious activities around Balinor’s mortal remains. He can’t have another body disappearing right under his nose.

I did have my phone out here earlier. Arthur looks around, then gropes under the towels and cushions on the sun lounger. But to no avail. “Where’s my bloody mobile?”
Trapped

“Where is my bloody phone?” Arthur remembers holding it when he came out to tell Merlin about the sorcerer’s death. Then Merlin had taken off out of the blue and thrown himself into the water while Arthur looked on, completely flabbergastted.

But when Merlin headed towards the unsafe part of the lake, clearly oblivious of the danger and too preoccupied to notice the signs warning off any swimmers, Arthur knew he had to act before it was too late. He’d sprinted towards the lake and yes, he vaguely remembers gripping his mobile far too tight at that point. And then?

Inspiration strikes and Arthur retracts his steps along the grass and then the beach itself. He chucked the mobile into the grass before he dived into the lake to follow Merlin. A tiny reflection of a silvery surface finally catches his attention. Shit. His mobile didn’t end up on the grass but right on the beach, and there it is now, water gently lapping over it. Arthur doesn’t even need to check that it’s totally buggered. Water and mobiles notoriously don’t go together.

His phone call will have to wait. There’s no landline at the Lake Cottage, but he can borrow Merlin’s mobile later. Arthur lets out a frustrated snort. He’s never been keen putting things like that off.

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The warm shower has definitely done Merlin some good. He feels slightly more focused and marginally more relaxed. Having a meal, however, is proving a bit tricky. They settled on the huge comfy sofa earlier to take a light, casual dinner, but Merlin’s stomach is not quite up to it. His insides are coiled up so tight he’s happy he manages to breathe. He picks at the light salad Arthur has tossed together, dressing and ingredients all supplied by one of the most popular Italian restaurants in Camelot, and mindlessly takes a bite off the crusty bread.

“Eating a little bit is going to help make you feel better,” Arthur says, attempting to nudge Merlin to give it a go.

“Not sure I can.”

“Have some wine at least,” Arthur insists and Merlin takes a huge gulp of the delicious sparkling white just to please him. “That’s better.” Arthur smiles and wraps an arm around Merlin’s shoulder. “Just trying to cheer you up.”

“You are.” Merlin is very sure about that. “More than you know.” Merlin inwardly groans in exasperation when his treasonous eyes tear up yet again. Arthur’s been nothing short of fantastic in his selfless support, and he’s totally awed by it. He still hasn’t asked me why I behaved the way I did. He’s so patient with me.

“Come here. Let’s see if I can get you to take your mind off it,” Arthur says, leaning back on the huge chaise longue and motioning Merlin to settle between his legs. No point arguing with that. Merlin does as he’s been asked and his back sags against Arthur’s chest.

“Mhhh.” Merlin sighs and lets his head fall on Arthur’s shoulder.
“That’s better. How about a movie?”

“Whatever you fancy.”

A minute later Arthur has chosen a thriller and they settle into watching it without much ado. Well, Merlin tries to, but before he knows, his mind gets tangled in a web of haphazard thoughts. Losing his father, failing at getting the formula, reproaching himself for not having tried hard enough, for letting himself getting distracted by Arthur, worrying about his mum and Morgana and whether he’ll be able to be there for them when they find out about Balinor, telling Arthur the truth and losing him.

Overwhelmed by his inner torment, Merlin trembles. “Relax,” Arthur says into his ear and wraps his arms round Merlin’s waist from behind. “You’re all uptight again.”

Arthur’s right. His whole body has tensed up with anxiety and apprehension, and he feels like a coil that’s going to snap any second. Merlin gasps when Arthur’s right hand slips under his T-shirt and starts rubbing small circles over the smooth skin of his stomach. Aaahhh. This is so good. “Nice,” Merlin whispers hoarsely, pushing a bit closer against Arthur’s chest.

After fifteen minutes Arthur suddenly removes his hand. “This isn’t working, is it?” he says quietly and to Merlin’s surprise takes the remote and switches the TV off. Merlin squirms free of Arthur’s embrace and turns round. “Hey, I was watching that,” he says as light-hearted as he manages.

“No, you’re not,” Arthur retorts, matter of fact. “You’re uptight and your head’s completely somewhere else.” Merlin’s gob-smacked how well Arthur is reading his innermost feelings. To his credit, he’s done his best to concentrate on the film in the hope it would distract him, but his mind hasn’t been cooperating. There’s simply too much bothering him.

“I don’t like seeing you like this,” Arthur says and looks at Merlin thoughtfully. Then he puts out his hand and Merlin takes it automatically. When Arthur gets up, Merlin follows without asking. When Arthur leads him to the bedroom, he doesn’t resist. When Arthur pulls them both onto the huge soft bed, he complies wordlessly.

“Let me look after you,” Arthur whispers and hugs him tight, both so used to the tingle between them by now, they hardly acknowledge it. He then proceeds to pull off Merlin’s shorts and T-shirt after removing his own. When he’s done he pulls Merlin flush to his body, and God, does it feel amazing to be engulfed in Arthur’s solid warmth. Merlin cuddles in even closer, breathing in Arthur’s scent and letting it flood his senses. He sighs contentedly, burying his head in the firm softness of Arthur’s chest.

Arthur cups his head with one hand, threading his fingers slowly through his hair and gently massaging his scalp all over, again and again. At the same time Arthur’s other hand glides down Merlin’s back, right into the small of it, and then over the curve of his butt, stroking him tenderly in ever increasing circles. And slowly, but surely the repetitive caress is starting to unwind Merlin inside and out.

Although nothing could take away the hurt raging inside him, Arthur’s touch is infinitely calming, the sensation of his skin pacifying, the rhythm of his gentle hands mollifying. When Merlin lifts his head Arthur’s lips are already there, waiting for him, soft and tender and full of compassion. Arthur’s presence is like balm on his soul. So good, so comforting, so reassuring.

“I love you,” Arthur breathes into his mouth, and Merlin’s aching heart cries out in despair. I love you, too. There’s nothing he wants more in this moment than to say those three little words branded into his heart in capital letters. But he knows he can’t. Not before Arthur’s heard the whole truth.
Merlin intensifies his hug instead and runs his thumb lovingly along Arthur’s bottom lip when they break apart. Then he places a small kiss at the corner of his lover’s mouth and allows himself to be cocooned in Arthur’s soothing arms. Merlin’s never felt more connected, more loved than in this instant, when a simple embrace and caring touch bring him the quiet salvation he so desperately needs.

The emotional roller coaster he’s been on all day finally screeches to a halt. Tomorrow. He swears to himself before the world around him, with all its hurt and sorrow falls away, and he dozes off, wrapped tightly round the man he loves.

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Boy, I’m so hot. Merlin wakes up radiating heat, unsure how long he’s been asleep. A second later he registers that he’s pressed firmly against Arthur and a wave of intense happiness rushes over him before the events of the previous day reach his consciousness and brutally stab at his insides.

It is tomorrow. His heart sinks like a lead-balloon. He lifts his head to check the alarm. It’s only 5.32. When he looks round at Arthur, he finds the blonde’s eyes resting on him in contemplation.

“Did I wake you?” Merlin mumbles and brushes a wisp of hair out of Arthur’s face.

“Nope. Been awake for a while.”

Merlin falls on his back to stare at the ceiling. The day of reckoning has come. He will have to face the music because he can’t bear lying to Arthur a second longer.

“How are you this morning?” Arthur asks, running his index finger over Merlin’s collarbone.

Merlin finds it hard not to squirm at the question, but still manages a feeble “Fine.”

“Hmmm.” Arthur sounds unconvinced, and he hesitates, apparently unsure what to say next. Almost absent-mindedly he traces a line from Merlin’s collarbone to the scar on his shoulder. “That’s healed really quickly,” he says with a hint of surprise in his voice, leaving unclear whether it’s the speed of the healing or the thought that this has never occurred to him before that puzzles him.

“Family trait. We all heal fast,” Merlin replies, his stomach churning at the fib. This has to end. Now.

He turns back to Arthur and looks him straight into the eyes. “I owe you an explanation.”

“It’s quite early yet. I can wait.” Arthur smiles and bends forward to brush Merlin’s lips with his.

“But I can’t.” Merlin can hardly hear his words for the noisy pounding of his heart.

Arthur half sits up and rests his head on his hand, his eyes alert and interested. “Okay then. I’m all ears.”

Merlin swallows to get rid of the lump that has formed in his throat. Funny, how his breathing’s restricted all of a sudden and how his hands have started fidgeting. Heat is flushing his body and he can feel tiny pearls of sweat appearing on the nape of his neck. This is it then. This is the moment of truth.
“Promise me to hear me out, even if what you hear might be … surprising.”


A huge crash, followed by a hallowing thud stops him in his tracks.

“That was in the hall.” Arthur jumps up and throws on his short and his T-shirt with the speed of light, and Merlin’s not far behind him doing the same. “Sounds like someone’s in the house.”

They rush towards the bedroom door, but don’t get as far when three figures appear right in front of them. *Morgana!* Merlin freezes for a fraction of time, staring at the intruders in total shock. *What…?*

Morgana and the taller of the two men lift their hand, and Merlin, knowing what’s to come, instinctively pushes Arthur aside. There’s isn’t even a split second to defend himself, not even time to divert the spell that hits him in his chest full on. An invisible force lifts him up and crashes him spectacularly against the back wall.

“Merlin!” Arthur’s anguished cry is the last thing he hears before everything turns black.

This is fucking bloody unbearable. Arthur clenches his jaws, torn between worry and anger. This is the second day he’s been held without seeing a face or anybody to talk to. Nobody has bothered to speak to him, nobody has come to at least let him know why he’s been abducted.

At this moment in time, that isn’t worrying him that much, because his captors don’t seem intent on harming him. In the meantime, anyway. The room – his prison - is a lot more agreeable than it could have been. In fact, it almost looks like someone’s made an effort to make him as comfortable as possible.

There isn’t only an en-suite bathroom, stacked with towels and toiletries, but also a couple of shelves filled with books of many different genres. He even has the use of a CD player and a cupboard full of CDs if music should take his fancy. Of course there’s no TV or radio or any other way to keep in touch with the outside world, but food has appeared regularly, strangely enough usually coinciding at a time when he’s been sleeping. Which hasn’t been that often.

They are keeping me in the dark deliberately. You don’t need to be Sherlock to figure that one out, Arthur thinks bitterly. And that is where his real worry comes in. He has no idea what happened to Merlin since they arrived here. Seeing Merlin crash into the wall of his bedroom has left a lingering scar on his brain. The idiot had taken the blow of magic that was intended for him. Why does he insist on playing the hero? I’d rather he’d run for his life. I’d rather he’d run for his life.

Arthur can vaguely remember hearing Merlin moan in the back of the van that took them to this place. Blindfolded, gagged and bound, he had no opportunity to communicate with him. But then Arthur was led into this room, and Merlin was apparently taken somewhere else. *Fuck. He could be dead. Bastards.* What if he’s been severely injured and these MUs are just going to leave him to his
fate? He could be lying somewhere, bleeding to death, for all Arthur knows. The notion has been
driving him absolutely mental. It’s all he can think of.

Being faced with magic that close up has also scared the hell out of him. He is man enough to admit
that. Arthur’s never witnessed with his own eyes how powerful a spell could be. The young woman
and the two men who had broken into his house had no problem overpowering him. A whisper of
magic brought him to his knees. A flash of golden eyes rendered him unable to move a second later.
Taking him away had been child’s play after that. It’s no wonder, his father’s been on his guard all
these years.

And that woman – he can still see the expression on her face after she’d put Merlin out of action. Her
eyes were searing with hatred and contempt when she turned to Arthur. “This is all your fault!” she
shouted at him, and her intention was clear when she stretched out her hand to throw a spell his way.
He was just lucky that the taller of the two men intervened. “Remember. We still need him.”

But it wasn’t the recklessness of her action, the determination she’d shown to get her way that sent
shivers down his spine. What shocked him more was that he recognized her face. The witch who
had been on the verge of killing him was the spitting image of Nimueh, his father’s past mistress.
Could this be just a strange coincidence? Arthur doubts it, but struggles to find an explanation why
this would be meaningful.

Arthur scowls, his mind racing. There can’t be anything worse than not knowing what this is all
about. What do the MUs want with him? And why were his captors quite happily showing their
faces? Do they really have the nerve to assume that they can outplay his father? Surely they must
know what forces the Governor has at his disposal. Arthur has not the slightest doubt that Uther will
do anything in his power to get him back and that he won’t rest until those who are responsible for
this outrage are hunted down and punished.

Of course he’s checked whether there’s a way out of here. He’s rattled at the door and the window,
not actually expecting any success with it, but having to try nonetheless. As soon as he touched the
handle of either, something reminding him vividly of an electric shock forced his hand off
immediately. Both, the door and the window, were specially secured or they were protected by
magic. With no guards to manipulate, Arthur could do nothing but wait. Surely someone had to turn
up at one point.

God, his head throbs! It aches from the constant need to speculate, the ever present worry about
Merlin and the rising tension inside him. Arthur rubs his head as if it would help getting rid of the
pain. A pain that’s increased since this morning.

That’s when it hits him. He hasn’t taken his hypospray since Friday evening. With all the on-goings
on Saturday it completely slipped his mind, and then they were taken on Sunday morning. If Arthur
has been counting right, it is now Tuesday. Shit. If this is going to be as intense as last time when he
stopped taking his medication he’s in for a rough ride. How is he supposed to think when his body is
hijacking him?

Arthur leans back on his bed closing his eyes, repulsed more than ever that he’s not only totally
helpless but also severely handicapped by his illness. Concentrate on something positive. Think of
Merlin. Merlin. Arthur’s never experienced a connection as strong with anyone else. That night he
held Merlin close to his body, he knew he would do anything for the man in his arms. That he would
excuse whatever he had to say. I wish he’d had the chance to speak to me.

Arthur has wondered quite a few times what Merlin was going to give away that morning. By his
demeanour it had to be something really big. God, Merlin. Just the mention causes waves of anxiety
for his well-being. Arthur is back to gritting his teeth when he suddenly hears a noise at the door. He
sits up in a shot to see the witch who abducted him slip into the room.

“Ah, there’s the golden boy. You’re looking quite cosy in here.” She looks round and then smirks rather sarcastically. “I hope the entertainment is up to your standard?”

Arthur remains quiet. He will not be provoked into an argument that easily. He senses Morgana giving him a once over, no doubt noting the dark circles under his red-rimmed eyes. “Are we looking a tad rough?”

*I’m certainly not going to answer that.* Arthur clenches his teeth and just stares straight at her.

“Ohhh. We’re playing the silent card!” Morgana mocks him, watching his every move, gauging every one of his reactions.

“Have you actually just come to gloat or is there a reason for your pleasant visit?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Arthur. I wouldn’t waste my time on you if I hadn’t been asked to come here. I guess you would like to know why.” Morgana’s as smug as they come, doing anything possible to make Arthur uneasy. “How about taking a guess?”

“Just tell me or go back wherever you came from. I’m not in the mood for games.”

“Now, now. What happened to that infamous Pendragon charm the media are raving so much about?”

*For goodness’ sake, woman. Just spit it out and let me be.* Arthur’s on the verge of becoming rude, but realizing this is exactly what Morgana intends, he bites his lips.

“Wondered maybe why you are here?” Morgana raises her eyebrows as if to suggest that her revelation will be anything but pleasant. “Go and ask me, come on Arthur, do as you’re told.”

A hint of gold at the back of Morgana’s eyes is a clear warning sign that Arthur has been pushing Morgana’s buttons, and that it might be in his interest to play her silly game. There’s no point in aggravating the woman more than she already is. Getting hurt or incapacitated won’t help him when he needs to keep his wits about him. He lets out an audible sigh. “Why am I here?”

“It’s really quite simple, Arthur. You are here as long as it takes your father to hand over the formula of the Serum to us.”

“You can wait for a long time then!” Arthur almost laughs.

“You reckon? We know how much your father dotes on you. I’m sure he doesn’t want to find bits and pieces of his precious son delivered to his address on a regular basis.” Morgana chuckles quietly, apparently pleased about the plan to blackmail Uther Pendragon.

“Do you really think my father is going to fall for that nonsense?”

“Of course he is. He’s already assured us that a copy of the formula will be delivered shortly.”

Arthur shakes his head at the naivety of the witch. “And how are you going to determine that this is a correct version of the formula?”

“We’ve got experts to deal with that,” Morgana answers confidently.

Arthur nods as if he understands, but is inwardly completely convinced that nothing in this world will move his father to hand over the only way of controlling magic to the very people who wield it.
“You’re completely deluded if you think this is going to work. Seems that magic doesn’t necessarily go hand in hand with common sense. You’re ridiculous!” There, he’s done it after all. Arthur’s very well aware that the tone of his voice was patronizing, maybe even a bit high-minded. But how the heck can that woman even believe for a second that this foggy-brained plan’s going to work?

“Do you really think that impertinent attitude of yours is going to get you anywhere?” Morgana hisses at him in response. “You are the most arrogant, stuck-up person I’ve come across, Arthur Pendragon. Do you actually believe that YOU can command ME?” Morgana’s eyes flash golden, and Arthur suddenly finds it hard to breathe. He’s struggling for air, gasping for some oxygen, but nothing happens. He grips his throat with both his hands, desperately trying to inhale.

“Feeling a bit breathless, sir?” Morgana asks condescendingly, throwing him a challenging look. “Don’t forget that I just need to snap my fingers, Arthur, to finish you off. You understand?”

Arthur drags some air into his lungs, aghast how easy it is for those with magic to control whoever they want. “Why do you hate me so much?” he can’t help asking, even if he doesn’t expect a straight answer.

“You stand for all that is wrong in this world,” Morgana says, surprisingly honest. “In this city, in this country you stand for the law. The law that hounds those with magic. No matter whether they’re old or young, innocent or guilty. You don’t care. You think that magic is fundamentally bad and that every sorcerer is flawed by default. You equate magic with evil.”

“Do you think your actions are giving me reason to believe otherwise?”

“Why should I try to make a case? Your father, you, this government have the blood of hundreds of innocent people on their hands. You have killed MUs for years in cold blood, not asking whether they have done anything wrong, just punishing them for who they are. Have you ever thought about that, Arthur?” Morgana spits out, her eyes challenging Arthur to answer.

Arthur looks at Morgana with surprise. “This government’s never killed MUs with intent, as you seem to suggest. What the heck are you talking about?”

Morgana laughs derisively. “Are you really that blind or simply stupid? The Serum has been killing our kind for years.”

“It was designed to help you.” Arthur has no idea why he feels that he has to defend himself when recent events at Lamia House have quite clearly indicated that the Serum might not be what he was brought up to believe.

“You really live in cloud-cuckoo-land, don’t you?” Morgana faces him straight on. “The Serum is deadly, and it killed my father, as so many MUs before that. He died because of YOUR laws!” The witch’s voice is full of sorrow and anger now.

“So that’s why you want the formula? To make sure that magic will reign freely in Camelot again?” Arthur shudders at the thought after witnessing what magic is capable of. _Father knew what he was doing when he introduced the Serum. These people are downright dangerous._

“You do have your bright moments, don’t you?” Morgana chuckles sarcastically. “I have no idea what Merlin saw in you. You’re not only an arrogant, dumb ass, but more boring than watch paint dry.”

What Merlin SAW? Arthur’s heart stops for a second at the thrown away comment and his body goes cold. What is the witch insinuating?
Morgana chuckles deridingly. “Do I detect a reaction in that poker face of yours? I wonder what caused that.” Something is telling Arthur that she knows exactly why he reacted, but he’s determined not to give her any reason to taunt him even more. He just stares at her without moving a muscle in his face while trembling like a leaf inside.

“Worried about your boyfriend, are you?” Why does the word ‘boyfriend’ sound like an insult and something dirty when it’s coming from her lips? The witch’s eyes are piercing his, gauging his reaction.

Arthur’s resilience is slipping away. He simply MUST know, no matter how much it costs him, pride or otherwise. “What have you done with Merlin?” he gasps, cursing for giving away how much the answer means to him.

“Merlin?” Morgana draws out the name as if she’s never heard it before.

“If you’ve hurt him…”

Why does the witch look rather triumphant all of a sudden? *What have they done to Merlin?* Panic squeezes Arthur’s heart so tight it has trouble keeping its jittery rhythm.

“Why would I hurt my own brother?” Morgana smirks, letting her words roll off her tongue as if they were something delicious.

“What?” Arthur asks completely flabbergasted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Merlin is my brother, and it’s only thanks to him we found out about your weekend in that beautifully secluded area. It made our plan a lot easier, I can assure you.” Morgana sounds infinitely pleased at sharing that information.

Arthur shakes his head, sure that the woman is doing everything she can to rile him on purpose. “Keep your lies, witch. There’s no way Merlin is your brother, and he certainly would never betray me like that!”

Morgana eyes him in a calculating way. “You reckon? Maybe you should ask him yourself.”

“He’s alive then?” Relief washes over Arthur. That’s all he wanted to know. If Merlin lives then there’s hope. Does the witch really believe she can alienate him from the man he loves so easily? “When can I see him?”

“God, you really are into him, aren’t you?” Morgana presses her lips together in a thin line before the corners of her mouth twitch into a nasty smile. “Maybe someone needs a wake-up call.” And with that she leaves the room before Arthur can respond.

Bloody sorcerers. Trying to sow mistrust and hard feelings between him and Merlin. Keeping him on edge on purpose. Provoking him until he snaps.

At least Arthur has established why he’s been kidnapped. Does his father really trust these people to return him safely once they have the formula? They could snap his spine with one look or one mumble if they wanted to. Why would they let him live? No point speculating about that now. He’ll deal with that when it happens.

Fuck, that head of his is killing him. And he can feel a wave of nausea lurking in the depth of his guts ready to strike. Fuck.
Morgana struts out of Arthur’s room, raging inside. I am going to show that arse what’s what. She heads straight for the room Merlin’s occupied for the last two days. He’s quite badly concussed and has been sleeping for most of the time. Morgana’s been itching to speak to him, but until this morning the doctor’s advised against it.

“Merlin,” she says warmly when she walks up to him. Merlin turns his bandaged head but still manages a scowl when he sees her. Of course she’d never intended to hit him with that spell of hers. Never him. Morgana trembles at the thought that she might have hurt the very person dearest to her heart.

It’s Arthur’s fault this has happened. If he hadn’t blinded Merlin with his charm and tricked his soul into trusting him, Merlin would have never tried to protect the young Pendragon. “I’m so sorry, Merlin. I really am. This was not intended for you. I …”

“If this had hit Arthur he could be dead.” Merlin’s voice sounds bitter and angry, making Morgana cringe on the inside. “Where is he? What have you done to him?”

Morgana grits her teeth in anger. Even now, injured and exhausted, all Merlin thinks about is the young Pendragon.

“Morgana.” Merlin is looking at her, evidently disorientated and confused and fraught with worry. “Where is Arthur?” he repeats and Morgana’s heart breaks into two. There’s something she has to do about Merlin’s obsession with the young Pendragon. Well, if she thinks about it, she’s done something already. Arthur will change his tune when he finds out that she’s told him the truth about Merlin, and THAT puts a huge smile on her face. Surely Merlin will see sense once the Pendragon rejects him? I will be there for you, when you need me, I promise.

“He’s kept in a safe place until Uther hands over the formula.”

“You haven’t hurt him?” Merlin sounds distraught, and Morgana feels anger bubbling hot under her skin. So what if they had!

“You care more about him than about any of us. Your own kin. What happened to you, Merlin?” she pushes out with disgust.

“I saw the man Arthur really is.”

“Yeah. Through rose-tinted spectacles.”

Merlin looks at Morgana in complete disbelief. “Arthur is honest and kind and just…”

“You’re making me feel nauseous,” Morgana spits out.

“Tell me NOW that he’s okay,” Merlin demands gruffly and Morgana flinches. Merlin has never ever spoken to her like that. The young Pendragon is rubbing off on him, but for Merlin’s sake she reluctantly gives in.

“You precious boyfriend is okay,” Morgana sneers and Merlin’s head snaps up as if he hadn’t expected her to know about Arthur and him. Morgana’s disappointment is almost physically painful. “How could you? Sleeping with the enemy?” she whispers, images of what she watched that Friday night still more than vivid in her head.
“Arthur’s not the enemy, he could be our biggest ally. I was getting my hands on the formula today! Arthur has agreed to have it checked out. Everything was falling into place! But you had to interfere and go crazy! By the time Gaius and I are ready to develop an antidote, Uther will have left a sea of devastation amongst MUs! What on earth did you think?

“Ally, him?” Morgana shouts exasperated, ignoring Merlin’s last question and homing in on his first statement instead. “He’s twisted you so badly you can’t think straight anymore.” Merlin goes for the ambiguity of her statement. “Maybe I don’t want to think straight anymore.” Morgana shakes her head in disbelief and grief. “Not even for father?” Merlin pales and his eyes are tearing up. “You’ve been told.”

“Yesterday.” Morgana almost chokes on the word.

“How’s mum?”

“As to be expected.” Morgana sees the tremble on Merlin’s lip and can’t bear it. She takes his hand into hers and places a soft kiss on to it.

“I want to see her,” Merlin says, blatantly doing his best to keep himself under control.

“Of course.” Morgana’s bad mood flips in an instant. They are definitely on one page with this. “God, Merlin. I hate arguing with you like this.”

When Merlin slowly retracts his hand from Morgana’s, she hardly manages to suppress her tears. “It’s not me that’s been led astray, Morgana, it’s you. You betrayed my trust when I told you where Arthur and I were.”

“We were going to go ahead with the plan anyway, just not so soon.” Morgana defends herself fervently. “I tried to let you know about it, so you had enough time to get away from Arthur before it happened.”

“And you think I would’ve left him just like that?”

Morgana takes a deep intake of breath. Fucking, bloody Arthur. Merlin is totally blinded by him. So much so that he’s willing to risk his own life for the man. Merlin’s loyalties have definitely shifted.

“Waiting a day or two would have made all the difference. This will cost our community. I warned you long ago that violence has no place in our fight,” Merlin says imploringly, trying to make her see his point of view.

“We waited long enough, Merlin. Somebody had to take action, and we’re going to lead the revolution as it unfolds.” There’s intense pride and determination in Morgana’s little speech. Yes, she’s proud of what they’ve done, even if Merlin doesn’t agree. She gets off the bed and heads towards the door. “You’ll see that in the end all this was for the best.”

Merlin throws her a disbelieving look and then leans back and closes his eyes. Morgana scans his face pensively before she quietly closes the door behind her. She stares at her hand on the door handle, her mind somewhere completely different. I love him, no matter what. She admits to herself, her heart heavy and desperate for her feelings to be finally recognized. He will see sense when Arthur drops him, even if he’s misguided now. And if he doesn’t, I know just the way to make it happen.
The darkest day

Arthur Pendragon kidnapped

Security Breech at the Ministry

Government held for Ransom

Is Camelot still safe?

Basically every daily newspaper is covering Arthur’s disappearance in one way or another. Uther grits his teeth, frustration and anger seething inside him. It’s blatantly obvious that somebody has leaked this to the press deliberately. That’s the last thing I need.

The Pendragon PR machine has done well to keep the rumours about Arthur’s health simmering under the surface so far, but somehow the news of his abduction has hit the papers so fast, they couldn’t react to it quickly enough. And now Uther’s facing this abomination of a political and personal nightmare. As a seasoned politician, he understands that headlines like this can seriously backfire on his government.

A few anxious voices have already aired their concern about the security of Camelot. That could easily turn into hysteria, if he doesn’t play the next card right. Uther received the demand of the criminals who took his son a couple of days ago. The message, immediately revealing who’s behind the kidnapping, was simple: Arthur’s life for the formula of the Serum.

Bloody bastards. Uther’s hate against magic is so deeply ingrained he can hardly breathe when he pictures his only son is in the hands of these vicious thugs. It only confirms what he’s been preaching for so many years: Sorcery’s evil and it needs to be controlled and suppressed. No matter what. The Serum’s done that successfully for years, serving him well on his mission.

Handing the formula over to those with magic would be suicidal madness. With the threat of the Serum gone, sorcerers would take Camelot over mercilessly. He’s sure of that. I will never let that happen. Fury and a feeling of impotence rage inside Uther like a wildfire. But what about Arthur? Uther takes the next best thing he can reach on his desk and throws it against the wall in full force to let some steam off. Fuck, not that it worked. This should have never happened. And right under his nose, too. How was that even possible?

He loves Arthur with all his heart, but the boy’s affliction has been the bane of his life. The day he found out that the boy had inherited some magical ability from his mother had been the worst in his life. He’d promised then he would never let it corrupt Arthur and contaminate his mind. By a stroke of luck Edwin and Nimueh had completed the formula for the Serum not long before, giving him a means to fight the power that could ruin his son’s life. But now it looks like magic is going to take his son from him anyway. Unless he hands over the only weapon he has against it. Damn.

A knock at the door startles Uther out of his dark thoughts.

“Uther.” Edwin enters and nods at him.

“You hinted on the phone earlier that you might have a way out of this bloody mess?” Uther’s comes straight to the point. He’s had enough of fretting over this.
Edwin approaches him with a smug smile on his face. “I did, and I think I have.”

Uther looks at his old friend expectantly. “Let’s hear it.”

“I say, let the rebels have the formula.”

“What? Are you out of your mind? I’ll never hand control of the Serum to MUs. Over my dead body,” Uther shouts at the top of his voice, disappointment crushing the ray of the hope that has been flickering in his heart since Edwin’s phone call.

“Hold on, Uther. I’m not finished.” Then Edwin slowly reveals his plan, and five minutes later there’s a satisfied smile on Uther’s face.

“You’ve been a true friend and a valuable ally for all those years,” Uther says, squeezing Edwin’s shoulder gratefully. Yes, he’s been lucky to find a sorcerer willing to work against his own kind.

They’d met at university, an odd duo, united by their craving for power and their hatred of the magical community. Edwin and Uther had been irreversibly scarred by magic at a young age. Uther, whose family had been wiped out by a sorcerer for no other reason than to show his power, leaving him to fend for his own from a young age and making his youth an utter misery. Edwin had been shunned by his own family for his love of dark magic, condemned to live a life of solitude, never fitting in anywhere and avoided by those who should have loved him.

They found common ground in their obsession to avenge themselves and they’d formed a bond, a quiet understanding that they needed each other’s skills and experience to pay back those who’d wounded them so deeply. It had been the one thing that connected them right from the start. They’d both suffered by the hand of sorcerers, and they’d both been humiliated by them. And they’d both vowed to never let magic get the upper hand in Camelot again.

The way things looked that was not going to happen this time, either.

It is time. The sentence’s been repeating inside his head like a stuck record. Merlin is outside Arthur’s room staring at the door mindlessly, his blood rushing in his ears, draining out any noise around him. He’s actually been standing here for quite a few minutes.

I need to be calm and composed, Merlin tells himself for the umpteenth time, trying to get his shaking hands under control without any success.

This feels like a walk to the gallows. Merlin runs his tongue over his dry lips. I know what’s coming but there’s nothing I can do about it. He’s gone through a variety of possible scenarios in the hope he might have overlooked the one thing that could avoid this ending in disaster. But the end result has always been the same. The odds of leaving that room with a smile on his face are ridiculously low.

Merlin’s tried to steel himself against this moment, the moment of truth, because he knows there’s no way round it. I have to tell him. He needs to know who I am. I don’t want to have any secrets from him any longer. Anxiety pulls Merlin’s throat tight and tighter. And then he’s going to leave you. A little devil whispers inside his head. You’ve known this day would come right from the beginning. So what are you whining for?

He loves me, he will think this through and understand. Merlin savours the notion for one long
second, letting wishful thinking rule his head, hating that he can’t find it in his heart to really believe it.

When he opens the door he finds Arthur sitting at the table, his head on his chest as he’s peacefully dozing over a book in his hand. He looks awful. There are dark shadows under his eyes and his face is as pale as a sheet. *What have they done to him? Why does he look as if he’s been to hell and back?*

Arthur startles awake when Merlin gets close and looks up at him in dazed bewilderment. “Merlin?” As soon as he realizes that he can trust his eyes he jumps up and pulls Merlin into a tight hug hastily. “Merlin. Thank God.” The relief in his voice should have felt liberating and joyful, but it gnaws at Merlin’s conscience like a hungry dog on a bone.

Merlin sinks into Arthur’s arms, allowing himself that last morsel of happiness before he’s going to do what he must. The tingle is there, reliable and strong, buzzing between them in harmony. Merlin basks in the affection wrapping itself around him like a woollen blanket. He nuzzles Arthur’s neck and takes a deep breath, letting Arthur’s scent engulf his senses. *How am I going to live without this? Without him?* A distraught sob erupts inside him but gets stuck at the back of his throat, suffocating anything he might have wanted to say.

When Arthur pulls back to look at him properly, Merlin cringes at the intensity of emotion shining in his eyes. *For how much longer will Arthur look at me like that?* Their lips find each other without another word, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. They fit together like a glove, perfectly, as if they were meant, and Merlin commits every caress, every breath, every loving touch to memory.

*I love you, and I’ve never told you. I love you. Good-bye.* Merlin tenderly runs his thumb over Arthur’s mouth and brushes his lips against the slight scruff on his cheeks. Then he takes a deep breath and slowly steps back, willing himself to let go of Arthur’s hand. A last brush against Arthur’s fingers, a last caress of his arm.

“You’re looking unwell. What have they done to you?” Merlin has to start somewhere.

“They’ve been treating me fine.” Arthur’s voice is shaking, still overwhelmed by Merlin’s appearance. “I haven’t had my hypospray for a few days.”

Merlin looks at Arthur in shock. *Shit.* He hadn’t thought of that. How long would it take for Arthur’s magic to shake the shackles of the Serum? “How bad has it been?” he asks, remembering Arthur’s account of the awful withdrawal symptoms he experienced when he stopped taking the hypospray first time.

“Actually better than I expected. I’ve been dizzy and nauseous, and I feel as rough as a badger’s bum, but I’m coping.” Arthur breaks out into a smile. “I feel a lot better now that I know you’re okay. I was so worried about you.” Arthur looks at the bandage on the back of his head. “Are you alright?”

“I was a bit concussed, and my head’s a bit tender and sore, but I got some treatment and medication, and I slept.”

“Thank God.” Arthur puffs a sigh of relief and then throws him a squint look. “You did it again.”

“What?” Merlin furrows his brows in confusion.

“You took that blow the witch intended for me.”

Merlin bites his lip in embarrassment. *Of course I did. It was the least I could do.* Arthur smiles at him affectionately, clearly misinterpreting his guilt for modesty, before he continues.
“That witch who attacked us. She’s really poisonous.”

“She came to see you?” Merlin blanches at the thought.

“Yes, she told me that they’re blackmailing my father. The formula of the Serum for my life. Can you believe that? They are totally deluded if they think my father’s going to agree to that.”

“Your father loves you. I think he would do anything to keep you safe,” Merlin says slowly and with conviction.

“Anything but this, Merlin. I assure you.”

A wave of intense worry flushes through Merlin. He thought that Uther agreed to the exchange. But what if he hasn’t? What are the rebels going to do with Arthur then? Are they going to make an example out of him just to hit Uther where it hurts most? “Do you know whether they’ve heard from your father?” he enquires cautiously.

“Well, according to that black-haired witch, he’s agreed to hand over the formula, but I simply can’t believe that.” Merlin lets out a sigh of relief. *Thank God.*

“I don’t think that witch can be trusted with anything she says. You should have heard all the lies she dished up about you, trying to taunt me.”

Merlin freezes. *This is it.* Why the fuck did Morgana have to interfere? He wanted to do this on his terms. The way he saw fit. But now he has to take it from where she left off. “What did she say?”

“She claimed that you were her brother. What a laugh! How could she possibly believe I would swallow that?” Arthur shakes his head in apparent disbelief.

Merlin is starting to hyperventilate, but nevertheless determined to spill the beans before he panics and chickens out. “Her name’s Morgana.”

Arthur’s looking at him, unsure what to do with that bit of random information. “Who cares? That lying snake tried to discredit you to get to me.”

“She told the truth.” Merlin focuses at the window behind Arthur, hardly able to utter the words.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Arthur is clearly taken aback and bewildered. Merlin can hear it in his voice. For the moment he’s not brave enough to look straight into his eyes. He can’t because he might stop when the first signs of hurt appear on Arthur’s face. “Morgana is my foster sister.”

Merlin hears Arthur swallow and have a sharp intake of breath. “What? Have they forced you to say that, Merlin? Tell me. This is nonsense and you know it. What’s going on?”

Merlin grits his teeth so hard he’s sure Arthur can hear the crunching. He takes the final plunge and faces Arthur directly. “Nobody’s forcing me to say anything apart from myself, Arthur. Morgana told the truth. We were brought up together.”

Arthur stares at him, clearly unable to speak even a single word while digesting the momentous news.

“You are her brother?” he finally pushes out, his brows deeply furrowed as the message is slowly reaching him. “You are her brother.” Arthur sounds as if he’s trying to convince himself that he has heard and understood this correctly.
“I don’t understand.” Arthur’s desperate effort to hang on to what he believes to be right is crucifying to watch.

“She was found lost and alone when she was two and my parents adopted her.” The explanation is as factual as a mathematical equation.

“The witch who abducted us is your sister.” Merlin notices that Arthur puts some physical distance between them, as he gets up to settle on the bed in the corner.


“The witch said they knew where to find me because you told her. Is that true, too?” Merlin’s thundering heart receives its first thrashing. He can see where this is going, but he isn’t prepared to lie again.

“It is.” The answer hits Arthur like a bombshell. His head snaps up and his eyes zero in on Merlin who keenly qualifies his statement. “I told Morgana unwittingly, and she passed it on to her friends. How was I to know that she would abuse my trust like that?” Merlin whispers in the full knowledge that this sounds more than unconvincing, however true it may be. Damn Morgana. She’s done a really good job sowing the seeds of distrust early so they had time to germinate.

“HER friends?” The doubt in Arthur’s voice is like a blow below the belt.

“These sorcerers out there are NOT my friends. I had no idea that this would happen, Arthur.”

“She said her father has recently died of the Serum.”

Merlin swallows hard and bites his lips in trepidation, fully aware that Arthur is watching every one of his moves. He must have noticed how nervous and terrified he is. The light of recognition crossing Arthur’s face confirms he has added two and two together correctly.

“That sorcerer … Balinor.” Arthur stops, visibly holding his breath, before realization crosses his face. “His eyes are yours.” Arthur’s gaze bores into Merlin’s eyes as if to double check. “He was your father,” he finally states with certainty.

No point denying that. Merlin decides to jump into this whole sordid reveal thing. “That’s what I tried to tell you at the Lake Cottage. That’s why I reacted the way I did. I loved my father. He was a good and honourable man, and he shouldn’t have died like that.”

Arthur nods, but Merlin can’t fathom to which part of his comment. He doesn’t have to wait long to find out. “You are the son of a sorcerer. Your sister is a witch.” Arthur states as he walks towards the window, his steps as heavy as if all the worries of this world were weighing him down.

Merlin doesn’t know what to do or what to say when Arthur goes totally silent after that. “Arthur,” Merlin gasps, needing to have some kind of response. Something to understand what Arthur’s feeling right now because his face betrays nothing, nothing at all. Suddenly the atmosphere’s charged with electricity and the air’s become too thick to breathe. Merlin wipes his clammy hands on his trousers, unsure how to stop them from fidgeting. Arthur. Talk to me.

When Arthur swivels round, any hope for forgiveness dies a slow and painful death. All the love and worry that was on Arthur’s face just a few minutes earlier have been wiped away. What remains is a stony mask, impersonal and unapproachable. But it’s Arthur’s eyes that deal Merlin’s heart the fatal blow. They’re distant and lifeless, and completely, utterly cold. “You have magic, too?” Arthur asks tonelessly.
“Arthur,” Merlin says imploringly, “Let me explain. Let me make you understand.”

“You do. Oh my God.” Arthur sinks on the chair, his legs obviously giving up on him. Merlin’s shaking like a leaf in an autumn storm when Arthur speaks again. “Show me,” he says, and Merlin takes a huge gulp of air. He needs to see it to believe it.

Arthur flinches when Merlin whispers a word in a strange language and his eyes turn golden. A bundle of flames appears out of nowhere on his outstretched palm. Arthur turns from ashen to grey and remains completely still, the only movement in his bottom lip, trembling uncontrollably.

“You lied to me all this time,” Arthur chokes out eventually shaking his head in disbelief.

“I didn’t want to.” Merlin’s horrified that the ball he’s set rolling is skidding out of control so quickly.

“Didn’t want to?” Arthur laughs bitterly. “You’re with them, aren’t you? Everything you told me fits in. You are one of THEM.” I knew he would end up with the wrong end of the stick. Fuck, Arthur, how can you go for that?

“No, Arthur. I’m not. I just got stuck into the middle of something I have no control over.”

Arthur smirks. “You don’t really expect me to believe that, do you?”

“I hoped you would.”

“To prove that I’m a gullible idiot?”

“No, to show that you trust my word.”

Arthur puts his hands over his face and rubs his cheeks fervently. “I did trust you Merlin. It is me who’s been betrayed. You lied about who you are all those months, and then even when we …” Arthur voice dies, strangled by anguish.

“My father. He was dying. I had to do something to save him,” Merlin pushes out quickly, hoping that maybe this is something that Arthur can associate with.

“Why?” His voice sounds small and uncertain and overloaded with hurt. Before Merlin can say anything Arthur lets out a pained groan. “Oh fuck. You were after the formula of the Serum.” It’s a statement, not a question, not even an assumption.

Arthur’s sussed the situation out, and it takes him mere seconds thereafter to draw his conclusions in rapid succession. “You weaselled your way into my office, God knows how you managed that, so you could snoop around while you pretended to be…” Arthur voice dies, strangled by anguish.

“My father. He was dying. I had to do something to save him,” Merlin pushes out quickly, hoping that maybe this is something that Arthur can associate with.

“So you’re admitting what I said is true?”

“Yes!” Merlin almost shouts it, not caring how incriminating it sounds. Arthur seems to have made up his mind anyway and he’s got nothing to lose anymore. “I wanted to get my hands on the formula. You’ve seen what it does to people. It’s been killing innocent MUs for years.”

“People of magic. Innocent?” Arthur sneers, turning away from Merlin in what looks like disgust. “Just look at you! Look at them! You call that innocent?” Anger’s mingling with the hurt that’s pouring out of Arthur’s words, and Merlin can see Arthur’s hands clenching into fists. “You deceived me for all those months to get what you wanted!”

“The Serum is not what it seems. You have to understand…’

“No, Arthur. No.” Merlin stutters desperately. Not that. Not that, please. How can he doubt my feelings? Not even an Oscar-winning actor could have acted the way I felt during the time we had together.

“Fuck, Merlin. You actually went as far as pimping yourself out to get the formula,” Arthur says, incredulous revulsion oozing out of every single word.

“Everything that happened between us was real. I swear, Arthur…” Merlin’s heart shatters into thousands of tiny pieces, splattering unceremoniously around him in the dirt on the floor.

Arthur doesn’t seem to hear him, caught in his own thoughts, and Merlin’s scared to do anything in case it causes more damage. If that is even possible. I need to wait and try to reason, he tells himself. As if he didn’t know he’s lost already.

“Save your breath, Merlin,” Arthur says icily and remote after a minute. “I congratulate you on a job well done. I believed every fucking word you said.”

“I meant what I said. I fell in love with you.”

The groan escaping Arthur’s mouth stabs Merlin’s insides with a jagged twist. This is pure agony. “Stop the bloody lies, Merlin. No need to work overtime.”

“No, listen, please…” But Merlin gets cut off immediately.

“You used my weakness for men against me. You twisted me round your little finger and made me like you, trust you, lo …” Arthur’s last word dies off in an agonized cry. “And when Gwaine told you how I felt, you went for the vital blow that night.”

“No, it wasn’t like that at all!”

Arthur’s piercing eyes bore into his heart, causing a major aneurism in every single part of it, bleeding him to death in the most harrowing way. “You calculating, cold-hearted bastard! I was blown away when you kissed me! Couldn’t believe my luck because I thought you were straight!” Arthur blanches as his train of thought hurtles towards total emotional obliteration.

“Oh my God,” he whisper breathlessly. “You lied about that, didn’t you? You aren’t even into guys,” Arthur’s says in a strangled voice. “I bet you had to force yourself to do the ‘gay thing’!” He stops to take a choked breath. “Were you secretly disgusted by my touch? Were you laughing behind my back? How stupid, STUPID I was!”

Arthur thumps his hand on the table so hard, Merlin can feel its vibrations on the floor. He can’t take this any longer. The defeat and blinding disappointment in Arthur’s words, the fury in his voice, the unwillingness to give him the benefit of the doubt, is more than he can cope with.

“Stop! Arthur, stop and listen for once!” Merlin yells and takes a step towards the blond, stopping in his tracks when Arthur throws him a deadly look.

“To hear more lies? I don’t think so.” Arthur’s trembling all over now, his anger barely kept in check by mere willpower. Despite everything Merlin stretches out his hand to grab his arm.
“Don’t. You. Dare. Touch. Me,” Arthur hisses through his teeth and then shudders. Something has triggered another reaction. “The tingle, the connection between us when we touch – you put a spell on me, didn’t you?”

Merlin’s too shocked to answer and, unable to speak, he simply shakes his head.

“For fuck’s sake! At least admit it!” Arthur waits for a second and when Merlin remains silent, he continues with disdain. “You can’t even own up to it. Isn’t that typical? You’re the perfect example how magic corrupts the mind.”

“I did NOT put a spell on you. I didn’t know myself what the tingle was to start with.”

“And pigs will fly,” Arthur says sarcastically, but there’s a quiet threat in there, too. “Release me from it.”

“What?”

“The spell, Take it off me.” Arthur moves forward like lightning and grabs Merlin’s shoulder’s with an iron grip. Merlin yelps, shocked by the force of it and the ferocity of the tingle rushing through them like a fiery spark. “I can’t. It’s not a spell.”

Arthur lets go of him so quickly Merlin almost stumbles to the floor. “I don’t want anything linking me to you. Understand?”

The tears that have been threatening to fall are now starting to roll quietly over Merlin’s cheeks. He hates me. He doesn’t believe a word I’m saying. Nothing I do will change his mind. Unsure what else to say, Merlin repeats it for the third time. “I can’t take it away, Arthur. I didn’t put a spell on you.”

Arthur chuckles bitterly in disbelief. “So much for honesty. God, I never knew how right my father was about you all! Was there one word of truth in anything you ever said to me?”

“My feelings for you are true. I’m the same person I was yesterday and the day before.”

“I don’t know who you are, Merlin.” Arthur’s anger has died all of a sudden, and he sounds sad, defeated and broken.

“You said you loved me.” In this sea of despair that’s the only hope keeping Merlin still above water.

“I loved the illusion of the man I thought you were,” Arthur says quietly and turns away from Merlin. “Leave me.”

“Arthur.” Merlin knows there’s no point. This is the end. And then it hits Merlin like lightening. I have to warn Arthur. The hypospray is going to kill him. He has to know. I have to try. I must say it. Maybe he’ll think of it later. Of course the timing for this last revelation couldn’t be worse, but it’s the only chance Merlin’s got.

“Arthur – the hypospray. There’s Serum in it. That’s what’s making you ill.” There – he’s said it.

“That’s ludicrous! Do your lies stop at nothing?” Arthur shakes his head, as he turns round, his eyes darkened by anger and sheer disbelief. “Why the fuck would you even say that?”

“Because it’s true.” Merlin’s shaking like a leaf now. Arthur has to take this on board. He has to! His life depends on it.
Arthur’s jaws are clenching as he presses his lips into a thin line. “Just like all those other true things you’ve been dishing up for weeks and weeks?”

“Arthur! You must believe me on this one. The hypospray’s going to kill you. Just like the Serum killed my father.”

“Let’s assume just for one second, that what you’re saying is right. Let’s assume I insult my intelligence by entertaining this outrageous idea.” Arthur’s eyes are burning into Merlin’s. “Even if there WAS Serum in my hypospray, it wouldn’t it affect me!”

Merlin takes a deep breath, going for the kill. “It would. It does. You have magic, Arthur. I’ve felt it.”

For a second Arthur’s completely still, but when his expression turns from annoyed to livid, Merlin knows his words have reached their destination.

“You don’t know when to stop, do you?” Arthur shouts, the veins on his neck straining. He kicks a chair out of the way as he walks up to Merlin, right into his personal space. Arthur’s face is only an inch away from Merlin’s, and Merlin can feel his breath brushing over his skin. “I was stupid, really idiotically stupid,” Arthur hisses. “But this? What do you take me for? Just take your fucking fairy tales and get out of my sight before I do something you will regret.”

Anger has started bubbling somewhere inside Merlin. After everything that’s been said, and no doubt too much was said, this is the final straw. Deeply wounded by Arthur’s intense rejection and turned inside out by this tirade of insults he’s come to the end of his endurance. He might be beaten, but he won’t be intimidated. He holds Arthur’s stare until the blond backs up.

“I don’t blame you for not believing me. No, I can’t and I won’t. But if you felt only a tiny fraction of what I feel for you, then you’d know I would never lie about anything like this.”

And at that, Merlin turns to leave. “Get out,” is the last thing he hears Arthur say before he closes that fateful door behind him.

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Merlin stumbles back to his room, completely oblivious to anything and anyone around him, and breaks down as soon as he’s on his own. The tears come easily now, leaving Merlin’s face awash with bitter saltiness.

The grief for his father, the biting disillusionment of being rejected by Arthur, the acute emptiness inside him, caused by the loss of love and hope, fuse together to tear at his insides ferociously.

A roar worthy of the wildest creature erupts from his chest as his hurt finally finds an outlet. Merlin doesn’t hear the window glass explode, he doesn’t see the table and chairs crashing into the wall, he doesn’t feel when the shards of the shattering mirror cut his face and his arms. He’s lost in the darkest corners of his consciousness.

*What’s the point of having all this power if I can’t save the people I love most? What have I actually achieved? Freya died in my arms. Father died before I could help him. The Serum is going to get the better of Arthur eventually if he keeps taking it.*
An overload of anguish makes his knees buckle under its weight, and he sinks on the floor, devastated, numb and hurting so bloody hard.

“Merlin.” The soft voice rips Merlin back into reality. He looks around the room, bewildered at the chaos that greets him. Surprised and shocked he turns round to find Morgana standing behind him, her eyes warm and compassionate.

“Morgana?”

His sister walks up to him and opens her arms to embrace him, but Merlin recoils instinctively, shaking his head quietly, unwilling to accept her so soon after her betrayal. *And she must be so God damn pleased with herself she’s been proved right about Arthur.*

“I’m not here to gloat,” Morgana sounds genuine, and Merlin looks at her searchingly. If it hadn’t been for her, all this could have ended differently. How can he forgive her for that? *Would it really have made any difference in the end? A little voice asks in the back of his mind. Arthur would have rejected him anyway, the time and place being completely irrelevant.*

“Merlin, I’m sorry. I really am.” Morgana’s voice is small and tinged with remorse. She’s biting her lip nervously and her eyes are pleading with him. This is so much like the Morgana he grew up with. They might have different political views and have opposed opinions how to approach the problems of the magical community, but she’s still his sister at heart. This is the woman who ran to him with every little concern when she was young, this is the woman he shared so much laughter with, this is the woman who’s grieving as much for Balinor as him.

Morgana motions to hug him again, and this time, Merlin lets her. He holds on to her and allows her to pull him up and take him into the bathroom. There she removes some tiny bits of glass stuck in his skin and dabs away the trickles of blood surrounding the shallow wounds. “Thank God, there are no deep cuts,” she says.

“Can you do the rest?” Morgana asks when she’s finished. Completely dazed, Merlin nods and mumbles the spell to see his skin repairing itself.

Then she leads him to the bed that has escaped the magical onslaught for some unknown reason. They settle down, next to each other, and Morgana takes both of Merlin’s hands into hers. How warm and soothing they are. How gentle and soft. The cold emptiness in Merlin’s heart reacts with a flicker of light and slowly his fraught nerves calm down.

“He’s not worth it, Merlin. He IS a Pendragon and always will be.”

Merlin swallows hard at hearing the old phrase yet again. And although he doesn’t agree with Morgana hundred percent, there’s some truth to her words. As soon as Arthur found out about his magic, his shutters had come down and nothing, nothing at all, had been able to penetrate them.

“He doesn’t deserve you. He never did. Believe me,” Morgana whispers, squeezing his hands firmly. Merlin’s battered heart prevents him from formulating a decent answer, but it seems his facial expression says it all. “I’m sorry you have to suffer because of someone like him,” his sister says, while she brushes one of his wild locks out of his face.

Then she puts her arms around him, kisses his cheek tenderly and pulls him into a close hug. Merlin sighs into it, holding on tight, grateful for the comforting warmth of her body. And yet, there’s something that doesn’t feel quite right about this. Something about the way Morgana leans into him. Something about the way she strokes his hair. But as soon as the thought blossoms in his mind, it fades again. *I’m glad she’s here. I’m glad I’m not alone.*
Eventually they part, and Morgana chuckles quietly. “You’ve made quite a mess round here,” she remarks rather dryly looking at the chaos around them. “I think you should tidy up, before we figure out what to do next.”
The aftermath

The blonde boy’s gagging for air, desperate and lonely in his plight, aware that it’ll be only seconds before he’s caught. Before he’ll be punished. Before he’ll feel the wrath of the man in front of him. The shadow of a tall figure falls on the floor next to him, and suddenly all his fear, his shock, his dread escalate as he anticipates the man finding him. One more step and then he’s there, right in front of him, and the boy looks up and cries out in terror when he recognizes the person towering above him. ‘Merlin!’ The dark-haired man bends over the boy and reaches out to him. ‘You have magic. I’ve felt it!’ The boy recoils and pushes himself further into the corner between the wall and the bed. Merlin’s hand comes closer and closer. ‘Nooooo!’

The roar of his own voice and the sharp sound of glass shattering rip Arthur out of his nightmare. He startles up and automatically reaches out for Merlin. It takes a second to sink in why he isn’t there. The aching pain that follows wakes Arthur as reliably as if someone had poured a bucket of ice water over his head. The aftermath of Merlin’s revelation is still permeating every fibre of his body. But why the fuck was Merlin in his usual dream? Arthur flops back onto the pillow and tries to steady his breathing. God, the nightmare was so vivid and the boy’s fear so immediate. Fear of Merlin. How odd. Arthur’s pretty sure he isn’t afraid of Merlin, even though he’s a sorcerer. Afraid is definitely the wrong word. Devastated or utterly gutted seem more fitting. Mind, that doesn’t pinpoint how he feels, either. Arthur chuckles bitterly. Not sure there’s an expression describing it perfectly.

That sensation of having your heart ripped out and trampled on repeatedly, the numbing grief as if somebody’s died, the disturbing feeling of getting marooned in a desolate, barren place by someone trusted. I’m affected by it even when I’m asleep.

Arthur suppresses the sob rising in his chest and tells himself to get a grip. Of course his mind has also been warped by the lack of medication he’s had over the last six days. He had his first shot pf hypospray as soon as he returned back to his apartment after his release yesterday evening. Maybe I should take another dose now. I really need to boost the levels of hypospray in my blood. That should help to reduce the nausea and dizziness which have been plaguing him.

Arthur slides his legs out of the bed. “Ouch!” He cries out when his feet hit the ground. He just stood on something really sharp. How the heck did the lamp on my bedside table break? Now that’s really weird. Arthur shakes his head in bewilderment. Maybe I pushed it off while I was dreaming.

Absent-mindedly he grabs the bottle of hypospray from his bedside table and puts it against his arm. His finger’s hovering above the button to release the medication into his bloodstream when suddenly the memory of Merlin’s last words is ringing in his head. “You have magic, Arthur. There’s Serum in your hypospray. That’s what makes you ill and it’s going to kill you. Stop taking it! Please. Listen to me!”

How could Merlin even consider he’d be prepared to believe nonsense like that? Did he think Arthur would fall for that crap? What was the point of that comment anyway? Arthur strains his brain for a couple of second and gives up. No, Merlin’s comment is utterly idiotic and doesn’t make sense. Forget about it. Now. The man lied virtually every single time he opened his mouth! Now that’s a truth Arthur can accept and he brushes Merlin’s warning aside without another thought as he pushes the button to release the hypospray.

Once he’s showered and dressed, he tidies up the mess on the floor. His father said he would pop in this morning, and he doesn’t want to alarm his Uther any further. I’ve never seen him this upset.
before. Uther had welcomed him back all teary-eyed and with an untypically warm hug.

“My boy,” he’d whispered. “We have to thank Edwin for your safe return.”

Edwin? Arthur had been just about to ask what his father meant exactly when the man in question had appeared in the room with a smug smile.

“Arthur! What a relief to see you all in one piece!” he’d cried rather pompously, clearly enjoying the ambiguity of his words. “I brought you another bottle of hypospray.” Edwin placed the medication on a sideboard. “The sooner you take it, the better.”

Then Edwin had forced a completely unnecessary medical once-over on him. The only reason Arthur didn’t protest was to keep his father happy who’d made crystal clear that he thought this was a good idea. Uther had even suggested to call some medical staff in to monitor him through his first night, but Arthur had put down his foot firmly on that one. Nevertheless, there was no talking Uther out of planting security guards at every entrance of the Ministry and even outside his apartment door.

“Arthur.” Like on cue his father has appeared in his living room and rushes up to him. “How are you doing this morning?”

“Alright.” What is he supposed to say? The bit of rough on the outside is pretty inconsequential. It’s what’s happening on the inside that’s killing him.

“Have you taken your medicine as Edwin told you?”

“Father! I’m not six years old anymore!” Arthur sighs, exasperated at the mothering comment. “And yes, I HAVE been a good boy and taken the hypospray as instructed.”

“No need to turn all sarcastic on me,” Uther grumbles, but the relief crossing his features is obvious. An instant later it’s replaced by grim determination. “I will hunt down those responsible for this. I’ll promise you that there won’t be a stone in Camelot I’ll leave unturned until they’re caught.”

Arthur swallows hard. Does his father know that Merlin hasn’t returned with him? Does he know Merlin was heavily involved in his abduction? _Fuck. It bloody hurts to even think about it._

“I just heard your latest PA, that Merlin guy, was the ringleader of these criminals,” Uther says, unwittingly answering the question the next moment. No doubt Merlin worked with the rebels, but ringleader? Where did his father get that idea? _Maybe he’s heard something I don’t know yet? _Before Arthur can ask, Uther continues, looking rather crest fallen.

“To think it was me who put that fucking traitor at your side.”

“He saved your life that day.” _Shit. _Where did that come from? It sure sounds like a bloody excuse for the man who betrayed him so cold-heartedly. _Get real, Arthur! What do you think you’re doing? That man pissed you around big time and you’re half-way defending him?_

“Percival is going to fill you in on the happenings of that day.” Uther answers rather cryptically instead of going into detail himself. “You might see things from a different angle then.”

Arthur feels all blood draining from his face. Percival, Leon and Gwaine announced their visit for the late morning. Going by what his father said, they’re going to add another rock to the sinking boat that is his heart. _I’m not sure if I can take any more. Things are bad enough already._

_Bad enough._ The words echo in his brain, and Arthur pushes them away with a surge of will-power. He needs to know one more thing for sure, something that’s been bothering him ever since he got
“Did you really give them the formula?”

“Ahh! That!” The twinkle in his father’s eyes immediately gives away what he confirms a moment later, when he explains in a few words what happened.

“That was genius,” Arthur gasps in surprise, to then add soberly, “So Merlin didn’t get what he came for.”

“No. Outwitted and put into place,” Uther confirms with an air of satisfaction.

“They must be seething.”

Uther’s unashamedly beaming at his son now. “I sincerely hope so.”

“All that effort for nothing.”

“It’s most gratifying.” No doubt his father’s more than chuffed.

It doesn’t take long though before Uther’s face darkens with contempt and anger though. “I just can’t believe the audacity of these criminals. To kidnap you, out of all people, and dare ask for the formula! The nerve to challenge this government in such an insolent manner! The newspapers have had a field day!”

“I bet,” Arthur mumbles under his breath.

“Merlin’s going to pay for this,” Uther vows, his eyes dark and hostile. “That magical son of a bitch won’t get away with this.”

“No!” Arthur’s curt reply sounds decidedly rude, and his father furrow his brows in confusion.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“Let him run.” Arthur can’t believe he’s just said that, but something deep inside his guts overruled any reason and made him spit it out.

“What? That man committed high treason! He needs to be brought to justice.”

*He’s right. What the heck?* Arthur’s common sense is wildly shaking its aching head. And it gets worse when he continues, simply following his gut feeling.

“Merlin and his friends failed miserably. They’ve nothing to show for all their efforts. I’m sure the Pendragon PR machine can make the most of that in the media. Make them look ridiculous. For all their power, a bunch of rabid sorcerers could not force their will on this government. That’ll help us regain some of the people’s trust better than any wild goose chase for a sorcerer all over the country. I’ve seen with my own eyes what magic can do. If Merlin and his accomplices don’t want to be found, we aren’t going to find them. Making a big spectacle of a chase we can’t win could easily have further repercussions against us.”

Uther looks at his son, appreciation and surprise shining in his eyes. “You are becoming your father’s son. A seasoned politician who can take clever tactical decisions,” he smiles. “You’re right. Giving these MUs extra exposure in the media could further their cause and harm us. I’ll keep this out of the public eye, but I’ll put Leon onto their scent behind closed curtains.”

Uther claps Arthur’s shoulder. “You need to recover properly before you go back to work. Stay off for the rest of the week,” he orders in a stern voice. “And don’t even think to relieve those guards
outside your door from their duty.”

“I won’t,” Arthur says and holds his hands up in mock defence.

When Uther leaves after some more pleasantries and small talk, Arthur sinks on the sofa and stares out of the window at the picturesque skyline of Camelot beneath him. *Merlin’s a liar and a traitor. Why the heck have I just made sure he’s getting away?*

Thank goodness Arthur hasn’t got a lot of time to ponder about his odd, illogical behaviour because Percival, Leon and Gwaine arrive not long after. After a warm welcome, a shaking of hands and heartfelt hugs they settle down with cups of coffee in the living room.

“I’ve got to fill you in on some … important matters,” Percival says uneasily, and all of a sudden the atmosphere shifts. Leon looks decidedly uncomfortable and, untypically, Gwaine is fidgeting on the sofa like a boy outside the headmaster’s office waiting to be told off.

*Shit. Here it goes. They’re worried how I will react to whatever’s coming.* Arthur braces himself as Percival starts talking, and as he discloses the findings of his research, Arthur’s chest becomes tighter and his mouth drier with every word his friend says.

Merlin is a biochemist. And from what Percival says a brilliant one. No wonder he enjoyed that morning in the lab at Lamia House! The attack on Uther was premeditated, aimed at getting Merlin into the Ministry and as close as possible to the man who was bound to know the whereabouts of the formula. Him.

Merlin’s been deceiving him right from the first day. Lying straight into his face every time they spoke, every time they touched, every time they kissed. All that kindness, that good humoured amiability, all the soft words whispered into his ear, all the passionate sobs against his body - a pretence. A ploy for a purpose. A means to an end.

Of course Arthur’s heard most of this out of Merlin’s mouth already. Listening to it the first time had left him knocked off his feet, and hurt and angry, to say the least. Having it confirmed in the cold light of the day by Percival is like getting the message knocked into his head with a sledgehammer. Even worse – it makes it totally, heartbreakingly real. Too real. It’s official now.

The only man Arthur’s ever given his everything - his heart, his body and his soul - never existed, and the short-lived happiness with him was nothing but a big, fat lie.

When Percival stops, Arthur’s body feels numb and frozen, and the strain of keeping up his composure is costing him more energy than he cares to admit. Silence descends on the room, and Arthur knows his closest friends fully understand what the enormity of the truth means to him on a personal level. He can feel their compassion and the warmth of their friendship, and he’s grateful for that.

“I tried to tell you as soon as I found out, and when I phoned you on your mobile and you didn’t pick up, I panicked.“ Percival swallows hard, a deep blush spreading over his face and his neck. “That was the biggest mistake I’ve ever made. I didn’t think the situation through as I should have, but acted out of my gut feeling. I jumped in my car to follow you to the Lake Cottage, but I was hardly out of the Ministry when I overlooked a traffic light in my hurry.”

Arthur can’t remember ever seeing his friend in such a state of remorse and embarrassment. “A lorry hit me and left me unconscious for half a day. By that time it was too late to warn you.”

Percival looks straight into Arthur’s eyes at the end of his ‘confession’. “I’m sorry, Arthur. I totally
fucked up. I owe you a huge apology. You could have been killed because I didn’t react the right way,” he says, his face awash with guilt.

“Nobody’s to blame, Percival,” Arthur rasps immediately. Percival shouldn’t beat himself up about this, when he tried to do everything in his powers to protect him. “Merlin fooled us all, and he was bloody good at it.”

He clears his throat and decides to draw a clear line under this topic just now. Breaking down in front of his friends isn’t really on his to do list for today. Doing something concrete, however, will take his mind off the idiotic pain shredding his heart into tiny pieces. For a little while at least.

“We intended to meet last Monday to discuss our progress in the Edwin investigation. Anything new?”

“I looked into the death of Cedric Delaney and after scouring through piles of witness reports we found something that might be a lead,” Leon says, and they all turn round to face him in anticipation of his report. “Two eye-witnesses mentioned a black van hovering around the scene of the accident.”

“And the significance of that is …?” Gwaine asks, a little puzzled at the seemingly random observation.

“Remember I had Edwin followed when he left Camelot around the time of Arthur’s collapse?” They all nod, ready to hear more. “Edwin spent two days in a wooden cabin in the forest of Ascetir. On the first day a black van was parked outside for a couple of hours.”

Gwaine whistles at the implication. “I’ll be damned.”

“And there’s more,” Leon continues. “A black van was also seen scurrying down the hill where Arthur was attacked at a time that coincides with the shooting.”

“Have you been able to get a hold of the number plate?” Arthur asks, his eye-brows raised expectantly.

“We did, but when we scanned it we found that it was a fake registration. We’re in the procedure of following this up. At the same time I have got a team checking out every van in Camelot of the same brand.”

“So you’re looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Very much so,” Leon sighs. “But it’s only a matter of time.”

“If we can find out who that van belongs to and then link it to Edwin, we might be able to prove that he had his hand in Cedric’s death as well as Arthur’s attack,” Percival says thoughtfully.

“That’s basically it.” Leon nods. “It could lead us right there.”

“That’s good news, Leon, even if it means we have to be patient,” Arthur says, and then swiftly changes the topic. “My father’s going to ask you to look for Merlin.”

“Yes, he’s already spoken to me about it.”

“I’d like you to report to me first if you find anything worthwhile,” Arthur says slowly, holding Leon’s gaze.

“Of course, no problem.” Leon nods at his friend. “You know you can rely on me.”
“Thank you,” Arthur says, thoroughly humbled by his loyalty, and he gratefully adds, “Thanks to all of you.”

Leon and Percival get up to clap Arthur’s shoulder before they excuse themselves, while Gwaine remains behind on the sofa.

“Yes?” Arthur asks, uncertainty in his voice.

“I’m not going to pretend I know what you’re going through just now,” Gwaine starts and of course Arthur understands what he’s hinting at.

“But…?"

“There’s something in all that Merlin business that doesn’t make sense to me.”

“What?”

“If Merlin’s really such a bastard, why did he protect you that day up on the hill? He got quite badly injured doing that. There’s no logical reason for him to do that.”

“I realize what you’re trying to do, Gwaine, and I do appreciate it. I’ve asked myself exactly the same question all over again. But the answer’s easy enough when you come to think of it. Merlin needed to make sure that I trusted him totally so I would have no qualms about handing the formula over to him. At our last meeting he suggested we check out the formula and get it off Edwin. And I fell for it. I would have given it to Merlin voluntarily last Tuesday. I guess ‘playing the hero for my sake’ was the perfect smoke screen.”

“You believe he was crazy enough to put himself into hospital for that?”

Arthur bites his lip so hard he can taste a tiny drop of blood on his lips. “These people, the MUs that abducted me – they’re desperate to get their hands on the formula. They’d do anything. I don’t think Merlin is any different!”

Gwaine throws Arthur a questioning look. “Right.”

“Merlin almost had me where he wanted me,” Arthur mumbles more to himself, turning over past events. “I was too blind to notice,” he smirks. “Too blinded by him, that is.”

“I’m not here to defend Merlin or any of his actions, but if you’d asked me I would have sworn his feelings for you were genuine.”

Arthur sighs, exhausted in body and mind. “I don’t know what to think any longer, Gwaine. I thought I knew the man. I thought I’d hit the jackpot this time,” Arthur says hoarsely. “Whatever happened between us felt real. Yeap. But he’s a sorcerer. He can conjure up anything, I suppose, even love.” Shit, I wish my voice didn’t betray how much it hurts. He knows that Gwaine can hear it, too.

His friend’s fidgeting again, and Arthur reads the signs of his discomfort correctly. “Is there something else you need to say?”

“Not sure if you want to hear it.”

“How am I supposed to decide if you’re not telling me?”

“Right.” Gwaine takes a deep breath. “That day when you collapsed.”
“Yeap?”

“When I got up to your office, Merlin was tending to you.” Gwaine holds his breath, as if he’s unsure whether to continue, but Arthur’s enquiring look is urging him on. “He was genuinely sick with worry. There’s no way he was putting that on.”

“Right,” Arthur says tonelessly, trying to process the fact as best as he can. So what, Merlin was upset. Who knows what was behind that. Some kind of dark reason he’ll most likely never fathom out.

“And he kissed you.”

Heat flushes through Arthur and makes his blood race in an instant. Merlin had kissed him then?

“That was before you told him about my feelings?” Arthur stutters, disbelief written all over his face. Gwaine nods. “He didn’t have to do that.”

“No.” A bit nauseous and shaky, Arthur decides to take the weight off his feet and sit down to consider what his friend’s just said. Gwaine’s trying to make me feel better. He’s trying to weigh up all the options, in the hope Merlin’s maybe not as rotten as he appears. But does it help to know that Merlin had apparently shown some affection towards him?

“I’m not really sure where that leaves me, Gwaine,” Arthur mumbles as his thoughts tumble around in his head haphazardly. “He still lied to my face, he still handed me over to the rebels, he still admitted he’d come for the formula. It was probably a random act of kindness or some sign of momentary confusion. Even if he felt something for me at that moment, he would have left me after his mission was complete, whatever happened that evening. A little kiss can’t make up for all his … deceit.”

Gwaine squeezes Arthur’s shoulder sympathetically. “Just thought you should know.”

“Thanks, Gwaine. Really appreciate it,” Arthur says, his voice faltering quickly. “But I think I’ve no choice but to face up to the fact that everything I’ve ever felt for Merlin was based on fake information and glorified lies.”

“I’m sorry,” Gwaine says, “I’m really sorry, mate,” and pulls him onto a hug. When he heads off fifteen minutes later, Arthur’s left to his conflicting thoughts as he stares out of the window.

He revisits what he’s just said and wonders if he actually means it. Can I really accept that Merlin’s affection was an illusion, nothing more? Will I ever get over him? The sharp ache inside him seems to suggest otherwise.

He wants to believe with all his heart that the man who meant more to him than anyone else is not as depraved and callous as he seems. Merlin also threw himself against the spell the witch intended for me when we were taken, cries his instinct to appease him. Yes, because they still needed me as a bargaining tool, and Morgana had forgotten that little fact for a second, his common sense counters with cool logic.

However Arthur turns and twists the facts – he knows there’s only one outcome at the end. The Merlin he loved is gone forever, and reality demands he accepts that the love of his life has turned out to be a calculating, cheating fraud.
“Are you having a cup of tea, Merlin?”

“I’ll be along in a second.” Despite everything, Merlin can’t help smiling. He could set his clock by his mum’s habit to have tea at exactly 4 p.m. every day. Merlin drags himself away from his research and quickly closes all open files on his laptop. Not that he’s come very far with his work. But he has had to do something sensible to fill the three months since Arthur’s abduction. And it also distracts him from completely toppling into the dark abyss that’s permanently gaping inside his heart.

Arthur’s on his mind whether he likes it not. All the time. He’s reliving parts of their last conversation every single day, wondering what he could have done or said differently to make Arthur understand. I should have insisted more on letting him know my feelings were real. I should have convinced him that I’ve always been sincere. Easy to say now. What kept him back then was an overwhelming sense of guilt. It was him who started their relationship on false pretences. It was him who kept all those secrets. There’s no denying their break up was his fault. The hell that broke loose was his doing alone, and it’s only fair he’s suffering for it now.

And suffer he does. Or whatever you want to call the daily torment of blaming himself for everything that’s happened, the continuous screaming of his heart, the gaping vacuum that Arthur’s rejection has left behind. Shit, he misses Arthur so much, he can hardly concentrate on anything else at times.

Time’s going to heal you, Hunith had said. Give it time, Gaius had advised. Just wait a few months, and you’ll look at it with different eyes, he’d assured himself. Bloody nonsense! The hurt inside him hasn’t lessened at all, and it’s been three long months. Three months since that fateful day. Three months since the fiasco with the formula.

Alvarr had planned the exchange meticulously. They would check out the formula and then let Arthur go. As easy as that.

“You will help us verifying the formula?” Alvarr had approached him the day before the big event. “Morgana says you’ve been working on it for quite a while.” What was Merlin supposed to say but yes? Their endgame – to free MUs from the deadly throes of the Serum - was the same after all, even if their approach to the problem couldn’t have been more different. If they could secure the formula, at least something good would have come out of this fucked up situation.

He’d called Will in and his friend brought a brand new laptop they wanted to use exclusively for the storage of the formula. Just to be on the safe side. The tension when the formula was delivered was electric. Everyone knew how much depended on it.

Together, they’d connected the memory device to the laptop and opened the file. Merlin and Gaius were on tenterhooks when they looked at the chemical composition before them for the first time. The formula was refined and incredibly intricate. It was definitely the real McCoy. They’d closed the file and saved it to the laptop and two other memory devices. Just to be on the safe side.

They’d sent a copy of the formula per mail to Merlin’s email account. Just to be on the safe side. They gave the green light to let Arthur go, and Alvarr did.

“I think it would be advisable if we all lay low for a few weeks. I doubt Uther’s going to take this lightly. The Justice Squad will be all over Camelot. Everyone and each of us has to be vigilant and careful. I’m going to call on you when the time’s right for the next strike,” the rebel leader had said before they all dispersed into different directions.
Alvarr had left the formula in his care, a bit reluctantly, as Merlin noticed. “Don’t be ridiculous, Alvarr,” Morgana had intervened. “All Merlin ever wanted is to develop an anti-dote to the Serum, and he’s the most qualified person for it. There’s no one better!” Alvarr still insisted on sending Daegal with Merlin and Gaius when they left.

“Where are we actually going?” Merlin had never thought any further than getting the formula. The notion that he would have to go into hiding for a good while had only just begun to sink in.

“Where better to hide than in public view?” Gaius chuckled, and Merlin was stunned to be taken to the Institute. They entered the huge building through a small private entrance reserved for senior staff only.

“I’ve set up the room off the lab for you to sleep in,” Gaius explained. “I also made sure nobody can disturb you once you start going.” The plan was genius. Who would even consider looking for Merlin in his old work place? And he had all the facilities there he needed.

Then, finally the big moment arrived. Merlin booted up the laptop and opened the precious file with Gaius and Daegal looking over his shoulder to watch.

That’s when everything started to go seriously wrong. As soon as the formula appeared, it started scrambling up, the chemical signs dancing around before their eyes, making no sense at all. They swivelled around the screen in ever increasing speed until they finally disappeared into thin air.

Merlin stared at the screen in utter disbelief. Edwin had tricked them. This was nothing else but the work of dark magic. “No!” The strangled outcry died in the silence of the lab. When Merlin turned round and saw tears in Gaius’s disappointed eyes, he’d had a hard time concealing his own desperate disillusionment. Daegal just stood there, gaping and thoroughly mortified.

“All we did – for nothing,” Merlin whispered. All the pain, the heartache, the sacrifice with nothing to show for. Of course they tried to retrieve the formula from Merlin’s mail and the other memory devices, but they weren’t surprised to find that exactly the same happened as soon as the file was opened.

“I didn’t know this was possible!” Will shouted in absolute outrage when they called for his help. Yet, no shouting, no searching, no electronic fiddling could retrieve the formula. It was lost to them all over again.

Merlin swallows hard, trying to shake the memory. He’s tried to claw at his memory ever since to see if he can put together the missing pieces of the formula. It’s a laughable scheme, but what bloody else can he try?

No point thinking about it now. Merlin sighs, as he walks down the corridor to head into the kitchen where, no doubt, a cup of tea’s already waiting for him. He catches his reflection in the full-sized mirror on the landing in passing. Even though he doesn’t look closely, he’s well aware that he’s lost weight. He’s always been tall, lanky and on the skinny side of things. Now he’s decidedly gaunt and bony. Which isn’t really surprising considering he’s only eating to keep his body ticking over and to please Hunith. He’s simply not hungry, and he’s completely buried himself in his work.

After the blow of losing the formula Merlin spent two weeks living at the Institute and resuming his normal work while hiding from everyone apart from Gaius. They’d expected Camelot to be swarming with officers of The Justice Squad after Arthur’s release. Strangely enough that never happened. Life seemed to go on pretty much as normal.

“Don’t relax into this. I guess that’s exactly what Uther’s men are hoping for. Once people become
careless they start making mistakes and give themselves away.” Morgana passed Alvarr’s warning on to everyone.

Merlin has a feeling – well, he actually knows because Daegal slipped him that information - she choose to keep another message from Alvarr to herself. His fury about the loss of the formula. If it hadn’t been for Daegal witnessing its disappearing act, Alvarr would have blamed Merlin solely for it. The rebel leader’s never hidden his dislike for him.

Merlin might have stayed on at the Institute, but then Lamia House finally released his father’s body. “Bloody time,” Merlin had mumbled under his breath, wondering why on earth it had taken so long. But at least Balinor’s earthly remains HAD been returned to his family.

The funeral changed Merlin’s outlook on what he should do next. Nothing in this world would have kept him from attending it, even if Hunith begged him not to. “They’re bound to look for you there. They’re going to expect you and arrest you, Merlin!” She’d sobbed into his chest.

“We’ll take precautions and everything’s going to be fine,” Merlin had assured her, and unexpectedly it was.

The funeral took place on a cloudy Tuesday afternoon, and everyone who’d known Balinor was there to pay their respects. It turned out to be a peaceful send off, dignified and serene, just like the man himself. And it made Merlin even more determined not to give up on piecing the formula together. I couldn’t save you, father, but I swear your death will not be in vain. You would want me to continue – for all our kin’s sake.

Hunith had been so fragile, so broken that day. She needs me. She needs my support, particularly with Morgana being away. But how could he? Going back to his family home was definitely not on the cards. Uther’s men were bound to keep it under surveillance. A chat with Alator, one of Balinor’s oldest friends, at the funeral reception provided a perfect solution.

“We do have secure rooms in the back of the Ealdor Health Centre,” Alator said.

“Secure rooms?” Merlin asked in surprise. He’d never heard of that.

“Magically concealed and protected. And to be used in emergencies like this. Your mum could go there with you for a while, keeping you company.” Alator threw a look at Hunith across the table. “Or the other way round.”

It still meant some degree of hiding, wearing hooded tops and sunglasses or using an invisibility spell ever so often. Admittedly, it did make Merlin feel a tad ridiculous. Like a pseudo James Bond of some kind. But he would have done anything to cheer his mother up and please her, and when her eyes lit up at his suggestion of staying there for a while, the deal was done.

Hunith had revelled in the task of looking after him again, and she’d put a strict routine into action. Like having tea with her at 4 p.m. Of course Merlin had no objections because he could see how much she enjoyed it.

“You’ve been working too hard again,” Merlin’s mum says when he sits down at the kitchen table. Merlin knows Hunith is worried about him. Her brown eyes caress his face softly, as if she could take away the emptiness inside him, as if she was able to drown his sorrows with motherly love.

“Nothing else to do.” Merlin manages a smile and squeezes her hand. His face freezes when he spots the daily newspaper on the table.
New rumours about Arthur’s mystery illness!

What’s wrong with Arthur?

Another health scare for Arthur!

A full-sized photo of Arthur covers the front page. He’s never looked worse. The stab into Merlin’s chest is surely nothing short of the pain a warrior feels when he’s run through with a sword. If the media are to be believed Arthur’s collapsed twice in the last three months. *The Serum’s gradually wearing him down. How much longer can he go?* Something heavy and ice cold is weighting down Merlin’s chest.

It looks like Arthur’s continuing to ignore his warning about the hypospray. *Damn him.* Despite Merlin’s words of caution. Fair enough, they did come at a highly unsuitable time, but Merlin had hoped that he’d maybe put enough doubt into Arthur’s mind to provoke him into action. Obviously not.

Merlin had also tried to leave messages on Arthur’s mobile, done safely from an untraceable phone, kudos to Will, but apparently to no avail. *Stubborn ass.* Of course Merlin has no idea whether Arthur actually received his messages or whether they’d gone lost somewhere in cyber space. Maybe Arthur got himself a new number or … well, who knows!

Merlin lets out a frustrated grunt. It’s bloody depressing to see Arthur deteriorating when he knows how to help him. *I can’t let him die. I don’t care if he never wants to see me again, but he’s got to live. Surely there must be something I can do?*

“Stop blaming yourself,” Hunith whispers. God, she knows him as well as Gaius does. “There’s nothing you can do.”

Merlin hasn’t told Hunith. Nor Morgana. They don’t know about Arthur’s magic. They don’t know that it is the Serum doing all these things to Arthur.

*Arthur.* Merlin bites his bottom lip vigorously. He hasn’t got a clue why he kept it a secret. He might have shared it with Hunith, but how could he expect her not to tell Morgana? Hunith is unaware of the rift between them. All she has witnessed is a very caring Morgana, forever mollycoddling Merlin when she’s home, forever trying her best to please him.

It’s not that Merlin hates Morgana or mistrusts her completely. He senses that her love for him is genuine, but ever since the abduction and his breakdown something has shifted between them. Something that makes him uneasy and keeps him on guard. No, he would never burden Hunith with this, not after all she’d gone through. This is their issue, their problem, and he hopes they’re going to work it out in time.

“I must do something, mum,” Merlin says. “But not to worry.”

Unconsciously Merlin’s index finger strokes over Arthur’s face in the picture. *I miss you. Damn, I miss you so much.*

“You love him still?” Hunith gently strokes his arm as she poses the question he’s been avoiding to ask himself every day. *Do I?* The excruciating pull inside his heart is answer enough.

“I can’t help it,” Merlin mumbles, giving up his struggle to admit it. “There’s so much more between
us than just that.” He quickly grabs the tea cup to hide the trembling of his finger and then corrects himself. “There WAS.”

“If he feels even a tenth of what you do, Merlin, he’ll forgive you one day,” Hunith says and gives him an encouraging smile.

_I wish I could believe that._ But the intense contempt, the icy resentment Arthur had shown when he finally bared his soul, is too vivid in his mind. Still.

Merlin takes a sip of tea, the delicate fragrance of Earl Grey tantalizing his taste buds. Ahhh! That does feel good. The hot liquid makes him feel marginally more alive. He stares at the newspaper in contemplation. Odd, how the reporters find out about Arthur’s collapses every time. Strange, the Pendragon PR machine couldn’t keep that problem out of the media and allowed this full-blown hysteria about the ‘heir to the throne’. Unless of course, they were never given that chance.

_I wonder who’s feeding them inside information._
“Fucking media!” Uther roars at the top of his voice as he sends a pile of newspapers flying across his office. The individual pages flutter silently on the soft rug between the coffee table and the desk and cover it in a vast quantity of headlines. “They are having a field day twisting everything we say or do!”

City under siege!

Magic threat on the rise!

Justice Squad tricked by MUs AGAIN!

Government in shame!

Uther Pendragon helpless?

Uther grits his teeth, not sure whether it’s out of desperation or anger. Probably a bit of both. The people of Camelot have become restless, maybe even fearful, over the last six months, and he can fully appreciate why. Petty crime has quadrupled, most of it magic-related, and innocent men and women have been exposed to an array of magical activity throughout the city.

Historical statues were seen to come alive in the middle of the day to frighten passer-byes senseless, fountains started spewing rainbow-coloured water in the square outside the Ministry of Justice – the pure insolence of that! – and on one memorable night the electricity supply of the city were switched on and off for a whole hour, causing chaos everywhere. The audacity and arrogance of the sorcerers responsible seems boundless.

It’s not as if the government hasn’t tried to squash this wave of criminal activity. No, the Justice Squad has never been more present in the streets of Camelot than now. And yet, it seems that every move they make is easily outmanoeuvred. The Police are never on a crime scene quick enough to catch the culprits, and there are never any clues or any evidence left behind that could indicate who was behind it all. It’s almost as if the MUs know when the police are coming and are well ahead of them every single time.

“They’re taking the piss,” Uther’s livid. “These impertinent bastards think they can walk all over me.”

Edwin looks at him with apparent sympathy. “I’m sorry I have to agree with you on that one. And it looks like magic activity is still increasing.”

Uther’s pacing up and down the room. This is getting out of hand. Something has to be done and as soon as possible, or people will demand his head. Some papers have started hinting at it already. Despite the Pendragon PR machine doing as much damage control as possible.

“I don’t get it, Edwin,” Uther says, looking at his friend totally puzzled. “Why is this happening now?”

“There have always been rebels out there, Uther. It would be naïve to assume otherwise.”
“Sure, but why don’t these MUs worry about the Serum and what it can do to them? They’ve been kept in check by it for years!”

“Something must have triggered off this wave of opposition.” Edwin rubs his chin in thought. “When did all this nonsense start to get really bad?”

Uther sits down and thinks it over. Is it possible to pinpoint an exact time? There’s always been the occasional magic-related crime, but he remembers discussing a sudden upsurge with Arthur about nine, ten months ago. But that was nothing compared to what has happened in the last few weeks. Suddenly something clicks inside Uther’s head. *Arthur.* He looks up at Edwin in shock.

“Arthur’s abduction. That was the trigger. I know it was. Seeing that some MUs were daring enough to kidnap my son must have encouraged others to flex their magical muscles.”

Edwin shakes his head, seemingly completely stunned. “Of course! Why did I never think of it!” He stops for a couple of seconds, clearly trying to work something out. “I wonder…,” he says, “I wonder if that’s their way of taking revenge because they didn’t manage to get to the formula.”

Uther’s eye brows shoot up, his index finger waving in front of Edwin’s face. “That’s it! Those sorcerers and their leader, Merlin, must have been seething when the formula virtually vanished into thin air before their very eyes! I bet he’s the one who’s behind all this.”

Edwin claps on Uther’s shoulder. “Yes, you’re right!” he shouts in excited agreement. “The man was the embodiment of a sneaky, untrustworthy MU, infiltrating the Ministry and deceiving Arthur into trusting him. He wants to avenge himself, no doubt. We ridiculed him, now he’s trying to do the same to us.”

“Why the heck didn’t I see that sooner?” Uther scratches the nape of his neck distractedly. “I can’t believe we still haven’t found that traitorous fucker.”

“He must have gone underground and orchestrate the attack on Camelot from behind the shadows.”

“True.” Uther’s tapping his fingers nervously on his desk. “Is there no way any of your special sources can lead us to his whereabouts?” He looks at Edwin expectantly.

“You mean my contacts in the magical community?” Edwin gives Uther a sly sideways glance. “As usual we understand each other. Finding Merlin has to be our priority. If we can try him for all the crimes he’s committed, the people of Camelot will see that they’re safe as long as a Pendragon is the head of state.” It’s the first time in weeks Uther feels genuinely pleased. This sounds like a good plan, a plan that’s going to keep him in power and restore the peace in Camelot.

“Merlin will be found, tried, and convicted. We will be merciless with our interrogation methods. He will pay for what he’s done. And his fate should be deterrent enough to keep all other MUs from mocking the laws of the Pendragon government again.”

“Well said, Edwin. Well said. Let’s go and have a drink on that.”

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“It is time.” Morgana’s shining eyes are beaming at Alvarr. This is the moment they’ve all been
waiting for. Alvarr has finally called a meeting with every existing rebel. They’ve gained massive support since the early days, and the room’s crowded with sorcerers and witches of all ages. They would have never been able to maintain the quality and quantity of their ‘attacks’ if there hadn’t been so many of them. This was the major ingredient to their success.

What’s more, the magical community is upbeat for the first time in over thirty years.

Getting the better of the Justice Squad and showing up their impotence against magic have caused a lot of smiles amongst MUs. Courage to stand up against the status quo has been blossoming all around.

“The government’s on edge. The police have started to take us more than seriously. The media have become very sensitive to all of our actions. Many of them are highly critical of The Governor for not providing proper protection to the citizens of Camelot. One more major shove, and Uther Pendragon will have no choice but to resign.”

Many of the MUs around are nodding their heads. Just like Morgana’s, their faces are determined and unwavering. After so many years there’s a general feeling of a new era dawning and their fate changing in their favour. Morgana throws a sideways glance at Merlin.

She worked hard to persuade him to come along tonight. Alvarr asked her to bring him along, because what they’re hoping to do will be impossible without him. Not that Merlin knows about any of this yet. At the moment he looks rather uncomfortable, clearly hedging his bets and waiting wearily for what’s to come.

“Some of you will have already guessed what we’re going to suggest.” Alvarr looks around the crowd to see plenty of excited faces. He takes a deep breath as if he’s contemplating the enormity of his plan. “We’re going to go for the formula one more time.”

“Hear, hear!” “Finally!” “Yes!” “We’re all the way with you!” There’s approval all over the room and exhilarated mumbling ripples through the room.

“What’s the plan, Alvarr?” a tall, broad sorcerer shouts. Morgana vaguely remembers his wife being killed by the Serum. But so many of them have a lost a loved one to the blue poison.

“I have it from an inside source…,” Alvarr exchanges a glance with Morgana, “…that there’s a copy of the formula on Arthur Pendragon’s computer. I’ll say, we’ll break in there and make it ours!”

Morgana feels Merlin’s stare in the back of her neck. Surely he can’t be annoyed with me for passing that information on. He spoke about that quite openly after Arthur’s abduction, and he never asked me to keep quiet about it.

“But we’ve never been able to penetrate the Ministry before!” a dumpy little witch blubbers, looking slightly frightened at the prospect of tackling such a dangerous task.

“We also have never had someone before who knows the Ministry inside out and can give us essential hints how their security works.” Alvarr’s looking straight into Merlin’s eyes now. “Merlin here has got a know-how that could get us right into the heart of the Ministry.” Everyone’s craning their necks and turning their heads to see who Alvarr’s talking to and Merlin blanches.

He scowls at Morgana, clearly displeased at getting blindsided, his face eloquently expressing what’s going on inside. His lips are mouthing something that looks suspiciously like ‘What the f…’, and for the first time that evening Morgana wonders if she should have talked to Merlin about this before. **Guess I was too scared he might say no.**
“Of course we don’t know yet whether Merlin’s actually going to help us.” Alvarr challenges Merlin, his eye-brows raised sarcastically and his mouth twITCHING INTO AN UNPLEASANT SMILE.

“I lost my wife to the Serum. He must help us!”

“My brother died of the Serum a few weeks ago!”

“I buried my son a year ago!”

Lots of voices are gathering momentum as they urge Merlin to confirm his alliance to their cause. Morgana’s anxiety soars when Merlin remains still, looking around the room and eventually burning his gaze into hers.

“Merlin, think of Father! I don’t need to tell you he was a good man, a man of honour and integrity. His life was cut short because of this one thing – the injustice the Pendragon government has imposed on all of us. He sacrificed his life for our kind, and we must do the same, if it means there’s a chance to lift that curse off all our shoulders.”

Applause follows Morgana’s little speech, and when she scans Merlin’s face warily and finds no sign of immediate agreement, she spits out angrily, "For goodness sake, Merlin. You’ve been after an anti-dote for ages. This is your chance to make it come true.”

Merlin’s fighting with himself, Morgana can spot the signs. The way he bites the inside of his cheek, the fingers tapping nervously at the side of his leg, the Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, all hint at it. What is there to think about? Why would he even consider not helping? Is this because of Arthur? Jealousy races through Morgana like a wildfire. He’s still thinking about that bloody bastard. Has he not read the papers? Arthur’s been seen with an old flame of his, smiling into the cameras, looking content. Why is Merlin still beating himself up for that arse?

“I will do it on one account.” As soon as Merlin starts speaking a hush falls over the crowd. “Nobody’s going to get injured or killed. The plan’s got to be fool proof.” Merlin stares back at Alvarr, his whole body language revealing how uneasy and doubtful he is.

“We’ll make sure of that, Merlin.” Alvarr holds out his hand to shake Merlin’s, who hesitates for a moment before grasping it, but he does eventually. Claps erupt around the room and Morgana walks up to her brother to hug him.

“What did you do that for, Morgana?” he hisses into her ear as he releases her.

“It’s all for the best. The formula has to become ours. You’re the key to it all. You can save so many people, Merlin,” Morgana whispers and squeezes his hand firmly. “Father would be so proud of you.”

Merlin nods. “I’m doing this for him, first and foremost. And for all of us. But I still don’t like how you’re going about it.”

Just then Alvarr comes up to them and takes Merlin aside. “I’m glad to see you’ve finally come down on our side, Merlin,” Alvarr says with a sly smile on his face. “If we succeed, and, with your help we will, neither Pendragon won’t be in power much longer.”

Apparently amiss of any words he wants to say, Merlin stares Alvarr out.

“Well,” Alvarr chuckles somewhat sneeringly, “… the young Pendragon doesn’t look like lasting for much longer anyway, hypospray or not. There was another report in the papers yesterday that he collapsed again.”
Morgana catches only bits of Alvarr’s comment, but she can’t hear anything that warrants Merlin strange reaction to it. He visibly freezes and throws Alvarr a suspicious side-way glance before his face turns into an inscrutable mask. That’s his poker face. What does he think he has to hide?

Morgana’s heart sinks. Here we go again. He’s probably got scruples. Arthur’s really fucked with his head. Maybe it’s time for me to help Merlin out a bit. I’ve given him plenty of time to get over Arthur. I won’t allow him to suffer any longer.

Just as well she’s come prepared. This event is the perfect opportunity to do what she’s been thinking about for so long. She walks up to the table where soft drinks, coffee and tea are available and takes two cups to fill them with orange juice. It’s far too busy in the room for anyone to notice what’s she’s doing next, and Merlin’s deeply in conversation with Alvarr. She removes a small vial with a transparent fluid from her bag, opens its lid with her thumb and empties the contents into one cup with a swift move. A quick swirl and she grabs both cups.

When she joins Alvarr and Merlin, she simply places the cup with the liquid into Merlin’s hand. Without thinking or looking at the drink he accepts it graciously and holds on to it for a couple of seconds while listening to Alvarr lining out his plans for the retrieval of the formula. Morgana quietly toasts her brother and takes a sip of her drink to encourage Merlin to do the same. He throws her a tense half-smile and, evidently thirsty in this stuffy room full of people, empties the cup in a couple of glugs.

Finally! Morgana can’t help smirking. He’s going to be mine now.

Merlin’s been tossing and turning in his bed for the best part of two hours. The alarm says it’s 2.15. Shit. I’m really fed up with this. And why do I feel as if I’ve had a whole bottle of whisky? Even lying down his head’s spinning, but that’s probably all due to the plethora of thoughts criss-crossing his brain like crazy. He tries to relax for the hundredth time, anticipating that this will have as little effect as all the other attempts he’s already made. Too much has happened earlier that night.

According to the press, Arthur collapsed three more times recently, so that makes it six all in all, if he’s counting right. Panic seizes his heart at the mere thought of what’s bound to come next. I must try again, I have to, he vows. He’s tried everything he could think of to tell Arthur about the hypospray. His e-mail was returned in a flash as undeliverable, an anonymous phone call to his office got intercepted thanks to Percival, he even wrote a regular letter, but no doubt that didn’t reach Arthur either. And if it did, Arthur’s certainly not acted upon it.

As if his heart wasn’t hurting enough, the recent reappearance of Aiden on the scene has completely destroyed the tiny flicker of hope remaining in a forgotten corner of his heart persisting doggedly that what they’d had together was too strong to die completely.

Arthur’s moved on. Merlin chomps at the inside of his cheek as the pain in his chest blossoms into fully fledged agony. He’s moved on and is finding comfort with the man who looks like me. How ironic is that. Bet he wishes we’d never met. I hope he’s happy at least. Merlin swallows the sob that’s been sitting in his throat and wipes away the sweat from his forehead. Why is it so blooming warm all of a sudden? Am I coming down with a fever? That would be the worst timing ever!

Merlin pushes out a puff of air and throws his blanket off. He has to be fit if he wants to join Alvarr. Although he hesitated to start with, he’s aware that the break-in is going to provide an ideal
opportunity to let Arthur know about the danger he’s in. If he leads the rebels to Arthur’s office, he’ll be able to leave a message there, a very personal message, maybe one Arthur will take seriously. That’s one reason why he’s accepted to work with Alvarr. Of course he wants the formula. Of course he wants his kin to become free citizens, but warning Arthur is the biggest incentive in this whole undertaking.

Alvarr has already milked him for information about the ins and outs of the Ministry, the alarm system, the guards, and any other details Merlin was able to remember. Not that he could answer all Alvarr’s questions, but having lived inside the Ministry has definitely given him some insider knowledge. He’s pretty certain they’ll make it to Arthur’s office undetected and, if Will and Gilli do their job right and use the technological data he’s given them, they should be able to work out how to open Arthur’s computer.

Then they can copy the formula and take it away. End of story. Even if they’re intercepted by guards, magic will help them to leave unharmed. Hope Alvarr sticks to his promise and isn’t going to hurt anyone. Merlin still doesn’t trust the man. Never has. Alvarr hates everything about the Pendragons, that’s for sure. That bastard had sounded so happy that Arthur was in pain and ill and weak. Fuck him. Ignorant, narrow-minded extremist. Why did he have to make that biting comment about Arthur? To rile me? To hurt me? To take the mickey?

“The young Pendragon doesn’t look like lasting for much longer anyway, hypospray or not,” Alvarr had said. For one instant he’d considered punching the man straight into his smirking face, sending him crashing into the nearest wall, but in the next his heart stopped.

How the heck did Alavrr know about the hypospray? As far as Merlin’s aware there are only very few people who know of its existence and why Arthur’s taking it. Uther, Edwin, Gwaine, and most likely Leon and Percival who have been Arthur’s life-long friends, and Gaius and him. Merlin’s knows that he’s never mentioned it to Morgana, just like the fact that Arthur’s got magic. So that option is out.

Morgana! For a moment her beautiful face floods every square inch of his brain. The curve of her delicate nose, the flutter of her eye-lashes, the emerald depths of her eyes. Merlin fervently shakes his head like a dog trying to get rid of water on its coat. What was that all about? What an odd image to dominate his mind! What was I thinking before that? Ah, yes. Alvarr and the mention of the hypospray.

Merlin doesn’t believe for one second that Uther, Gwaine, Percival or Leon have anything to do with this. There’s only one person who could have passed that secret on to Alvarr. Edwin. Is there any other way Alvarr could have found out? Most unlikely! But if this was true, it would mean that Alvarr and Edwin must be in contact with each other and share pretty important information.

They must be working together. Must be. But for what purpose? Merlin’s even more awake now than he’s already been. Shit. If Alvarr was in league with Edwin, would it not be feasible that Edwin knows everything the rebels do? Double shit. Does this mean that Edwin knows what they’re planning to do? Why would he allow it? Surely he wants to keep the formula safe?

Everything always leads back to Edwin. The disappearing bodies, the suspect examinations of MUs at Lamia House, the Serum in the hypospray,… Yes, that. Does Edwin want to kill Arthur? There’s no logic in that. He was most likely told by Uther to prescribe a dose of Serum to Arthur to keep his magic under control. But Uther has no way of really understanding what exactly is in Arthur’s hypospray or what it might do. Is Edwin deceiving Uther? What motive would he have for that? Edwin is Uther’s right-hand man. He’s in a positon of high power. Why would he risk it all?

Just then, another thing strikes Merlin. Morgana! She’s right in the middle of this. Does Morgana
know anything about an alliance between Alvarr and Edwin? She’s really close to Alvarr. I’ve seen the way she looks at him. She has no right to look at Alvarr like that. No right at all. Not when I am there. Morgana should not be wasting her time on that idiot. Merlin grits his teeth, and then stops short slightly bewildered. Surely Morgana can do what she likes. It’s never bothered him before and it shouldn’t bother him now.

But it’s a fact that she hangs onto every word Alvarr says and backs him up whatever it might be. And she follows every one of his instructions to the T. Like this afternoon. Surely Morgana and Alvarr had conspired to take him by surprise and more or less ‘blackmail’ him into agreeing to work with them. He was pretty angry about it then, to put it mildly, and he’s still annoyed about it.

Why hadn’t Morgana spoken to him about it before-hand? Most likely, he would have said ‘yes’ anyway. She was right when she said all he ever wanted was an anti-dote for the Serum so their kin could live in peace and without fear. Why did she have to stab him into his back and almost bully him into this decision?

She’s always been a strong-willed girl. And once she’s passionate about something she’s going for it with all her conviction and energy. She didn’t mean it. I know she thinks it’s for the best.

Okay, he might not approve of what Morgana’s has done, but he can’t be really mad at her, either. It was just a silly mistake. Morgana is a passionate woman and it got the better of her. An image of her face, cheeks flushed and eyes burning with conviction, careens through his brain. Hmm, actually the idea of a passionate Morgana sounds rather appealing.

Morgana. Morgana. Morgana. Her name reverberates inside his heart and saturates every fibre of his being. From feeling fully alert one second, Merlin goes to drowsy and confused the next so suddenly, he isn’t even aware it’s happening. All the thoughts that have been whizzing through his head intermingle with each other, topple on top of each other, break up into fractions of ideas and finally end up in a pile of obscure fuzz. Drowning in shades of gold and black and green his brain shuts down and seconds later he’s fast asleep.

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“Morgana!” Merlin beams at his sister the next morning and walks up to her. “You look amazing!” God, she’s really gorgeous. It’s nothing new that Morgana’s an incredibly attractive woman. He’s always been aware of that. But looking at her just now has made his heart beat faster and he can hardly take his eyes off her as she settles at the kitchen table.

“I’m so pleased you could join us for breakfast!” Hunith smiles at her daughter and places a kiss on her cheek. “It’ll be ready in a second.” And then she turns round to busy herself at the cooker to finish off the bacon and eggs she’s started a minute earlier.

“Merlin, how are you today?” Morgana asks gently, and when her green, glorious eyes dip into Merlin’s he almost forgets to breathe for a second. That shade of green is stunning, and it’s brought out even more by the dark red of her lips and the soft, long curls of black hair that play around her face graciously. Merlin almost reaches out to touch them to see how soft they are, when he realizes what he’s doing. What the heck? I’m obviously still half asleep. It’s no wonder after the short night I had.

“Tired.” Merlin grins sheepishly, feeling tongue-tied and awkward like a teenager. “I had a lot to think about last night.”
“I bet you did.” Morgana squeezes Merlin’s hand and the surge of electricity that runs through him takes him by surprise. Wow. She is lovely. Her mouth. Her lips.…

“I thought about Alvarr’s plan,” Merlin starts, but Morgana puts her finger over her lips, her eyes looking pointedly towards Hunith. Of course, it’s not a good idea to alarm Hunith before he knows what they’re actually going to do. How kind of Morgana to think of mum first! She’s such a considerate, warm-hearted girl.

Throughout breakfast Merlin repeatedly checks out his foster sister, the pull towards her increasing every time their eyes meet. Every smile makes him feel light-headed, every touch sends shivers down his spine, every time she holds his gaze his knees go weak.

By the time they’re clearing the dishes away, Merlin’s forgotten why the strong attraction towards Morgana should feel odd. He really has to talk to her, really needs to put his hands into that mass of dark hair, really must touch that heavenly neck…

There’s a glint in Morgana’s eyes making his blood run faster and when she draws him back into his room after they’ve finished helping tidy everything away, he doesn’t resist. Morgana settles on the bed after removing the latest newspaper that’s been cluttering it. She stretches out her hand to pull Merlin down to sit next to her.

“Oh, these papers!” Morgana exclaims and points at the headline of yesterday’s Daily Mirror. “Poor Arthur, he’s not looking great these days, is he?” She watches him expectantly, as if whatever he’s going to say might be something special. Merlin’s eyes run over the headline and the picture on the cover. Arthur Pendragon does look a bit run down.

A strange sensation spreads in Merlin’s chest, and a vague memory of sorrow passes in a flash. He remembers feeling pretty upset and depressed about Arthur’s illness the day before. He does recall thinking about trying to do something. Something that has to do with Arthur and the time when he worked for the blond. That’s such a long time ago. Why was he so desperate to help him? Was that what he actually wanted to do? Why would he?

An image of Arthur kissing him pops into his head, followed by another memory of his lips on hot skin, on Arthur’s body, on his … What? Fuck! Did he really do that? He must have been totally out of his mind. Or had it been some freaky dream? Merlin blushes although he knows that Morgana can’t read his mind. Just as well, I don’t want to put her off. And I still haven’t answered her question.

“He looks ill,” Merlin says rather matter of fact. “Maybe his new boyfriend is wearing him out.” Thank God, he must have said the right thing because Morgana beams at him with sparkling eyes.

“Yes, maybe,” she says with a grin and cuddles into his side. Merlin immediately places his arms round her shoulders to pull her in tight. Why has he never noticed before how good Morgana smells? Thank you and Alvarr decided on a plan yet?”

“Nothing completely concrete, but I’ve passed on everything that might be useful. Alvarr thinks we’ll be able to go ahead with our task in a week, two at the most.”

“So soon?” Morgana’s delighted and Merlin’s hearts soars.

“The sooner, the better. Are you going to come with me?” Merlin asks, desperate to have her support. Morgana isn’t only the most beautiful creature he’s ever seen, she’s also a formidable witch and a loyal ally, and to have her backing and approval means everything to him.
“I’d go anywhere with you,” Morgana whispers, running her fingers gently over his, and finally interlocking them. *That feels amazing.* Merlin’s head is starting to spin, but he isn’t too dazed to answer her.

“Nothing would make me happier!” And then instinct takes over and he bends forward to place a tender kiss on her lips.
“Merlin.” Hunith sinks onto a chair next to the table, her voice just an exasperated mumble.

Merlin swallows hard. He knows his mother’s mortified, and she’s packed all the anguish she must be feeling into one word. His name. He could have coped with anger and rage, and if he’s honest, his mum would have every reason to react like that, but her quiet desperation is way more devastating.

“Must you go?” Hunith’s eyes are begging, and Merlin almost buckles under the weight of his guilt. He’s avoided this conversation for as long as he’s been able to because he didn’t want her to worry for longer than necessary. But they’re going to break into the Ministry tonight which left him no other choice. He had to tell her about their plans.

Morgana squeezes his hand under the table and Merlin reciprocates immediately. God, what would I do without her? She’s become his steadying rock, his source of comfort and support in only a few days. Not to mention the things she does to his heart. Her gaze makes him hot all over and a brush of her fingers against his skin is enough to evoke feelings he’d never thought possible. How blind he has been for so many years overlooking the woman right in front of his nose! He’d never even considered her THAT way.

A heartfelt sigh escapes Merlin, partly for the plight of his mother who’s petrified of losing not only him, but also the young woman she’s brought up as her daughter, and partly for the turmoil inside him, caused by a gaze into the emerald heaven of Morgana’s eyes. He uses all his will-power to snap out of his day dream and answer his mum’s question.

“You know, I have to. Father’s last words were ‘Make me proud’. I want to do just that. I couldn’t save him, but I can try and save our kin. To honour his memory. It’s the least I can do.” Hunith presses her lips together tightly while silent tears roll over her cheeks. “Oh, Merlin.” It seems her pain has robbed her momentarily of any other words.

“Morgana will be there and we’re going to watch out for each other, won’t we?” Merlin smiles at Morgana gormlessly. Her skin is glowing today, radiating actually, and the urge to touch it and savour its softness has been driving him crazy.

“Of course, we will.” Morgana says and places a kiss on his cheek. Merlin shudders at the tiny touch as heat rushes through him from top to toe encompassing his whole being. Once this is over I’m going to make sure that she is mine. Permanently.

“If you get caught…,” Hunith’s voice trails off, as a sob cuts her words short.

“We won’t get caught, mum,” Merlin says with total conviction. “Alvarr has powerful magic and you know how talented Morgana is.”

“Not to mention Merlin’s powers.” Morgana rewards Merlin with one of her dazzling smiles that take his breath away.

“You must use your magic if you need to,” Hunith urges them.

“The Ministry will be empty at this time of the day, and once we’re inside, there shouldn’t be any guards who could interfere with our plans,” Merlin explains in the hope to pacify his mum. But judging by her look, Hunith is still more than sceptical.
“When are you leaving?” Hunith mumbles, sounding defeated and frightened.

“We have to go now.” Morgana gets up and walks round to Hunith to hug her warmly. “We’ll be alright mum. Alvarr’s thought of every little detail.”

Hunith nods and strokes over Morgana’s wild, dark locks. “Good luck,” she whispers before she lets her go. “I just want to have a word with Merlin before he joins you.”

“Sure.” Morgana smiles at the two of them. “I’ll be waiting outside, Merlin,” she says before she disappears down the corridor.

“Mum.” Merlin gets up and walks round her to embrace her. Hunith sinks against his chest, trembling with choked emotion. “Shall I help relax you?” he whispers, but she shakes her head.

“Please look after yourself,” she says hoarsely, when she pulls away. Her hands nervously dust off his jacket as if it needed cleaning. They both know there’s nothing there to be brushed away.

“I will,” he promises again with a reassuring smile, noting how she struggles to return it. Unexpectedly her face brightens a little a second later.

“I assume you’re going to take the message for Arthur you wrote last week?”

“Arthur?” Merlin looks at her dumbfounded. “A message?”

Hunith throws him a strange look. “The warning about the hypospray. You said you would leave it behind in his office.”

“Oh!” Merlin can vaguely remember voicing that idea a few days ago. But for all the gold in this world he can’t remember why. “I forgot about that.”

“Forgot?” Hunith cries out, surprise written all over her face.

“It’s not that important. Surely the young Pendragon has other people to look after him,” Merlin says defiantly, wondering why Hunith is furrowing her brows. This is her ‘I know something’s not right, tell me what it is’ look.

“What’s wrong with you, Merlin?” Hunith asks, watching him closely.

Merlin has no idea why his mum would sound as fearful as she does. “Wrong?”

“This isn’t like you.”

“What are you talking about?” Merlin doesn’t get it. Has he pushed Hunith over the edge? Have all the recent events finally proved too much for her?

“Has anything happened?”

“For goodness sake, mum. Nothing’s happened. Would you stop talking in riddles?” Merlin’s slowly losing his composure because he’s completely confused by his mum’s odd behaviour. What has suddenly got into her?

Hunith scrutinizes him from top to toe. “You told me only a few days ago that you love Arthur, and now you’re acting as if you couldn’t give a toss about him.”

“Love Arthur?” Now that’s the strangest thing he’s ever heard. Okay, he’s not particularly proud of acting the lovesick fool around Arthur when he worked at the Ministry. But that had been part of his
mission and he’d only put it on for that purpose. “You must have got the completely wrong end of the stick, mum. Arthur means nothing to me.” No, I’m in love with Morgana. Merlin bites his lip, realizing this isn’t the time to give away his newly found feelings. Apart from that, he has no idea how his mum might react to the news.

“Right,” Hunith scrunches her face up in confusion, a tiny frustrated sigh escaping her lips. “I know you need to go and I don’t want to keep you. But we’ll talk about this when you come back.”

 Relieved that his mum’s letting the uncomfortable topic go, Merlin agrees immediately. “Of course.”

“Just one thing,” Hunith says, her eyes scanning his face uneasily. ”Leave that message for Arthur. If not for him, do it for me.”

“Really?” Merlin’s face is a huge question mark.

“Just say yes and do it,” Hunith sounds firm and determined now, the way she used to speak to him when she told him off. How can he refuse her, considering what a tough few months she’s had? At this stage Merlin would have promised anything she asked just to make her happy because leaving her behind in any kind of agitation is simply too awful. Even if he hasn’t got a clue why his mother cares about that message so much.

“I’ll do it. For you,” he says, pleased that Hunith appears more at ease as soon as he walks up to the sideboard to pick a small envelope out of a pile of paper and put it into his pocket.

“Good.” Hunith gives him tiny smile. “And Merlin, please come back.”

Merlin just nods and quickly hugs his mother one more time before he rushes after Morgana.

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“I assume everything’s in place.” Edwin looks at Alvarr expectantly. He called this second meeting in his log cabin to ensure that absolutely every one of his instructions has been followed. I’m on the home straight. I can’t afford anything going wrong now.

“It is. We’re ready to go tonight,” Alvarr confirms and smirks.

“And Merlin will be there?” Edwin asks. This is, after all, the most important point. I will present him to Uther on a golden plate, like a lamb ready for slaughter, and when he gets sentenced I’m going to score on two fronts. A surge of excitement flushes through Edwin – his goal is in immediate grasp and soon he’ll reap the rewards for his sacrifices and his patience.

“I was pretty sure he wouldn’t turn down the opportunity to get to the formula after he’s failed so miserably the first time. But he still needed a little bit of persuading.”

“From what you’re telling me, his sister played a part in that?”

Alvarr grins from ear to ear. “Yes, she did. It’s so easy to manipulate Morgana!”

“Morgana. That’s her name?” Edwin wonders, mild curiosity in his voice.

“Yes, Morgana Emerson. Why are you asking?” Alvarr asks, surprised at the off-beat question.

“Morgana, it’s a common name in the magical community, isn’t it?” Edwin says without answering Alvarr’s question, a small frown on his forehead.
“Guess so. I know a couple of Morganas in my extended family.”

Edwin nods, but his thoughts are far, far away. Nimueh’s little girl was called Morgana. Her full name had been Sofia Morgana, but her mother had always preferred to address her by her middle name. He’s wondered so often what happened to the little toddler he’d left in the back garden of Alator Menzies, one of the more prominent sorcerers in Camelot, certain that he would be able to find her a home.

Sometimes Edwin had been tempted to have her found, but, in the end, he always stopped himself for the same reason. What good would the knowledge do him? Or her? None whatsoever, as far as he could tell. Most likely Morgana had grown up happily in a family, completely unaware of who she was. Why would he take that from her? Anonymity was what Nimueh had wanted for her daughter, and he would never go against the wishes of the woman he loved.

“Right.” Edwin rips himself out of his daze, as he gets out of the sofa chair. “Make sure your timing’s right, and that you and Morgana get clear before the guards arrive. Leave everything else to me.”

Edwin grabs Alvarr’s shoulder. “A few more weeks, Alvarr. We’re almost there.”

“Looking forward to it,” Alvarr says with shining eyes, the vision of a glorious future on his mind. A few final words, some last advice and then he takes his leave.

Edwin settles back on his soft chair again once he’s alone. So far everything’s gone swimmingly. Camelot is in uproar. The fear of magic has the city in its grip and is spreading steadily throughout the country. The people’s trust in Uther to protect them from sorcery is fading at an alarming speed. Uther’s on constant edge, painfully aware that his power is slipping through his fingers like quicksand. No measure he’s introduced to keep the increase of magical crime under control has helped so far. No wonder, as Edwin’s always been one step ahead of him.

The old doctor chuckles quietly. Very gratifying, that! As for Arthur, he’s pretty near the end. A tiny push in the form of a slightly higher dose of Serum in the next few bottles of hypospray will finish him off in the matter of a few weeks. Edwin’s self-congratulating himself for this part of his plan. It IS rather ingenious, to be honest. Arthur will officially die from his long-standing illness. No questions asked. That’s what I call maximum effect for minimum effort.

The knowledge that Uther’s effectively killed his son for his phobia of magic is just the cherry on top of his achievements. He can’t wait to see Uther’s face once he realizes the truth. When the Governor’s at his lowest point, heart-broken by the loss of his son and inundated with demands to resign, Edwin’s going to strike.

The Elixir is as good as ready. All the years of quiet crafting has paid off in the end. He’s just waiting for Merlin’s little contribution to it, and that’ll happen soon enough once ‘the greatest sorcerer to ever walk the earth’ has been injected. The Serum’s designed to increase in its effect the more magic it encounters, and if rumours are to be believed, Merlin’s powerful, very powerful. So he won’t have to wait for very long for Merlin’s demise.

And then the Elixir will make HIM most powerful than man ever. Even more powerful than Merlin. And Camelot and Albion will be his. His alone. He will be unstoppable, and people are going to look up at him as their Saviour.

Soon, Nimueh! Soon our revenge on the Pendragons will be complete.
It’s been a long and exhausting day. But all days feel like that at the moment. Arthur lets his head fall back on the soft backrest of his leather chair, breathing in deeply. How much longer can he go on like this? It’s not that his work load’s increased, but he simply takes ages to get things finished. His condition allows him to work at full concentration for only a very limited time.

Arthur isn’t stupid. He can see clearly where all this is going. Things are going to come to a head, and soon he’ll have no choice but to give up work all together. Every single collapse has left him weaker and more prone to pick up other little ailments like colds and stomach bugs, contributing to the deterioration of his strength. *I’m a bloody invalid just as I’ve always feared.* Arthur chuckles bitterly. *And much sooner than I thought.* He remembers sharing these fears with Merlin not that long ago.

*Merlin. Fuck.* He’s thought of him again - despite the strict guidelines he imposed on himself to keep his sanity since they broke up. No thinking of Merlin, no mentioning his name, no craving for his presence, for his smile, his embrace, his body. Nothing at all. Unrealistic or not, he promised himself to act and think as if Merlin had never existed and to delete even the tiniest of memories immediately when they occurred. For most of the time this has worked surprisingly well.

However, the first month after his kidnapping had been a journey through hell and back. He combed through every moment he’d had with Merlin, searching for clues of his deceit. He ran countless conversations past his mind, analysing Merlin’s words for lies and contradictions. He repeatedly relived their last meeting, hearing Merlin admit to his crimes and his betrayal, until Arthur couldn’t bear it any longer.

He really wanted to give Merlin the benefit of the doubt as Gwaine had suggested and believe in the sincerity of his feelings, at least. He honestly tried. But how the heck could he get past the evidence of Merlin’s actions? They were simply too damning to overlook. As for his proclamation of love – what else could they be but empty words? How could Merlin dare to even mention the L- word after all he’d done to him?

And yet, despite it all, defying logic and common sense, Arthur hasn’t been able to extinguish the tiny flame that’s keeps flickering on a slow burn somewhere inside his heart. He despises himself for it. For still having feelings for the man who lied to his face without any scruples. For yearning for a man who’s nothing but a traitorous liar. How can he possibly admit that, deep down, a scanty shred of affection for Merlin keeps bobbing up like a tumbler toy? The knowledge has been torturing him, gradually chipping away at his self-worth. And he hates Merlin for that, too.

Arthur groans with frustration. *Just fell for it again. Thinking of HIM.* Arthur grabs his mobile and speed-dials Aiden’s number. He owes that guy more he can ever repay him. Aiden’s selfless support has kept him afloat in the stormiest of seas. He’d just appeared at his office one day out of the blue. “Want to go for a coffee?” he’d asked, looking slim, tall and handsome.

“I can’t.” Arthur resisted to start with. “I’m not in a position to offer you …”

Aiden cut him short. “I don’t expect anything from you, Arthur. Not now, not in future. I know I’m not him. I understand the last thing you need right now is another relationship, but I think you could do with a friend.” And that’s what Aiden has become. A real friend, a shoulder to lean on, a man of integrity he fully trusts. Speaking to him always does him good, and it’s not any different this time.

The talk to Aiden’s definitely cheers him up. Some funny anecdotes about the latest play at the
Empire Theatre, some general chit-chat about old acquaintances and a little prep talk have helped to make him breathe a little bit lighter.

A couple more files before I call it a day. Arthur’s determined he’s not going to be beaten by this bloody illness. Perseverance has always been one of his strengths and he’s going to rely on it now. A knock at the door of his office interrupts him half an hour later.

“Father!” Arthur can’t help grinning. Uther’s definitely paid him a lot more visits recently and he’s phoned him at least once a day.

“You’re working late again,” Uther states and gives Arthur a once over. He’s done that a lot lately, too. “Feeling alright?”

“Not too bad. I don’t want to leave all that …” Arthur says, pointing at the stack of folders piling on his desk, “…until tomorrow.”

“Just make sure you aren’t overdoing it.”

“I promise, Father. I’ll be off to bed once I’ve finished this file.”

Uther gives Arthur a hesitant smile and wishes him a good night, before he heads back to his apartment.

Eventually, it’s after 11 p.m. when Arthur switches his computer off and puts the last file aside. Maybe I have overdone it after all, he thinks when he attempts to get up, and his legs won’t do as they’re told right away. I’m really knackered. Easy does it.

An instant later he grunts with frustration when a dizzy spell hits him as soon as he’s trying to put weight on his feet. A bit disconcerted, he stops moving and stares at the medical emergency button he’s been carrying around with him for quite a while now. It’s quite a clever little thing, measuring his temperature and pulse continuously and then transferring the data to the nearest hospital. As soon as anything out of the ordinary happens an ambulance will be with him within minutes. Clever, but bloody ridiculous for a man of my age.

Arthur gets the remote control for his latest gadget, a sofa that turns into a single bed by the push of a button. True, it’s a bit pathetic he would have something that silly in his office, but it has proved incredibly handy lately. Just like now, when returning to his apartment isn’t an option. Arthur presses the green button, happily admitting that he’s taking childish pleasure from watching the change.

A few minutes later he’s recovered enough to slip into jogging bottoms and a comfy T-shirt, ready for bed. As instructed by Leon he puts his Safety Chip onto the small table next to him and places a mini laser gun under his pillow. Uther insisted on extra safety measures after his kidnapping. When Percival fully agreed with his father, urging Arthur to be better safe than sorry, Arthur bowed to their will and, to ease his father’s mind, had an extra alarm for his office installed.

The sun’s not quite risen when an unusual noise wakens Arthur. Disoriented, he lies motionless, trying to make sense of what has interrupted his sleep.

“Click, click, click.” Weird. This sounds suspiciously like the quiet buzz of the office alarm when he switches it off. He almost sits up to go and check, when he hears a small creak at the other side of the room. The office door. Someone’s opened it. Shit.

Arthur’s heart is thudding so loud he’s afraid whoever has just broken into his office is going to be able to hear him. He’s lucky his bed isn’t in immediate view of the door, but once the intruders – the silent footsteps give away there’s more than one person involved – move towards the middle of the
room, he won’t have anywhere else to hide.

“The computer,” a muffled voice says, and a flash of light falls onto his desk.

Arthur watches breathlessly from under his cover as three dark figures sneak towards their obvious destination. At least they’re not after my blood. But what the heck could they want from my PC? A determined grin plays around his lips as his hand automatically finds the laser gun. Nobody’s going to take anything from this office if he has a word to say about it.

All he has to do is wait for the opportune moment, and make sure he gets to his Safety Chip. Once he presses it, the Police will be here within minutes.

A tall, lean figure, looking vaguely familiar, confidently reaches for the button to boot up Arthur’s PC. Seconds later the tiles of the opening menu flicker across the screen. The man at the computer clicks through the menu as if he knows it by heart, but Arthur can’t quite make out where he ends up. Whatever it is, I’ll be damned if I’m lying here watching a bloody thief stealing data from my computer.

“And what exactly do you think you’re doing?” As soon as Arthur is raising his voice the main lights come on and flood the office. The intruders, startled out of the safety of darkness, whip round in shock to reveal themselves.

Arthur’s heart stops. It’s the witch and the sorcerer who’ve kidnapped him. And the man breaking into his computer is … Merlin.

It’s amazing how many different thoughts the brain can process in the smallest fraction of time. While Arthur takes stock of his situation, he bullet-points the following:

1. He has no chance against three MUs. He might hurt one with his laser gun, but that still leaves two sorcerers to deal with thereafter.
2. Even if he could use his Safety Chip – which he doesn’t because he noticed it slipping on the floor when he jumped out of his bed – the police would never be fast enough to get to him.
3. Merlin’s hair is in a complete mess, and he’s looking decidedly haggard and bony. His cheekbones dominate his face more than ever, jetting out like shards of glass.
4. He has not the slightest intention of letting Merlin shit on his head for a second time.

“Get off that computer,” Arthur says, threat and determination in his eyes while he points his gun towards Morgana.

“Or what?” Merlin tilts his head, challenging and slightly provocative.

“Or I’ll shoot her first.” To make clear he’s not kidding Arthur unlocks the safety catch of the gun.

“Stooping low, aren’t we?” Merlin retorts, but something like worry crosses his face, and he pulls Morgana behind him to shield her with his body.

“Not as low as pimping myself out!”

“I did what I had to do,” Merlin states with a hint of surprise as if he doesn’t get why Arthur would be upset about that.

He doesn’t even try and contradict me. “ Fucking bastard.” Arthur’s blood is coming to boiling point, intensely detesting that Merlin’s still got the power to make him hurt the way he does. “Don’t believe for a second I’m going to hesitate taking YOU out instead.” Arthur grits his teeth in anger as all the resentment he felt for so many months bubbles violently to the surface. “It would be my pleasure.”
Unimpressed, Merlin shrugs off his jibe. “Would it now?” The cool indifference in his voice stabs straight through Arthur’s battered heart.

Is this really the same man he fell in love with? The same man who swore his love to him in the end? What a bloody joke! Merlin’s detached behaviour proves what Arthur’s told himself a million times. He never loved me. He used me and threw me away when he didn’t need me any longer.

“Merlin, stop it,” Morgana says as she steps forward to put her hand on Merlin’s arm. “He’s not worth it.”

“I know he isn’t, but he threatened you, and your life means more to me than anything else.”

Suddenly Merlin’s voice is all soft and low, and when he places his hand on hers, his thumb stroking her fingers reassuringly, it hits Arthur out of the blue. They are together. Merlin is with Morgana. Probably has been all along. He’s always lied to me. Always. As if he needed further proof of that!

For all it’s worth, the revelation tips the iceberg and propels Arthur into action. In sudden inspiration he moves with a swift turn, so he gets in line with his PC and before anyone can stop him he’s blasted his computer into smithereens.

“Get him, Alvarr!” Merlin shouts at the other sorcerer, his attention full on dragging Morgana onto the floor to shield her from the exploding debris.

Alavarr recites a couple of words and Arthur’s laser gun’s sent flying to the other side of his office. At the same time the sorcerer uses the momentary confusion to glide right behind Arthur, leaving him sandwiched between himself and Merlin and Morgana.

Shit. I’ve lost my advantage. If he ever had one to start with. There’s no way he can fight on two fronts, which leaves nothing but insolence to defend himself.

“Sorry, guys. Seems what you came for has just crumbled to dust,” he says as calmly as he musters. “Bloody shame, that.”

Before anyone answers, a pained outcry draws Arthur’s attention to Morgana who’s holding her left arm in agony. Blood’s dripping steadily out of a large cut, apparently caused by a sharp piece of metal that’s lodged itself into the soft flesh of her upper arm.

“Morgana!” Merlin’s fearful cry, further evidence of his true feelings, makes Arthur’s insides clench. “I’m here. Hold on!” Merlin rasps in panic, when Morgana sways and sinks to her knees.

“This is your fault, asshole!” Merlin growls at Arthur, as he wraps his arm round her shoulder to steady her. Ignoring anything else around him, Merlin gently takes the injured arm and whispers a few incomprehensible words. The shock of seeing Merlin’s eyes turn golden freezes Arthur to the spot. It’s the first time he’s witnessed Merlin using his magic. And if it wasn’t for this fucked up situation he actually might have been impressed.

Arthur can hardly believe his eyes when the shard is pulled from the wound by an invisible force and drops on the floor. A couple of mumbles and more golden magic later, and the bleeding stops and Morgana’s white face is getting colour again.

“I told you not to harm her,” Merlin snarls in anger, animosity oozing out of every syllable, as he turns round. Before Arthur can react, Merlin’s up and walking towards him, taking a couple of hurried steps. “You’re going to regret this.” His eyes are piercing Arthur’s with an intensity it physically hurts, but Arthur matches it all the way.

“Kill him, Merlin! For me!” Morgana’s shrill cry is hallowing off the walls, but for some reason
words have the opposite effect, causing Merlin to stall rather than act. Something resembling confusion crosses his face as he stops midway to stare at Arthur as if he’d never seen him before. For a second his eyes dart between Morgana and him, looking uncertain what to do.

“Avenge our kin!” Alvarr’s shout shakes Merlin out of his stupor and he automatically lifts his hand to cast the spell, but then remains motionless yet again. He stands rooted to the ground, staring straight into Arthur’s soul.

*How fitting that the man I wanted to spend my life with is going to end it.* Arthur chuckles bitterly at the irony of fate. But maybe that’s the way it’s supposed to be. And as he’s looking into the face of death, heart-broken and resigned to whatever’s coming, the thought this might be an easy way out before his condition gets the better of him pops into his head like an uninvited guest.

“Do it, Merlin,” he whispers, holding the other man’s gaze. “You’re doing me a favour.” Merlin swallows hard, still hesitating while that moment in time stretches out of all proportion.

Then everything happens at once. Distant voices in the corridor approaching the office trigger a roller-coaster of actions.

For fuck’s sake, Merlin!” Alvarr curses, apparently fed up with Merlin’s indecision. “Bloody Pendragon. That’s for you!” he shouts, sending a blast of light in Arthur’s direction. He leaves no doubt what he’s intending to do.

“No!!!” Merlin reacts with the speed of light. Hand outstretched, he tries to block the spell, but he’s not quite fast enough to deflect it completely. Most of the power hits the wall behind Merlin blasting a balloon-sized hole through it. The remains hit Arthur’s back, thrusting him forward straight into Merlin, causing the warlock to lose balance and fall backwards with Arthur crashing on top of him.

The tingle racing through Arthur is mind-blowing. It’s been almost six months since they last touched and it seems that all that pent-up energy between them has just been released. It races up and down his limbs, engulfs his heart and leaves him dizzy.

“Arghh!” Arthur moans as he rolls off Merlin, landing on his side next to him.

Numb with the after effects of the tingle he vaguely hears Alvarr and Morgana shouting somewhere in the distance. “Run! We need to get out of here!” “Merlin! Merlin!”

All of a sudden searing pain explodes in his head and then everything goes very quiet.

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“Arthur!” Merlin mumbles in confusion, a wave of nausea washing over him as he tries to sit up far too quickly. The ferocity of the tingle has rendered him near unconscious, and it’s taken him a second or two to compose himself again. And then there’s this odd sensation as if he’d just returned from an alternate universe.

Morgana? He was in love with her? Surely that can only have been a dream? But there’s no time for random thoughts like this at the moment. Merlin’s mind hums with confusion as he slowly pushes himself off the floor. What the heck has just happened?

The last fifteen minutes flash past his memory, leaving him dumbfounded. If he wasn’t surrounded
by broken bits of plastic and metal he would have sworn he’d been hallucinating. Slowly the outline of a figure next to him takes shape. His gaze settles on it and his insides ache when he realizes who it is.

“Oh my God!” A torrent of blood’s gashing out of a cut on Arthur’s head, soaking his clothes and forming a crimson puddle on the floor. Alvarr must have hit him with another spell on his way out.

“No, no, no!” Merlin babbles as he bends over Arthur’s lifeless body. He grabs his arm to check his pulse and lets out a huge sigh of relief when it comes through loud and clear.

Without another thought Merlin presses his hand on Arthur’s injury and frantically tries to remember the correct healing spell. *Bloody hell, I just used this a few minutes ago,* he curses under his breath. *Concentrate Merlin, concentrate!* Merlin wracks his brain for a couple of seconds before it comes back to him.

“Purhæle dolgbenn!” he whispers and his eyes glow golden.

Too agitated to see Arthur hurt, too involved in his effort to close Arthur’s wound, Merlin doesn’t pay attention to anything else around him. He doesn’t hear heavy footsteps coming closer and closer, and he isn’t even rattled by the profanities uttered by a man behind him.

He’s going to regret his carelessness when he looks back at that moment later.

Suddenly a jagged pain slices through his recently healed shoulder out of nowhere. Something hits the back of his head with full force and a firework of stars explodes inside his skull. By the time Merlin gets shackled and dragged away he’s long lost to the darkness of his unconsciousness.
“You’re sure you don’t want me to help you with that?” Alice, the woman Uther employed as Merlin’s replacement looks at Arthur with worried eyes. “You really should be resting.”

It’s only been a few hours since the break-in earlier this morning, and Arthur knows Alice is right. Despite everything, the mumsy undertone in her words puts a smile on his face. The slightly plump, grey-haired woman standing in front of him with concern in her face has been nothing but wonderful ever since she’s taken on the job as his PA. Organized and determined, with a huge splash of kindness, she’s kept him and the office going over the past six months.

Arthur does appreciate her offer, but he HAS tried to relax and put everything that happened out of his mind for a little while. It’s impossible. He’s so tense he’s near snapping in two. Staying in bed is simply not an option. He has to do something to distract himself. Sorting the files left splattered spectacularly across the whole room when he blew up his computer is the perfect mundane task he needs to keep him occupied before the trial at 1p.m.

“Thanks, Alice. I promise I’ll call you if I need you.”

“Your father isn’t going to be pleased about this, you know?” Alice tries one more time.

*No, he isn’t.* Arthur’s well aware of it. To say Uther was on the brink of a mental melt-down when he heard about the attack is the understatement of the century, and he reacted accordingly when he stormed into Arthur’s office not long after the guards dragged Merlin away.

“Fucking sorcerer! Impertinent, brassy little shit! He’s going to pay for this. The sooner, the better. I’m going to postpone all the other court cases for today. I want Merlin in the dock this afternoon.”

“You can’t do that. We haven’t built a case against him.” Arthur voiced his opinion without much thinking. Yes, Merlin was guilty of at least two capital crimes, but surely it wasn’t proper to forgo the preparation time a Defence Attorney usually had before a trial.

Uther threw him a weary look. “A case? That sorcerer …” and the last word was laced with
smouldering contempt, “…has committed high treason. And not only once. He’s been caught in the act this time, and there’s more than one witness for it. We’ve plenty of evidence to go ahead. Merlin will go to trial, and he will be sentenced. Today. The people of Camelot need to see us reacting immediately to an act as bold and impudent as that.”

Arthur understood why his father was so keen to deal with the matter swiftly. The unrest of the public about magic-related attacks had reached new heights in the last week. The news that sorcerers had been able to break and enter the very heart of Camelot’s justice system was only to increase the people’s anxiety.

And yet, Uther’s hurry left Arthur’s inherent sense of justice with its hackles up. Every person, no matter how guilty, should have the right to a proper trial. When he said as much, Uther glowered at him. “Are you defending that traitor? You can’t be serious! Would you get your brain into gear, for fuck’s sake?”

“I just want to make sure the law is upheld,” Arthur cuts his father short.

“I am the law, and the law will be upheld, Arthur,” Uther said in a way that made clear he didn’t expect to be contradicted. “Not only do we have witnesses that Merlin almost killed you, but Edwin also has proof that he was the ringleader of a number of magical crimes committed in recent weeks.”

“Edwin?” Arthur couldn’t hide his surprise.

“I asked him to poke around a bit to see if he could find any clues about who was responsible for all the troubles we’ve had. It seems he’s got some very reliable informers.”

Edwin? Informers? Why would the doctor get involved in what was strictly speaking a matter of the police? This was none of his business. Why had Uther even asked him to stick his nose into it? Uneasy about the whole idea, Arthur furrowed his brows.

“No need to look like that, Arthur. I know what you’re thinking. But Edwin’s a trusted friend. He’s gone out of his way to help, and the evidence he’s shown me this morning is pretty damning. And if it hadn’t been for him, you wouldn’t have had such a lucky escape.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was one of Edwin’s informers who ticked him off about the attack. If Edwin hadn’t sounded the alarm, you mightn’t be here anymore.” Uther’s voice had gone all crackly at that point, tugging at Arthur’s heart. His father had had a nasty shock when he was informed that his son had been found in a puddle of blood, looking half dead. No doubt, his father’s anger had hit the roof when he’d heard a sorcerer was responsible.

The thing was, Arthur couldn’t recall the events leading to his injury. He simply wasn’t able to confirm hundred percent it was Merlin who was to blame. It certainly looked like that on the surface of it, but something inside him fervently refused the idea.

“I’m not sure it was Merlin who wounded me …,” Arthur said, just to be interrupted by a very impatient Uther immediately.

“Get real, Arthur. The man’s guilty. He almost killed you. He deserves every little bit that’s coming to him. This is my final decision,” he pushed out brusquely, his face softening a second later. “Look Arthur. You’re not thinking straight just now. The whole thing has shaken you more than you realize. I’m sure you’re still traumatized. It’s only been a few hours. You’ll understand eventually this is for the best.”
“Arthur!” Alice’s soft voice penetrates his thoughts and Arthur realizes he’s been standing next to her wordlessly while letting his mind drift.

“Sorry, Alice, and thanks,” Arthur mumbles a bit embarrassed, but Alice gives him a friendly smile and gently pats his arm.

“Just be careful and don’t overstretch yourself. This has all been a bit much on top of your usual problems.” Arthur sighs when she closes the door of the office behind her. Her words are well meant, but he can’t help feeling he’s being treated like a terminally ill patient.

His gaze is drawn to the pile of paper thrown haphazardly on his desk by the cleaning team. Once the police had given their go ahead, they came in to clear his office of the debris covering every surface in the room. They even made the blood stain, left by his injury, disappear. Unconsciously Arthur touches the back of his head where a bandage of gauze covers the cut supposedly caused by Merlin’s spell.

They told Arthur that they’d stopped the sorcerer just in the nick of time, moments before he had the opportunity to finish him off completely. Merlin had been leaning over him, eyes all golden and hands on Arthur’s head when the guards knocked him out.

The thought’s been niggling Arthur ever since. Merlin had plenty opportunity to do him serious harm before that. But he hesitated. Twice. As far as Arthur remembers. His recollection of what happened is rather hazy, and he’s been working on lifting the fog that’s been clogging his memory.

Arthur lets his head fall back gently and closes his eyes, willing himself to revisit the events of this morning. If his bloody head wouldn’t hurt that much! It’s as if he’d never received any pain relief. In fact, it was the first thing the emergency medic had given him, before he got to work stitching his cut together.

“Odd,” the young doctor had said. “Considering how deep the wound is and how much blood you lost, this shouldn’t look as knitted together.”

Arthur was too dazed and weary then to digest the words, but now they suddenly seem to hint at something completely unexpected. Maybe … maybe Merlin was responsible for that? Maybe the guards had completely misunderstood Merlin’s intentions? Maybe he was healing me.

Arthur’s insides tighten into a knot, his mind in a flurry of confusion. But why? Merlin had been nothing but distant and dismissive of him before that. Why would he help him? And yet, what other explanation could there be? He mended Morgana’s wounds, what if he did the same for me?

Arthur’s heart leaps at the notion, and as he’s leaning further back into his chair, an ache in his back triggers another flash of memory. Something hit him in the back. Some kind of energy. Alvarr’s spell …

A vivid image zooms through his mind, and Arthur’s eyes widen when he hears Merlin’s agitated voice all over again. Noooo! And then … shit … the truth unfolds in all its glory. Merlin saved me. He defended me against Alvarr.

Arthur’s gaze is drawn inadvertently to the gaping hole in wall. That could have been right in my chest. But he saved me. Does this not prove that Merlin’s not as bad as he thought? A torrent of contradicting emotions rushes through his heart. He saved me, but he was still ready to break into my
computer and betray me again. And he confirmed that everything that happened between us was a bloody lie. He made clear that he and Morgana were together. A frustrated groan leaves Arthur’s chest.

I have to stop beating myself up about this. Arthur rubs his forehead and picks up the extra strength painkillers the medic left behind. He pops two into his mouth and swallows them down with a sip of water. Which reminds him to take his hypospray. Edwin’s left a new supply just the day before. “I’ve improved the composition again,” he’d said, “Hope it helps.”

Why am I still trusting Edwin with this? There’s something fishy about him, that’s for sure. Arthur hesitates briefly before he pushes the button to release the hypospray into his bloodstream. That doesn’t mean he isn’t doing his job as my doctor. Father trusts him, and he’s been loyal to us forever. Why should I doubt him over my medication?

Ten minutes later Arthur’s in the procedure of sorting paper into neat piles, picking apart pages and pages of different files. “Reminds me of bloody Sisyphus,” Arthur grumbles under his breath, letting his frustration out on a stack of paper rather than acknowledging the trial later in the day is hanging over his head like the sword of Damocles and giving him heart-burn.

“What the heck…?” A small cream envelope slides out between two partly burnt pages. Arthur knows that this wasn’t there the night before when he worked on these files.


A sudden outbreak of sweat caused by his erratic heartbeat and a violet flush of heat make Arthur ridiculously uncomfortable. What is this? Shall I open it? What if this is some kind of trap? Some kind of cursed note? Poisoned paper? Why would he leave a letter to me?

Arthur weighs the envelope on the palm of his hand, desperately uncertain what to do. He feels torn into so many different directions it’s making him dizzy. What the heck am I going to do with this?

Where am I? Merlin opens his eyes and scans the small room. It’s a cell, that’s for sure. Secured by cold iron, if he goes by the nausea and chill running through his body. But it’s not Lamia House. This looks like a four-star hotel compared to his father’s cell. The bed he’s lying on is half decent, as is the rest of the furniture, and there’s even a small window. I must be in one of the secure cells at the Court House.

Merlin checks the time on the large clock on the left wall. 9:46. He must have been knocked out for quite a while. Drowsily he attempts to sit up, but immediately lets himself fall back onto the bed again. His whole body feels as if a tank had run over it repeatedly, and his head’s near splitting in two. When he touches it tentatively it becomes clear why. His hair is clogged with crusted blood, no doubt the result of the hit that put him out.

And his shoulder! Arrgh! He must have been hit right where his scar is, the one the laser wound left behind. It’s burning like fire, and Merlin isn’t surprised to find an enormous amount of bruising and swelling when he cranes his neck to check it out.

His mind inevitably flicks back to the events of earlier that day. Arthur. Cursing at him. Looking at him as if he was nothing but a piece of dirt. Getting hit by Alvarr’s spell. Lying on the floor,
unconscious and bleeding. Why does this hurt so much now? He was barely moved by it then. *All I was worried about was Morgana.* It almost feels as he was a different person at that point.

The realization is stupefying when it comes. Morgana. That sudden attraction to her. The irresistible pull towards her. The almost compulsive need to be near her, touch her, hold her. *She put an enchantment on me. Or some kind of love potion.*

Shit. Merlin swallows hard. There’s only one reason why somebody does a thing like that. He can’t say he saw that one coming, although something about Morgana had bothered him in the last few months before she gave a helping hand turning his head. *I do love her, just not like that.* Something like pity and sorrow wells up in Merlin’s heart for an instant.

No wonder, she hates Arthur so much. Merlin has never hidden his feelings for the man. How desperate Morgana must have been to stoop down to such measures! And yet, how could she?

*If she feels anything real for me, how could she betray my trust like that? She knows how much Arthur means to me, but did she care? She egged me on to kill him.* Her crazed outcry still reverberates in Merlin’s head and suddenly pity’s replaced by anger. *She would have had me kill the man I love.* What if he’d done it? What then? Had she intended to keep him in her grip forever?

Touching Arthur snapped him out of the enchantment, he’s sure of it. When they crashed together on the floor, the fierce connection between them broke the spell and lifted the haze distorting his senses. The tingle that supposedly proves they are meant to be. What a laugh!

*Arthur. He hates me. His eyes … oh God, his eyes. So dark with hurt and hostility.* Merlin’s heart aches with such intensity he wonders for a split second if it wouldn’t have been preferable to remain under Morgana’s love spell.

But none of that matters now, anyway. Merlin lifts himself up slowly with a groan and lets his head sink into his hands. The fact that he’s in one of the cells at the Court House is a clear indication that he will be up for trial soon. Already. How is that even possible?

Evidently it is, because an hour later a small man with thinning hair enters the cell, declaring he’s Merlin’s Defence Attorney and that his trial’s been set for 1 p.m.

“*Today?*” Merlin can’t hide the shock in his voice.

“*Uther insisted on it,*” the man who’s introduced himself as Cornelius Sigan says.

*Right, that figures. He can’t wait to get rid of me.* “*On what charges?*” Merlin asks.

“*Use of Magic, Attempted Murder, Breaking and Entering, Deceit of the Third Degree, Incitement to Theft, just to mention to main ones.*”

Merlin’s mouth goes dry while his head’s taking turns between spinning out of control - just like his life - and going blank with shock. *So that’s what it feels like to be faced with your death sentence. To know that your time is going to be cut short. To realize you’ll never see your family again.* Because any of these charges are punishable with the Serum.

Still, there’s one thing he doesn’t get. “*Attempted murder?*”

Sigan throws him an odd look and answers sarcastically, “*Considering you were caught wielding magic on the Governor’s son, leaving him unconscious and bloodied, that’s hardly surprising, isn’t it?*”
“I tried to help Arthur!” Merlin mumbles. *Surely Arthur must know I didn’t hurt him. Even under Morgana’s influence I couldn’t bring myself to do him any harm. My magic simply wouldn’t allow it.*

“Really?” Sigan tilts his head, clearly not believing a word he’s saying. “Not sure we’ll be able to convince the jury and the judge about that.”

Of course Sigan’s right.

By the time the Prosecutor’s asked the tenth person into the witness stand to testify against Merlin and his crimes, it wouldn’t have mattered what was true anymore.

“His filthy hands were on Arthur Pendragon, tearing a deep wound into his head.”

“His eyes were evil when he mumbled the spell.”

“I saw him draining blood from the Governor’s son.”

“He’s the one that put the alarm system out of order!”

“That’s the man who threatened my family if I didn’t do as he told me.”

Merlin sits in a glass box strengthened by cold iron, and stares at the witness stand as one person after another swears on their lives how vicious he was, how he used his magic to intimidate them, how he bullied them into doing things they would have never done otherwise. He doesn’t know any of them.

But it doesn’t stop there and at the events of that morning. Further witnesses appear out of nowhere to testify it was him who ran a campaign to humiliate the Pendragon Government by organizing magical crimes. It was him who’d made the police a laughing stock. It was him who’d scared the living daylights out of the public by his illicit magical actions.

Merlin’s stunned into silence. The evidence presented against him is overwhelming and sounds utterly convincing, and all the witnesses are vetted. They’re good, reliable people. If he didn’t know for sure that he’d never met any of them he would have believed their stories himself.

*This isn’t a trial, this is a bloody warfare against me.* Merlin presses his lips into a thin line. It’s not as if he’d expected to get spared from a death sentence for what he HAD done. But he’s branded as an arch enemy of the State, as an evil mastermind who’s been out for the blood and power of the Pendragons, a malignant man riddled by deceitfulness and infamy, THE sorcerer responsible for the suffering of so many law-abiding citizens in Camelot.

*I’ve been framed. They’ve made me the scapegoat of the nation.* Not that the extra charges will make his sentence worse – the Serum’s all ready, waiting for him anyway. He’s got no illusions about that. It’s the extra burden on his mum and his friends he regrets. They will have to live with his sentence longer than him, and he fears the repercussions it might have on their lives.

Admittedly, whoever’s behind this has done a great job. For the first time since his arrival at court Merlin turns his head to the right towards the visitors’ benches. Uther’s there, his eyes gleaming with
unashamed hatred and a satisfied smile playing on his lips.

Merlin’s heart stops when he spots Arthur and Percival sitting directly behind the Governor. He’s here. He’s come to see me sentenced. Apart from the bandage on the back of his head Arthur’s fine. Good. So what. Has he got nothing to say about all that crap people have made up about me? Apparently not, because Arthur’s involved in an animated conversation with Percival. He must believe all those lies spread unashamedly by so many people. He must agree with my charges.

This is the point when Merlin starts giving up. He hardly hears the voice of the judge asking the jury for their verdict. “Guilty on all charges!” reaches him as if shouted from a distant shore. It all seems surreal, like a nightmare. A never-ending torment happening to somebody else.

He should have used his magic to get away when he had the time. Alvarr and Morgana had managed it to safety and he would have, too, if he hadn’t chosen to deal with Arthur’s wound. He would have been fine without my help, Merlin thinks in bitter regret. I could have saved mum all the hurt that’s coming her way now.

The brutal grip of the guards shakes him enough out of his stupor to notice Arthur gaping at him with a deep frown on his forehead. Their eye contact lasts for the fraction of a second. Then Arthur turns away.

“That’s where you belong, you traitorous piece of filth,” the overzealous guard hisses when he pushes Merlin brutally into the cell.

It is similar to the one Balinor was imprisoned in, small, maybe three by three metres, and lit by a lonely, dull light bulb sticking out from the wall above the door. What an irony he should end up in this high security prison cell at Lamia House which has been specially designed for sorcerers like him. Odd, to think he once inspected this place with Arthur.

Merlin’s only too aware that the walls are heavily reinforced with cold iron, much more than the cell at the Court House. Its power hits him immediately, encasing his half-conscious body in a suffocating grip. With his arms and legs tightly shackled and his head and upper body blood-smeared – a result of two guards practising their truncheons on him on the way from the Court House - he’s never felt more helpless.

“Sorcerer!” the bald, muscly guard mumbles with contempt. To underline his repugnance he kicks the butt of his laser gun into Merlin’s chest, aiming deliberately at the raw wound on Merlin’s shoulder. Merlin winces in pain, crashing onto his knees on the rough stone floor. Another blast into his back hurls him across the ground, grazing his elbows in the process, and although his body acknowledges the burn, the pain never fully registers as if his mind considers it negligible, compared to his other injuries.

When he collapses into a curl next to the makeshift bed, he feels the guard approaching to go for more and intuitively lifts his arms to protect his head. A second later a kick hits his shoulder and another one goes straight into his torso. The cracking noise of a breaking rib and the agonizing, stabbing pain that follows are the final straw to Merlin’s endurance.

His body seems to consist of nothing else but screaming agony and as he lies motionless on the
ground, the stench of antiseptic and bleach, used to drive away the smell of death, is the last thing his brain processes. He can’t take any more, and it’s just as well that mercy takes pity on him and releases him into unconsciousness.

A glaring light shining brightly into his eyes brings Merlin back into reality. For a moment he has no idea where he is and what the heck’s going on. Then it all comes back in a flash. He’s been caught red-handed using magic. And he was thrown into this forsaken cell reeking of desperation.

Once confusion and disorientation settle, he groans as the agony of his injuries engulfs him. His abused body’s shaking with throbbing pain and relenting to the dark force of the cold iron which has crept over him silently while he was knocked out. He senses his magic uneasy and quivering inside.

Slowly everything around takes shape and he finds himself surrounded by four men. Three guards and a man in a white coat whose voice sounds decidedly familiar.

“Put him on the table!” he orders, while Merlin’s wracking his brain trying to match a face to the voice. Rough hands grab him and dump him on the steel table, strapping him down so tight he can hardly move a muscle. Merlin yelps as the leather straps cut into his arms, and despite his drowsiness and lack of coordination his eyes go golden instinctively to defend himself. He hears a man wailing as he crashes into a wall, but the feeble attempt to defy his jailers ends embarrassingly quickly. He’s simply too weak to conjure up the power he needs to escape, with the cold iron doing the rest to incapacitate him.

“Merlin,” The voice says in a deep, rather satisfied voice. “Trying to live up to your reputation as the most powerful sorcerer to ever walk the earth?”

Merlin follows the sneering voice of the man in command and holds his breath when he recognizes the person addressing him. Edwin. Who else? Making the most of the situation.

“No sorcerer before you has been able to perform magic in these four walls.” The doctor smiles, appearing pleased. “That should make this little experiment even more interesting.”

At that, he opens a metal case containing a syringe and a few bottles of a blue liquid. Merlin knows exactly what this is. The Serum. The one substance every magic user fears more than anything else. Merlin stares at the fluorescent blue of the liquid and can’t help imagining what this is going to do to him. Unconsciously he starts to pull at the straps holding him down.

“Are we getting nervous?” Edwin asks and smirks. “Just face it you’ve lost. “No need to hurt yourself any further,” the medic says in a derisive manner.

Hurt himself further? What a joke! Merlin lets out a bitter chuckle. Another injury wouldn’t make any bloody difference to his fate. Once he’s injected, the Serum will finish him off anyway, and he’s certain to die sooner or later, just like so many of his kin before.

The sting of the needle piercing into his vein is nothing compared to the impotent anger and frustration that rages through him. He watches breathlessly as the medic pushes the plunger of the syringe down slowly and the blue liquid inside disappears drop by drop into his bloodstream. So this is it.

All he can do is to stare at the syringe as it is emptying bit by bit. The Serum’s spreading through his body, reaching every part and every fibre, and as it takes command of him, cell by cell, his magic recoils and struggles against it. It tries to push the icy blue away with all its force and fight it with all its might. But the Serum has the force of a tsunami washing over every attempt to resist it. Uther’s scientists have been working relentlessly to perfect the formula over the years. These days, it’s so
effective at supressing magic that there’s no getting away from it.

He closes his eyes and breathes through deeply. So this is the moment that signifies the beginning of the end of his life. God, his hopes were so high to do something meaningful for his people. How much had he wanted to demolish the threat of the Serum. For a moment he thinks of his mother, but he immediately pushes the thought away. He doesn’t want to imagine her face when she finds out she’s going to lose a loved one for the second time within a year.

Just as the last drop of the Serum enters Merlin’s bloodstream the heavy iron door of the cell bangs open. The medic and the guards look up and immediately stand to attention. It’s Arthur.

He looks flushed as if he was hurrying and the expression on his face is rather fierce. Merlin can hardly make him out from his position, and although there’s no reason to justify this whatsoever, he feels strangely comforted by his presence.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Arthur growls at Edwin and paces towards the table right past Merlin without acknowledging he’s there. Merlin focuses mindlessly on the few drops of blood collecting on the inside of his arm when Edwin pulls the syringe out of his arm.

“I act upon the direct orders of the Governor,” the doctor answers, wiping the needle with a smug, satisfied smile.

“Of course you realize that it’s your duty to inform me of before the Serum is injected,” Arthur emphasizes every single word to make his point, leaving no doubt that he’s more than displeased. “So why didn’t I hear about this sooner?”

Merlin recognizes the tone of Arthur’s voice and, even without seeing Arthur’s face, he’d bet his jaws are clenched and his lips thin. Angry Arthur’s a force to be reckoned with. And the men before him know it, too.

“The Governor ordered that the Serum should be administered immediately after the trial, Sir,” Edwin mumbles. What a joke how subservient he sounds, no doubt putting on a five star show.

Merlin hopes to catch Arthur’s gaze as the blond turns ever so slightly in his direction. He wants to read what’s in his eyes, but Arthur’s still standing with his back to him. It seems he’s mainly here because he’s thoroughly pissed off about being left in the dark about the timing of the injection.

“Is that right, Edwin?” Arthur puts on his most arrogant tone, and Merlin can virtually feel how Arthur’s running his eyes over the man in a condescending way. Arthur’s never liked Edwin as much as his father, family doctor or not. But, considering Uther’s hurry to punish Merlin as quickly as possible, the doctor’s claim is most likely true.

“I want you to report to me later, understood?” There’s so much authority in Arthur’s voice, so much natural leadership quality in the way he acts that Edwin backs off.

“As you wish, Arthur!” he mumbles while collecting his implements and putting them back into the metal case. He leaves with a short, reluctant nod towards Arthur.

“And you three,” Arthur grumbles at the guards, “I want you back here in half an hour. This prisoner will be moved to a cell on the ground floor.”

“But sir…” the tallest guard mumbles, “He’s a sorcerer.”

“Wouldn’t you agree that this shouldn’t be a problem anymore? He’s been put out of action by the Serum,” Arthur’s voice is trembling; the guards wouldn’t detect it, but Merlin who knows every
single nuance of it, who knows how he looks and sounds when he’s thoughtful or happy or bored, isn’t fooled. The slight tremor in the words stands for a lot more.

“Now, release him from these shackles and get on with it.”

The men seem to understand THAT, at least, and after letting Merlin loose they leave quietly. Deafening silence spreads through the cell.

Merlin attempts to sit up, moving in slow motion to avoid aggravating his injuries further. The ice blue inside him swirls around and grabs hold of his whole body. He carefully scrambles up, but can’t help but groan as he tries to get his legs off the table. His head is fuzzy, and it takes all his concentration to bid his limbs to do what he wants.

Arthur hasn’t moved, still turning his back on him, obviously with no intention of giving him a hand. Why would he? Merlin thinks bitterly. There’s so much unspoken hurt between them, such a heavy load of unresolved emotions, it’s no wonder.

Finally, Merlin has managed to sit up. He drags in a deep breath. All he’s able to do at this instant is to stare at Arthur’s back who seems to have his eyes glued to the clock on the otherwise barren wall opposite. The dressing on Arthur’s head symbolizes in so many ways what has gone wrong between them.

And Merlin waits. And waits. Until something breaks inside him and he erupts.

“Why are you here, Arthur?” he pushes out as if he was in the driving seat and not the one who’s just been condemned to a painful, drawn-out death.

Arthur takes an audible breath before asking hoarsely. “Why did you come back?” He is still carefully avoiding eye contact. ”Did you not do enough damage the first time?”

So did you. Merlin squares his jaws defiantly. “I had no choice,” he says, much more determined than he feels.


“Surely you know what happened with the last copy!” Merlin’s accusing tone slices the air, and Arthur stiffens. “The Serum’s killing too many of us. It was the only way.” Why should Merlin lie, when it’s crystal clear his mission was to steal a copy of the formula? So they could develop an antidote. So his people didn’t have to suffer like he was about to.

“Why you?” Arthur asks, the tone of his voice suggesting he already knows the answer.

“I know the premises. I know the defence mechanisms. I know you,” Merlin croaks the last bit, not only because he’s suddenly feeling very heady and strange, but because the words rip his heart out.

“More lies and treason, then, Merlin.” Arthur’s disappointment and anguish are clearly evident and Merlin flinches. “Just what to expect from a sorcerer.” Merlin cringes at Arthur’s words. He’s mindlessly reciting the propaganda he’s been taught from the moment he was born. It’s what he’s been told all his life. How can Arthur reject all this in the favour of one man? It means giving up everything he’s ever believed in and leaving him stranded and lost somewhere in nowhere land.

Arthur’s condescending words hurt and Merlin’s heart dies yet again, drowning the last ray of hope in a sea of despair.

“I assume that must be it,” Merlin pushes out. He’s deliberately provocative to see whether he can
rile Arthur enough to face him.

“Why would I be different from the rest? I’m just another one of those twisted, criminal magical minds that threaten Albion. Just another sorcerer who wants to corrupt the foundations of this nation. Is that what you believe Arthur?” Sarcasm and anguishment are dripping off his words and the fact that Arthur still hasn’t had the guts to turn round is making his blood boil.

“That’s what you think I am, don’t you?” Merlin finishes off sharply. And God, he’s so hurt, so torn to pieces when he says it because, despite all that’s happened, a crumb of hope inside him had held on to the belief that, one day, Arthur would stand up publicly against his father’s views about magic and that maybe, one day, Arthur would be able to forgive him. Now he understands how dreadfully wrong he was. Arthur’s always been his father’s son. And how could he not be, when he heard nothing but well-phrased slogans about the evils of magic since childhood. It had been Merlin’s own fault, his own decision to ignore this painful truth because he hadn’t wanted to see it. He’d thought Arthur could be different. How more deluded could he have been?

*Of course I gave him no reason to think differently.* Merlin admits to himself, a wave of guilt crushing his weary shoulders. *Arthur. I’m so sorry,* his mind whispers, the words remaining buried and unheard inside his head.

And then, as if he understood Merlin’s silent plea, Arthur finally turns round and their eyes meet. Merlin’s heart misses a beat at the intense hurt that stares back at him. But there’s anger and rejection, as well. Too much of it. For the fraction of a second it feels like losing Arthur all over again, even though Arthur isn’t his to lose anymore.

“Who the hell did that to you?” It sounds as if Arthur’s spoken before he thought this through. Has the sight of Merlin, looking thoroughly broken, blood-smeared and bruised all over prised open a door to what he used to feel for him?

Shocked by the unexpected question Merlin stares at Arthur. Exhausted in body and in mind, his voice starts failing him. “What does that matter now, Arthur?” he whispers. “I’m condemned to die. A scratch here and there….”

And at that, everything’s suddenly all too much and he topples forward, losing consciousness.
Arthur catches Merlin just before his face hits the ground. His dead weight and the force of the fall leave Arthur no choice but to slide on the floor. He ends up leaning against a leg of the steel table, Merlin in his arms.

Merlin’s head rests on Arthur’s shoulder with his lips right next to his ear. His faint breath brushes over his cheek like a warm caress, and Arthur shudders at the contact. *Stop it, you idiot. You’re just going to rip a hardly healed wound open again.*

At the bottom of his heart Arthur knows it’s a lost cause. His insides are in complete turmoil. Not only from the tidal wave of unwanted yearning, but also from the shock of seeing Merlin’s deplorable state.

He looked worse for wear during the trial, but now he’s just a mess of purple bruises and crusty blood. It’s blatantly clear he was beaten up. *No man should suffer abuse like that. No matter how guilty.* Arthur’s throat tightens. *This must have happened on the transfer between the Court House and the prison. I will get whoever did this.* As for now he needs to get medical help. Normally Edwin would be called down if a prisoner needs attention, but there’s no way that’s going to happen. Edwin’s not going to put another finger on Merlin.

“Guards!” Arthur shouts at the top of his voice. “Guards!” The men he reprimanded earlier are in the cell within seconds, alarm on their face when they see Merlin’s body half wrapped over Arthur’s.

“He collapsed. Give me a hand to take him to the medical station on the ground floor,” Arthur commands, and while the men drag Merlin’s motionless body to the lift, Arthur’s on the phone to the hospital. Within minutes he’s organized a doctor and a nurse to be brought to Lamia House, someone to take proper care of Merlin.

John Marshall meets the group along the way. “I heard Merlin was sentenced for sorcery. You’re really want to put him up here?” There’s worry in his voice and Arthur reacts to it immediately, pacifying the Prison Supervisor.

“He’s been injected and he’s been beaten to a pulp. I can’t see the risk.” Arthur explains and, on scanning Merlin’s body, John nods.

Five minutes later Merlin’s propped up in a bed at the medical station, still unconscious, but breathing a lot more steadily. Arthur gives the resident nurse all the relevant information. She does a quick once over on Merlin to check his vital statistics, but apart from being unconscious and his obvious injuries, he’s stable.

When everyone’s gone, Arthur sinks on the chair next to the bed. The hospital staff shouldn’t be too long. God, this must be the longest day ever, and it’s been a hell of a roller coaster. It is half past five now, but it seems a whole life time has passed since the attack this morning. He’s so exhausted he finds it hard to keep his eyes open. It’s the first time he’s had a second to stop and think since he left the Court House after the verdict.

The verdict. The trial. Arthur’s mouth goes dry and he runs his tongue over his lips to moisten them, while he leans back in the chair and gives into the urge to close his eyes.

Arthur realized after about the fifth witness that something was off. Merlin was as guilty as hell, but all those witnesses had appeared out of nowhere. And yes, their statements did make sense and were
credible, but he had no idea how anyone could have made such a tight case against Merlin in such a short time. Not that his father gave a toss. He was delighted at the proceedings as they were.

Arthur’s stomach churned. This wasn’t justice and it certainly wasn’t within the law.

“Get the files of the Prosecutor once they’re done,” he whispered to Percival. “Ask Leon to check these people out. I want to know who put them up to this.” He was pretty certain who that person might be, but he needed proof beyond reasonable doubt before he could act. Some hard evidence the court could accept.

Guilty on all charges. It didn’t come as a surprise, nor did the life sentence or the prescription of the Serum. Arthur’s heart had fluttered like a bird caught in a cage frantic to get out. The Serum.

Arthur can’t look at Merlin just now. Because as soon as he does he has to acknowledge that the unthinkable has happened. *I was too late. He’s going to die.* The words keep hollering inside his head, growing louder and louder. Images of Balinor, emaciated and weak, hardly able to speak, rise from his memory in horrifying clarity.

The Serum should have never reached Merlin. Certainly not today. That’s never happened before. The revelation that Uther’s gone behind his back to arrange an early injection is sobering and hurtful.

His father was determined to make the most of this case, and, a man on a mission, he made sure Merlin got punished immediately. No doubt to send out a warning sign to all the other MUs and to show the public that it was Uther Pendragon and no one else who was in charge of Camelot. *But most likely he was worried I might muck this up for him. He didn’t want me to interfere.*

*And he made bloody sure I couldn’t,* Arthur thinks bitterly. After the trial Uther pulled him aside with a huge list of questions about another case and introduced him to a prominent lawyer. Unawares of what was going on Arthur had let himself get drawn in to the conversation, even if it had cost considerable will power to concentrate on it when his mind constantly flicked back to Merlin’s face when he heard the verdict. The void in his eyes, the disappointment and the resignation.

But then Percival had appeared and whispered into his ear what he’d overheard when he approached the Prosecutor for the case files.

“Where’s Edwin? I need him to clarify some details,” the Prosecutor had asked.

“He’s already off to Lamia House for the injection,” a young employee had replied. “Said that justice couldn’t wait any longer.”

Arthur squares his jaw in anger. *Father delayed me deliberately. He tricked me so Edwin had enough time to get to Merlin.*

Merlin. Arthur’s eyes are finally drawn to the man on the bed and his battered body, covered in cuts, swelling and bruises. Despite everything, it’s difficult seeing Merlin suffering like that, but the knowledge that the Serum is raging inside his body taking him a step closer to death with every minute and every breath is tearing Arthur apart. It shouldn’t. Should it?

Arthur drops his head on his hands and presses his palms against his forehead. *I can’t bear to lose him,* he admits reluctantly inside his head. *I can’t bear to lose the man I once loved. Fuck. Still love. Why else would I be here with him?* Arthur swears and beats the thought into submission, reminding himself yet again why he’s a complete moron.

*I did what I had to do.* Merlin said about THEM. Their time together.
Her life means more to me than anything else. He said about HER.

It’s a fact. Merlin loves Morgana. It hurt then, it still stings like a fresh burn now. Even though his common sense is shouting at him in pianoforte to grow up and face the facts. I’m so hopeless. I really need to get my head examined. Always have where Merlin was concerned.

Arthur shakes his head as if he could get rid of his irritating thoughts. Just to do something he walks up to the window because suddenly he simply can’t stay still any longer. He stares out into the grey courtyard of the prison and, lost in the self-perpetuating meanders of his torment, he puts his hands in the pockets of his trousers.

His right hand finds a bit of paper. Merlin’s letter. He hasn’t opened it yet. Just like the other one he received not long after he’d returned home from his kidnapping. Arthur gulps and takes a deep breath. When Percival had come to pick him up to go to the trial, he’d put it into his pocket. No idea why. Probably just an automatic thing. Because it was there in front of him. And here it is.

Arthur stares at his name written by Merlin’s hand. A second later he follows his gut feeling and rips it open to find a small sheet of paper in it, folded neatly into half. Arthur takes it out slowly with trembling fingers.

Arthur,

I know I have given you no reason to trust or believe me.

It is true I lied to you about who I am. It is true I deceived you to get to the Serum. I wanted to tell you at the Lake Cottage, you have no idea how much. But it was too late.

It is true I wanted to find the formula. You’ve seen what it does to people of my kind. I loved my father and he didn’t deserve to die this way. Judge me on that.

But what I said to you before is also true. You have magic. It sounds demented to you, I’m sure. Not that I understand it, but it’s there, and it’s kept in check by the Serum in your hypospray. You’re going to die if you keep taking it. That’s a fact.

I understand why you would refuse to believe me. You don’t have to, for all I’m asking is to get the hypospray checked out. Then you’ll have all the proof you want.

Grant me the benefit of the doubt. I want you to live, more than anything else.

Choose to live, Arthur. The people of Camelot need you.

Merlin

He wants me to live and he’s dying. Arthur’s Adam’s apple bobbing up and down is the only sign how hard he’s fighting to keep his composure. Why would Merlin send a letter of warning if he didn’t care? And yet, there’s no hint in the letter revealing how Merlin feels about him. Arthur sighs, once again utterly confused by the Everest-sized contradiction that is Merlin.

‘More than anything else.’ Wonder where I heard that one before. Arthur smirks. Merlin appears to be overusing that phrase a bit.
Me and magic. Of course it’s all a lie. This is the most preposterous thing he’s ever come across. Why would he even consider it?

Because he hasn’t got anything to lose by getting the hypospray tested. If Merlin’s wrong, which is most likely, Arthur can put this whole thing out of his mind. ‘Give me the benefit of the doubt,’ reverberates inside his mind. Percival would advise me to do it, I’m sure. Nothing wrong with double checking.

But what if Merlin’s right? Arthur’s head is humming. He simply can’t go there just now. What a relief when he’s interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Tom! Thanks for coming.” Arthur gets up to greet Dr. Anderson and lets out a yelp of surprise when he spots the small, dark haired nurse behind him. “Gwen! I’m so glad it’s you who came.”

Oddly enough Gwen gives Arthur only a very superficial smile and, avoiding any further personal chit chat, heads straight for Merlin.

“Good God!” She gasps when she sees him. “How long has he been out?”

“About half an hour,” Arthur replies, “but his breathing’s been fine and the resident nurse checked his pulse and temperature.”

Gwen nods and shoots Arthur a look as cold and piercing as an avalanche of icicles. “He’s been injected?”

Arthur gets it. Gwen’s judging him for letting this happen. Damn it. Isn’t she right? He doesn’t need to answer her rhetoric question, knowing she’s been briefed by the doctor.

Within an hour Merlin’s been cleaned and his wounds have been tended to. Just when Gwen covers Merlin up again, he lets out a pained groan and his eyes pop open.

“Gwen,” he mumbles, his eyes clouded by the sedative Tom injected earlier. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking after you,” Gwen says softly and takes his hand.

Merlin manages the imitation of a smile and a one word reaction. “Nice,” before he drifts off again.

“His exterior wounds aren’t the problem,” the doctor says to Arthur. “His body is fighting the Serum, and it’s taking a lot out of him.”

Arthur nods again, as if he’s lost the power to speak, but his throat’s simply too tight to talk.

The doctor leaves after instructing Gwen and the resident nurse, and a few minutes later, Arthur and Gwen are seated at the only two chairs in the room. The brooding silence is deafening until it’s finally torn apart by a question.

“What did you let that happen?” Gwen asks suddenly, resentment in her voice. She doesn’t need to say what. The accusation in her voice makes it very clear. “He saved YOUR life before.”

“I never wanted this, never.” Arthur stumbles over his own words, strangely compelled to defend himself. “It was out of my hands.”

“You’re the Minister of Justice.” Why does that last word sound so bloody incriminating?

“It’s not as easy as that,” Arthur mumbles hoarsely, overcome by mental and physical exhaustion. He
doesn’t know whether it is Gwen’s softening gaze or the desperate urge to unload his conscience allowing him to break down, just a little. In a few words he explains how Merlin ended up where he is now.

“I see,” is Gwen’s only response and although it doesn’t sound judgemental, it’s not exactly sympathetic either.

“He has magic,” Arthur adds, implementing that nothing would have saved Merlin.

“Yeah,” Gwen says quietly, completely unsurprised.

“You knew?” Arthur lifts his eyes to meet hers.

“I guessed when his wounds were healing way too fast.” She smiles sadly.

*Another mystery solved.* Arthur wonders briefly why the idea never occurred to him. It seems so obvious now. *Because your head was in the clouds.*

“He’s a good man, Arthur. I know he is.” Gwen throws him a challenging look.

*How can she be so sure? She knew Merlin only for a short time, after all.* “He lied and deceived me,” Arthur blurts out. “He was going to steal the formula of the Serum.”

“Does that surprise you?” Gwen asks. “Have you any idea how many MUs have died in the most harrowing way because of it?”

No, he doesn’t really. If Gwen’s right, there must have been hundreds over the years. “They were criminals, like murderers and thieves and …”

“All of them? Are you sure?” Gwen gives him a stern look.

“I’ve seen what magic can do, how powerful sorcerers are. They would cause chaos in Camelot if they weren’t deterred by the Serum.”

“People like him?” Gwen motions towards Merlin, and Arthur swallows hard realizing their conversation has come full circle. Can he really believe Merlin’s good? After all he has done? After what sorcery has done to Camelot?

The family Balinor saved pops into Arthur’s mind. They were just common people who had committed no other crime apart from having magic, and that wasn’t exactly something they’d chosen, as far as he knew. True, THEY hadn’t been criminals, but what of Morgana and Alvarr? They both used their magic for their own purpose without any remorse. Arthur unwittingly touches his throat, Morgana’s angry eyes and his tightening air pipe vivid in his memory.

“There are lots of things you don’t know, Gwen,” Arthur finally says quietly, too exhausted to go into detail and explain.

“I’m sure I don’t,” Gwen replies calmly, “but I know Merlin.”

Arthur stares into space, her words echoing in his head before they make their way into his heart. It’s like the clash of the titans – cool-headed logic against the confused emotions for Merlin that won’t go away. Arthur groans as his head starts spinning while his brain turns into mush.

“Go home and sleep, Arthur,” Gwen says, sympathy in her voice for the first time. “There’s nothing you can do here anymore today.”
“Morgana! What happened? Where have you been all day?” Hunith walks up to Morgana with hurried steps and outstretched arms to welcome her back.

Morgana falls into her embrace, hardly able to speak. It’s been a hellish day in every respect, and it’s not going to get better. Nothing can be worse than telling a mother her son won’t be back.

Alvarr and she had escaped from the approaching guards by the skin of their teeth. She’d wanted to go back to get Merlin, had cried, resisted, but Alvarr had dragged her away.

“No need for all of us to die,” he’d shouted at her in anger, when she pulled away, using her magic.

“I promised …,” Morgana started, to be cut off immediately.

“Forget your promises. It’s too late. There’s nothing you can do.”

She knew Alvarr was right. The Ministry was buzzing with guards and police men, and with so many against them, they couldn’t have accomplished anything, not even with magic. She had no choice but to give in and follow the sorcerer. They’d planned to return to Merlin’s secure apartment, but it became obvious soon enough that they wouldn’t get that far, in daylight at least. The sheer amount of police presence in Camelot hardly allowed them to put distance between them and the Ministry.

“Better if we part,” Alvarr said when he dropped Morgana at a small flat not far off the town centre to take refuge. He instructed her quickly to lie low as long as she could before disappearing to his own hiding place. Morgana had had a whole day to think the events of the morning over and to picture what would happen next. She’d almost gone crazy imagining what they might do to Merlin.

The thought of returning to Hunith had focused her, and when dusk set and darkness provided plenty of shelter, she’d risked everything to return to her mother. She couldn’t have stayed away, knowing Hunith would be beside herself with worry.

But now she’s here, overwhelmed by trepidation of what must come. Right on cue Hunith pulls away to look over Morgana’s shoulder, her eyes going dark when the person she’s looking for isn’t there. “Where is he?”

“Mum,” is all Morgana needs to say to make Hunith understand.

“No! Not him! Not him as well.” Hunith claps her hand over her mouth, and then remains frozen in silent shock. A suffocated gurgle escapes her mouth as she reaches for Morgana.

Morgana hugs her tightly, not sure if she’s holding up Hunith or the other way round. She can hardly believe what happened herself, and as she hangs on to her mother, the shock and horror she’s been suppressing all day finally breaks free. The tears come quietly before she breaks down completely, clinging to Hunith, and they cry together, who knows for how long.

“Tell me what happened,” Hunith says eventually, and Morgana does, giving an account from her perspective. And once she’s done, Hunith lets out a sigh. “He saved Arthur’s life?”

“He deflected Alvarr’s spell, the stupid fool. We could have finally avenged father’s death, but he
“…,” Morgana whispers rather defeated. Of course Merlin had always refused to fight their corner with violence, but surely he’d had enough reason to want Arthur dead? After the way the blond had treated him? After everything Arthur had done to their kin? It’s beyond Morgana why he’d hesitated. Had they not imagined a chance like this so many times when they were young?

“...helped Arthur, instead,” Hunith finishes the sentence off, startling Morgana back to the present.

“He could have gotten away, but he stayed with Arthur,” Morgana says, cold resentment in her voice when she mentions the young Pendragon. What was it that stopped Merlin from lashing out? “Why didn’t he do it?” Morgana whispers, her voice crackling with desperation.

“I’m sure you know the answer to that, don’t you?” Hunith looks at her pensively while Morgana tries to make sense of it all. It was impossible Merlin still cared for Arthur. Impossible. He was mine. The potion made sure of it. He loved me. I know he did. He more or less told me, the voice inside her screams in frustrated anger.

“He’d stopped loving Arthur.” It’s supposed to sound convincing, but for some reason the words are drenched with doubt and uncertainty. Morgana’s head snaps up to look straight at Hunith. “He shouldn’t have had any feelings for him. Not anymore, I mean, he shouldn’t, not since I gave him …,” it slips out before Morgana can bite her tongue. A flush of heat rushes through her body as she prays Hunith won’t pick up on her words. Of course she should have known better.

“What did you do, Morgana?” Hunith’s searching gaze makes Morgana tremble. She can’t lie to Hunith, not now, not ever, actually. Because the woman she calls her mother has given her unconditional love from day one and was always there for her when she needed a shoulder to lean on.

“I couldn’t watch his pain any longer. He was tearing himself up for someone who twisted his mind and turned him against our kin,” Morgana says tentatively, biting her lips while struggling with her conscience for the first time. Before she can get to the truth, Hunith speaks it out loud.

“So you gave Merlin a love potion.” It’s a statement rather than a question, and Morgana freezes on the spot, like a child caught with her hand in a cookie jar.

“How…?”

“Before Merlin left with you, he didn’t act like himself. There was something off, the way he spoke about Arthur. I know Merlin and what’s in his heart. He would have never willingly abandoned Arthur,” Hunith says, matter of fact.

“I … I wanted to help him forget about that self-centred, arrogant arse,” Morgana starts defending herself sheepishly.

“Help him or yourself?” Hunith throws Morgana a knowing look.

Morgana’s eyes widen, as a jolt of surprised shock renders her breathless. “You knew!” She stares at Hunith, utterly mortified she hadn’t been as inconspicuous about her emotions as she’d thought.

“I saw the way you looked at him, the way you adored him,” Hunith says with a sad smile. “I thought this was something for the two of you to sort out, but I never expected this to happen.”

“Merlin was suffering, I wanted to make him happy,” Morgana says defiantly. Surely nobody can hold that against her?

“By taking his will and his heart away?” Hunith meets her eyes, and the silent accusation in her gaze
pierces straight into Morgana’s soul.

“Are you saying his love for Arthur was right? All it brought him was misery and hurt. I just couldn’t watch it any longer. He was beating himself up for nothing,” Morgana cries out, desperate to prove she only wanted the best for Merlin.

“It wasn’t your choice to make,” Hunith says quietly. God! Why do the words hurt so much? Deep down Morgana knows they’re true, but she can’t quite face up to it yet.

“I’ve always loved him,” Morgana whispers, tears in her eyes.

“Shouldn’t that have kept you from abusing his trust like this?”

Morgana can hardly breathe. Her shoulders are shaking as her sobbing becomes stronger and stronger. She never considered it for a second. How Merlin might feel about this. What he would want. No, she’d been thoroughly swept away by her contempt against Arthur and been so blinded by her own feelings, she never gave his a single thought, never gave him the option to make up his own mind. I know he would have rejected me. All he wanted was Arthur, even when Arthur dropped him as I’d predicted, she admits to herself reluctantly.

“I thought he would return my feelings one day,” Morgana mumbles, defeated and aching so much, and then, all of a sudden, turns rigid in sudden realization. “I betrayed him. I stabbed his back when he needed my support. I didn’t protect him the way I should have. And now it’s too late, too late…” Her voice falters as she starts crying uncontrollably, her body shaking under the burden of guilt and remorse.

But Hunith isn’t letting her get away with it that easily. “By taking away Merlin’s right to make a free choice and twisting his mind for your own purpose you made him your pawn, degrading him into life he never wanted, AND you might haven stolen his only chance of real happiness.”

Why does this sound so bloody awful out of Hunith’s mouth? “I thought he would be happy,” Morgana says feebly.

“Is that so?” Hunith throws Morgana a stern look, and then sighs, “You can’t force real love, you know?”

Morgana puts her head into her hands, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I love him so much.”

“I’m sorry,” Hunith says simply. “You know, he loves you, too, don’t you? Maybe not the way you hoped for, but he does love you.”

“Do you think he’ll forgive me?” Morgana presses out.

“I really don’t know,” Hunith answers honestly, shaking her head. “He might never have the chance.”

Morgana sobs even more as Hunith’s words sinks in and, strangely, it is Hunith comforting her, when really it should be the other way round. Shame and self-reproach are near suffocating her, not only for her betrayal but also because she might never have the opportunity to make it up to Merlin.

When her tears dry up, and she finally regains her composure, Morgana looks at Hunith in despair. “What are we going to do? He’s going to be tried and sentenced.”

“As long as he hasn’t been injected, there’s hope,” Hunith rubs her nose in thought, and, surprised by the determination in her voice, Morgana lifts her head at.
What do you mean?

Tomorrow I’m going to see the only person who can help him."

Arthur wakes with a sore head, but as soon as he opens his eyes he’s wide awake. Merlin. He was the last thing on his mind before he fell asleep and he’s the first thing in his head this morning. He is a good man, Gwen said the day before. I think his feelings for you were genuine, he hears Gwaine saying all those months ago. He saved my life again. Arthur tells himself.

Arthur grunts in anger at the inner devil that’s been niggling him relentlessly to give into his gut feeling and stop vilifying Merlin. He can’t. The evidence against the man is simply too strong. Is it just that? Arthur asks himself. Or is it because he feels scorned? Because he’s seen that Merlin loves someone else? Because he can’t accept he’s in love with a man who took advantage of him? Surely I’m not that petty?! Or am I?

Deep in thought he automatically grabs the bottle of hypospray from his bedside table and puts it against his arm to release the medication. When his finger’s about to press the button he freezes. I want you to live. Give me the benefit of the doubt! Merlin had written in the letter. Even if Arthur can’t get himself to forgive Merlin, he can do that – give him the benefit of the doubt, at least when it comes to the hypospray.

I will get it checked out, Arthur decides. Today. Of course if Merlin’s told the truth,… Arthur swallows hard. The consequences are far reaching and utterly mind blowing, and he still doesn’t want to think about it. Because somebody, somewhere would be responsible for that, and there are only very few people to choose from.

Would it change how I feel about Merlin? Arthur wonders and pushes the thought away without considering it. No point worrying about ifs and buts. I think I’ll deal with that when I get there.

Half an hour later Arthur’s made his way to his office, to be greeted by Alice.

“Good morning, Arthur. The Chief of Police phoned about five minutes ago. He’s coming by in about fifteen minutes.”

Arthur nods and furrows his brows. If Leon wants to speak to him in person, it must be important. The man’s been far too busy recently to waste time on private visits unless there’s a good reason for it.

“Progress!” Leon sighs as he sinks onto the sofa in Arthur’s office a little later. “Finally.”

The triumphant look on his friend’s face sends Arthur heart racing. “I’m all ears.”

“We’ve found the black van. It was hidden in an old shed on a small farm just outside Camelot, and we’ve been able to identify it as the same van parked outside Edwin’s log cabin.”

“That’s really great news!” Arthur exclaims, tense with anticipation.

“And it gets even better,” Leon grins, “it’s also a match to the van seen shortly after Cedric’s fatal accident.”
“So it’s most likely the same person involved in both cases?”

“Yeap.”

“And the owner? Any idea who it is?”

“Now this is where things get really interesting,” Leon stops to pause before he gives away the real bombshell. “That van’s registered to an Alvarr Brown.”

“Alvarr.” Arthur’s mouth remains open in shock.

“I pulled a picture out of the Citizen’s Register.” Leon hands a print out over to Arthur who stares breathlessly at the image of a very familiar face.

“It is him,” he whispers in total bewilderment. “The rebel leader. The guy who almost killed me yesterday.” If Merlin hadn’t prevented it, a small voice mutters in the back of his mind.

“Going by the description you gave of the man yesterday I thought it might be the same guy.”

“Shit.” Arthur’s brain is processing the new information with the speed of a top performance PC. “Does that mean Alvarr and Edwin are working together?”

“Not bad for a pencil pusher.” Leon throws Arthur a cheeky smile. “Look at this.” And with that he passes his friend another photograph. It’s quite grainy and not very clear, but it’s easy to recognize Alvarr, and … next to him, without any doubt, Edwin.

“I trusted my instincts and kept up the surveillance we put on Edwin originally. And here we are … Bingo! That was about a week ago, outside Edwin’s log cabin.”

“But that doesn’t make sense! What does Edwin want with Alvarr? Or the other way round?”

“Now that’s the million dollar question.” Leon leans back, closing his eyes in thought. “Seems Edwin could be up to all sorts of tricks.”

“What do you mean? Have you got any theories?” Arthur asks.

“Speculations, yes. But none I can prove, unfortunately,” Leon admits reluctantly.

“So what’s your take of the situation?”

“Let’s start with the facts we know. First, there’s been a huge increase in magical activity over the last year. The question is: why or what for?” Leon looks expectantly at Arthur.

“I’ve no idea,” Arthur says, feeling as clueless as he was before.

“Tell me, what was the consequence of the magical attacks?”

“The media went wild, people got scared, they started to panic …,” Arthur whistles at the next conclusion, “and blame the government for not providing enough protection from sorcery. They started questioning Father and his ability to hold MUs at bay.”

“Exactly,” Leon says. “Second, YOU have been the target of two attacks. The son of the Governor, the Minister of Justice, the person who upholds law and justice. What was the reaction when it became public that you, out of all people, wasn’t safe from magical crimes any longer?”

Arthur nods, slowly catching on, where Leon’s taking this. “There was outrage and fear. I’ve never
seen Father that worried.” Arthur pinches the bridge of his nose. “Are you trying to say that someone’s out for Father’s neck?”

“Not only Uther’s. Yours, too. For the past half-year rumours about your health have regularly appeared in the press. Rumours only, yes, but enough to unsettle the public. People don’t want their leaders to appear weak, as much as they might like you as a person.”

Arthur lets out another whistle. “So with both, Father and me, discredited, the Pendragon Government could be brought to its knees. Is that it? That’s quite a conspiracy theory you’ve got there, Leon.”

“More than a theory, Arthur,” Leon raises his eye brows as he drops the morning edition of the Camelot News and a couple of other papers on the coffee table. The headlines are surprisingly similar.

**Edwin Richter unveils enemy of the nation**

**Dr. Richter saves the day**

**Edwin Richter – a man we can trust!**

**The most dangerous sorcerer of all time – caught by an unlikely hero:**

**Edwin Richter.**

“Fuck.” Arthur can hardly take it in. This is more than obvious. “Looks like Edwin’s making sure the people of Camelot know who they need to thank for Merlin’s arrest.”

“Yeap,” Leon agrees. “He’s certainly put himself into the right light, hasn’t he? Question is, why? Why would he discredit your father now? He’s been Uther’s biggest ally for years. I can’t see a motive anywhere.”

Arthur rubs his chin, subconsciously noting the stubble he’s grown over the last two days. “No, me neither. You think the Serum and those disappearing bodies have anything to do with it?”

Leon shrugs his shoulders in frustration. “I’ve no idea. What I do know is that something’s terribly wrong and that it feels like things are going to come to a head soon.”

*Yes, I’m sure Merlin’s trial was part of that.* Arthur suddenly goes completely still. Where does Merlin fit into this whole intrigue? He was working with Alvarr, and Alvarr’s in league with Edwin. Was Merlin involved in their scheme? Somehow that doesn’t ring true to Arthur, he has no idea why.

“I’m sorry about Merlin,” Leon says, warmth and sympathy in his voice, interpreting his sudden silence correctly.

“I don’t understand any of this,” Arthur sighs. “I’m pretty sure Edwin was out for Merlin’s blood. All those fake witnesses, the early injection….” Arthur’s voice dies in a rasping crackle as he’s trying to suppress the sudden panic in his heart. *Merlin’s going to die, and there’s nothing I can do.*

“Why don’t you ask Merlin?” Leon suggests, and Arthur throws him a surprised look.

“You think he’s going to tell me the truth?”
“Just see what he’s got to say. We can still decide afterwards what to make of it,” Leon says as gets up. “Percival has passed on a list of those witnesses who testified against Merlin at the trial. I’m going to check them out asap, and I’ll talk to John Marshall in case anything new has come to light about those bodies.”

Arthur nods, his head buzzing with a million questions. “We’ll keep in touch,” he says as Leon takes his leave.

As soon as the door closes behind his friend, Arthur’s on the phone. There’s something he has to do, right now, before he changes his mind. “Peterson? I was wondering if you could help me out with a little problem…?”

Five minutes later Arthur puts the phone down and stares into the room, wondering if he’s done the right thing. Peterson was only too happy to check the hypospray out. Without mentioning it to anyone. It shouldn’t take longer than 24 hours, he said. And whatever the result, I will deal with it. Arthur squares his jaw defiantly.

The buzzer on the internal phone rings, drawing his attention away from the unpleasant thought. “There’s a Mrs. Emerson downstairs, Arthur, insisting she needs to speak to you. Do you want me to have her sent up?” Alice asks.

Mrs. Emerson. Merlin’s mother. It can’t be anyone else. Arthur’s insides clench violently, out of trepidation or surprise, he can’t tell. What on earth does she want? What the heck is he going to say to a woman whose husband and son have been ripped from her in the name of the law he stands for?
Arthur would never attribute the heat rising in his chest and the incessant tapping of his foot on the floor to nervousness. Even if it's true.

Merlin’s mother must hate my guts. What is she going to say to me? What can I possibly say to her? Although Arthur steels himself for an unpleasant conversation, he hasn’t got the tiniest clue what to expect, and it rattles him.

“Mrs. Emerson, sir,” Alice announces eventually, and Arthur’s heart starts thumping furiously, as Hunith enters his office. As good manners dictate he gets up to meet her. “Mrs. Emerson, I’m Arthur Pendragon.”

“I’m Merlin’s mother,” Hunith says, looking up to scan his face carefully. Arthur nods, struck by how small and fragile the woman appears, while, in contrast, her words emanate a sense of quiet strength and confidence. He fleetingly notices Hunith’s drawn face and the dark shadows under her eyes. No wonder, considering all she’s been through.

“Please take a seat,” Arthur motions her to the sofa next to his desk, while he settles in the soft chair opposite. He’s just about to ask why she has come to see him when Hunith speaks up.

“I’m not going to beat about the bush,” she says and looks directly into his eyes. “I’m here to ask you to help Merlin.”

Arthur feels his blood run cold. Of course Merlin’s mother hasn’t been notified about the injection, yet. It all happened so quickly the day before. Arthur shifts in his seat uncomfortably, aware it’s up to him to deliver the awful news. What a shitty situation, he thinks and wracks his brain how to go about this with sensitivity. Tongue-tied and completely out of his comfort zone, Arthur desperately tries to find the right words. Hunith who has been watching him closely, inevitably mistakes his reason for not answering.

“Please,” she says hoarsely, “just listen before you dismiss it right away.” And before Arthur can throw in a word or stop her, Merlin’s mother starts talking rapidly.

“Merlin didn’t choose to have magic. He was born with it. Does that make him automatically a man inferior in character to those who aren’t sorcerers? He never abused his powers. On the contrary. He’s always been an advocate of using magic for the good of people, for helping and supporting them, but for nothing else.”

At that Hunith throws Arthur a searching look, as if she’s hoping to find something particular there, but she pauses too shortly for Arthur to react. “I don’t know exactly what happened between the two of you, and it’s not up to me to judge you for anything. But you’ve been with Merlin. You must know what he’s like. My son has magic, that’s true. But he isn’t a criminal because of that. He isn’t evil because he wanted to save his father’s life. He isn’t corrupt because he tried to do away with the Serum.” Hunith swallows hard before her brown kind eyes pierce into Arthur’s. “Merlin made me believe you’re a good man at heart. That’s why I am here. Please help him.”

Every word hits Arthur like a punch into the guts, and he feels almost winded by the anguish flaring up inside him. “I wish I could,” he rasps, a fist-sized lump tightening his throat, and he cringes at the hurt in her eyes. Hunith’s face drops at his words and tears start clouding her eyes. He knows he has to stop her before this goes any further.
“You mean, you won’t,” she whispers, her voice thick with disappointment.

“No. That’s not it.” Arthur shakes his head, biting his lips, aware there’s no good way to say what he has to. "It’s too late. Merlin was tried and sentenced yesterday. My father …,” Arthur’s voice falters,”…my father ordered his immediate punishment.”

“Immediate? You mean …,” Hunith’s eyes widen in disbelief, too horrified to finish her sentence.

“Merlin was injected yesterday. I’m so sorry,” and as Arthur says it, he genuinely feels it in every fibre of his body. I’m so sorry, Merlin. So sorry. I wish I’d have been on time. “There’s nothing I could do,” Arthur mumbles a bit defensively as an after-thought.

Hunith sits on the sofa motionless, clearly too distraught to react in any way, apart from her finger nails digging into the soft flesh of her palms. She stares into empty space in total shock. Her face ashen and her limbs trembling, she slowly draws herself up to stand. “I won’t impose on you any further,” she whispers, broken and defeated, and gets up to head for the door, but her legs give way and she sinks back onto the sofa, a void look on her face.

“Please, stay seated,” Arthur jumps up and presses the intercom button. “A cup of tea, Alice, please. As soon as you can.” Then he walks up to Hunith, unsure what to do and what to say. Nothing, nothing at all, seems adequate, and Arthur feels utterly helpless. He wants to comfort the woman in front of him, wants to tell her how sorry he is and how much the truth hurts. Because it DOES hurt him, too. But what are his feelings compared to her pain? How can he possibly understand what’s going on inside her?

Alice interrupts the eerie silence when she comes into the office to put a cup of tea and a couple of biscuits on the coffee table. Arthur nods her a thank-you before she slips out of the room. “Try and drink something,” he says to Hunith quietly, and to his surprise Hunith grabs the cup and lifts it to her lips.

Arthur paces up and down the room, steam-rollered by an overload of emotions. She is trying to convince me that Merlin isn’t debauched and twisted. She wants to persuade me that he’s decent human being. Of course a mother would say that about her son. But then there were also Gwen and Gwaine who’d done the same.

Can he believe Merlin acted out of empathy? Is he ready to listen to the little voice in the back of his head urging him to knock down the wall of denial he’s carefully constructed around his heart? Maybe I can forgive the man for what he’s done in the name of compassion, but that doesn’t take away the fact that he pretended affection where there was none.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Hunith has been sipping tea, and suddenly looks up at Arthur to ask out of nowhere, “Did you want to?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you want to help him?”

Arthur isn’t sure why this might have any significance now, but the least he can do is answer the question he’s been asked. “I tried,” he starts and quickly recounts his rush to the prison, ending in a shaky, “I wasn’t fast enough.” No, I wasn’t. And now he’s going to die.

“Thank you,” Hunith whispers, a silent tear rolling down her cheek, her body rigidly upright.

Arthur can’t help but feeling ashamed. How can this woman whose heart was undoubtedly broken a few minutes earlier find it in her heart to thank HIM? And whatever for?
“For trying,” Hunith says, clarifying her words. “Why did you do it?”

Arthur feels heat rising in his cheek, as he asks himself the same question. Why did he belt along the streets of Camelot to prevent Edwin from following his father’s instructions? Why did he think the world was ending when he realized he was too late?

“Merlin’s trial was unjust. I would never see any man punished unfairly.”

“Is that it?” Hunith says softly, and Arthur isn’t quite sure where to look. Something inside him is on the verge of erupting, but he stubbornly keeps it under lock and key. Something he’s admitted to himself in his weakest moments for a fraction of time. Can he let it go? Can he really say out loud what’s still in his heart? Is he going to betray his own principles if he does? Is he going to lose his integrity if he accepts his feelings?

He almost jerks when Hunith puts her hand onto his arm. “So you haven’t given up on Merlin completely,” she says with a poignant smile, reading his inner struggle with startling accuracy.

“I can’t help it,” Arthur says begrudgingly, and surprisingly honest. No, he can’t wish away the strong emotions Merlin evokes in him. He’s tried and tried, but failed every time.

“Tell him please, before he … dies,” Hunith mumbles, every word an effort. “He’ll go more easily.”

What? What’s that supposed to mean? “Why would he? He loves Morgana,” Arthur bursts out before he can stop himself.

“Morgana might want to believe that, but …” Hunith shakes her head sadly, and then returns Arthur’s searching gaze. “It’s not my place to speak for Merlin. But I beg you to talk to him. Settle your differences before time runs out.”

Arthur nods in a daze. Did Hunith more or less imply there was nothing between Merlin and Morgana? That he was mistaken in believing that Merlin never had any feelings for him? That anger and pride had kept him from trusting Merlin to tell the truth? Is that what she meant?

Images of Merlin laughing, teasing him, holding him, kissing him, loving him flash through Arthur’s mind like a whirlwind and a razor sharp pain cuts through him like a sword. Was Hunith really hinting Merlin’s feelings for him were genuine? There’s no reason for her to lie about a thing like that, and this woman, Merlin’s mother, certainly doesn’t strike him a liar. Anything but. So if what she says is true …

An unintended sob escapes Arthur’s mouth, and when he feels a warm hand on his shoulder he looks up into Hunith’s knowing eyes. “I can’t watch him die,” he stammers mindlessly. “I can’t lose him.” A wave of bitter-sweet regret washes over him, and he knows he can’t ignore his true feelings any longer.

Hunith presses her lips together tightly, unbound sorrow reflected in her face. “We will have to bear it, Arthur.”

Arthur doesn’t even notice the informal address because his mind, unwilling to acknowledge the facts, is running in agitated circles. “There must be SOMETHING that can be done. Something,” he says, pacing up and down his office again. This can’t be the end. I refuse to accept that.

“Gaius and Merlin tried to develop an antidote,” Hunith mumbles and Arthur’s head shoots up. “But they were never able to finish it because they missed one part of the formula.”

“That’s why Merlin came to the Ministry,” Arthur says, and his eyes light up when it hits him. “If I
give Gaius the formula could he manage to produce an antidote?”

The look on Hunith’s face speaks volumes. She’s utterly dumbfounded. “You would do that for Merlin?”

Arthur swallows hard and whispers more to himself than to her. “I have to at least try and save him.”

“Thank you. It means everything,” Hunith says, her voice shaking from suppressed tears, as she gently squeezes Arthur’s hand.

The gentle touch grates on Arthur’s composure more than any harsh or angry words could have. Quickly he claps her hand and smiles, before he shows how much her kindness and honesty are tearing him up.

“So,” he says to distract from his emotional state, “Gaius should be able to give me more information?”

“I’m sure he can,” Hunith says with conviction.

“That’s what I’ll do then.” Arthur says, his eyes gleaming with determination at the sight of even the tiniest morsel of hope.

Strangely, the first thing edging itself into Merlin’s consciousness is silence. It seems weird he can’t hear any noise at all. Well, apart from the soft ticking of a clock somewhere. Next, he becomes aware of his body and his limbs, stretched out on a bed and covered by a crisp, starchy bedsheets, smelling faintly medicinal. There’s this odd, unexplainable sensation of being wrapped up in cotton wool, inside and out, dampening his senses.

His sluggish brain tries to make sense of where he is and what has happened. He struggles to open his eyes, barely managing to lift his heavy eyelids. He has to try a couple of times before they obey his will, and as the fog clouding his awareness dissipates, the room comes into sharper focus. He’s definitely in a hospital room, or something alike. The clinical smell of antiseptic and the pristine steely surfaces of the sideboard are a sure give-away. And the bandages that are covering various parts of his body.

Where the heck am I?

There’s the clock. It’s 4:30. Is it day or night time? The window on his left hand side suggests it must be the afternoon. Why is it so quiet? And why is he overwhelmed by a sense of loss?

Merlin takes a deep breath and strains his brain, for one second and then another, and at least some things falls into place. The trial, the guards, Edwin, the Serum, Arthur. The name alone causes his heart to ache. In fact, it’s the only thing that’s aching. Apart from that, he can feel no pain. And there’s something missing. Something vital.

My magic. Pure terror grips his heart at the thought. My magic. I can’t feel it anymore. The gentle humming of gold that’s been circulating in his veins since the day he was born is gone. They have taken the essence of my being from me. I’m as good as dead. The ensuing panic causes his breath to go shallow and his blood to race. I need to get out of here. Now. His mind goes blank and he tries to get out of bed instinctively, when an icy voice stops him short. “I don’t think so.”
Edwin. Where the heck did he come from? He stands in front of him, a small cold smile on his lips. "Ablinn ðu; forlæte ðu nu." Merlin’s immediately pushed back on the bed by an invisible force, his arm and legs pinned down and unable to even move an inch.

“What a sight to behold,” Edwin chuckles derisively, as hatred’s darkening his eyes. “The most powerful sorcerer of all, thwarted by little me.” Then he opens the case at his side to pull out a syringe filled with a blue liquid. The Serum. He holds it up to his eyes and caresses it with his index finger. “Time for round two.”

“Why are you doing this? Why do you hate me so much?” Merlin manages to spit out.

“Oh. Don’t flatter yourself, Merlin. This isn’t about you,” Edwin says, as he grabs Merlin’s arm with an iron grip. “This is all about me, and I will have what I want.”

Merlin’s eyes widen when Edwin pierces the needle of the syringe into his arm and presses the plunger to push the Serum into his bloodstream. Merlin can do absolutely nothing, but watch. He’s completely at Edwin’s mercy, and they both know it. Unexpected rage flares inside him, mingling with the frustrated anger at the hopelessness of the situation.

“You’re not going to get away with this,” Merlin hisses at the doctor.

“I already have,” Edwin smirks. “You don’t exactly look as if you could stop me.”


“You’ve played right into my hands all along Merlin, and soon, very soon, a new era will rise in Camelot.” Edwin gets lost in thought for a second, before he gives Merlin a smug grin. “Not that you will live to see it.”

A new era? What’s Edwin planning to do? Merlin needs to get to the bottom of this, not for himself - he’s not going to last much longer, as Edwin pointed out so kindly before - but for all those he’s going to leave behind. “Are you really deluded enough to think you can take the power from the Pendragons?” he asks.

Edwin eyes crinkle in mirth when he replies. “Deluded? You’d like to think that, wouldn’t you? Camelot and Albion are going to be mine, and not long from now. That’s as sure as you dying.”

The revulsion in Edwin’s words and the wild, possessed glimmer in his eyes make Merlin cringe with worry. What the fuck is the man up to? He’s certainly bloody sure about himself. I must find out what he’s going to do. I must do something. Merlin’s frantic to elicit more out of the doctor, but Edwin’s already at the door.

With a smirk worthy of a Bond villain, he turns one more time. “Good bye, Merlin, and thank you. Without you I wouldn’t have the whole of Camelot looking up to me the way they do now. Their hero. Their saviour. And thanks in advance for the contribution you’re going to make once you’re…,” Edwin sends him a triumphant smile, “…dead. See you in three weeks.”

With that he’s gone, and so is his magic. The tightening grip holding down Merlin disappears in an instant, and Merlin can finally move his arms and legs again. I must tell somebody about this. I must tell Arthur. Merlin presses his lips into a thin line, wondering if Arthur would actually believe a word. The way he spoke to him when they met in the cell wasn’t exactly encouraging.

Bloody hell. I have to try. For mum. For my friends. For all of Camelot. Arthur was onto Edwin before all this happened. Surely he wouldn’t brush me off? Merlin swings his legs off the bed shakily. I must alert somebody. I must find a person to get Arthur. He’s almost upright when his
effort to get up is thwarted for a second time.

It’s as if he’s struck by lightning. A surge of high power energy flashes through him and then his whole body starts convulsing. His muscles contract in rapid succession, lifting his body rhythmically off the bed and letting it crash down again. An explosion of excruciating pain suffocates him all of a sudden, blanking out every thought and making every coherent move a thing of impossibility.

Merlin watches himself as if his body was not his, but someone else’s. He’s twitching and twisting and as he spasms uncontrollably, he hears a man cry out in utter agony. A second later, he realizes it’s him.

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Arthur can feel the eyes of the young guard who was designated to act as his guide on him, no doubt evaluating his state of health. The press has had a field day with releasing ‘before and after pictures’ of him on a weekly basis, after all. Arthur’s fully aware he looks like shit. The exhaustion and weakness caused by his condition has been bad enough recently, but the events of the last two days have taken him to near breaking point. The stubble on his chin, the dark shadows under his eyes and the gaunt image of his face accentuate his dishevelled appearance. So much for the golden boy, he thinks rather sarcastically, as he follows the guard into Lamia House.

It’s also been an incredibly strenuous day. There were so many extras to deal with on top of his usual work load. First Leon’s briefing, then the visit of Merlin’s mother, followed by a plethora of phone-calls, starting with the one to Gaius. To say the old man was surprised to speak to him was a huge understatement.

“I need your expertise,” Arthur said without going too much into detail. He’d decided to save that for a talk face to face in private, “and I would like to meet you.”

“Is this about Merlin?” Gaius asked carefully, and the wobble in his voice suggested he’d heard what had happened. When Arthur answered in the affirmative, the old chemist immediately agreed to his request. The sooner they met, the better.

Arthur also instructed his closest allies, Percival, Gwaine and Leon to do whatever they could to nail Alvarr and Edwin to some kind of punishable crime. There had to be something somewhere.

It’s 5p.m. Arthur checks the time as he’s crossing the courtyard of the prison. Just as they turn the corner to enter the Prison Block, he sees a white coat disappearing behind the door of the Research Facility. As if the white-haired wearer was in a rush. Hmmm. Why does that make him uncomfortable?

A minute later Arthur’s hurrying towards the medical station. His hands are damp and clammy and his heart’s thumping with anticipation. He’s finally going to face Merlin and talk to him. Leon suggested it first and, of course, Merlin’s mother basically pushed him into it. For completely different reasons, obviously. But here he is. As nervous as a teenager on a first date. How ridiculous!

Arthur’s apprehensive mood deepens as soon as he enters the medical facility of the prison because it’s obvious there’s something amiss. The desk at the reception is unmanned and he can’t hear or see any of the staff usually rushing around. Silence echoes from the walls of the corridor. What the heck is going on? And where is Gwen?
His question’s answered a second later when he turns a corner and finds Gwen and the resident nurse sitting on the floor staring into space, doing absolutely nothing.

“Gwen!” Arthur shouts and bends down to touch her shoulder.

Gwen startles and looks up at him, her face riddled with confusion. “Arthur…?”

“What happened, Gwen?”

“I came out to speak to Louise.” Gwen motions towards the nurse next to her, and then furrows her brows. “But I can’t remember anything after that.” She lets out a gasp of surprise when she checks her watch. “That was over 20 minutes ago. It’s as if time stood still.”

*Magic. It must be. Somebody used magic on Gwen and the nurse to …*

Arthur shares an alarmed look with her before sudden recognition hits both of them. “Merlin!”

Gwen scrambles up and they rush down the corridor to get to Merlin’s room. They both stop in horror at what they find.

Merlin is writhing on his bed in obvious agony, coiling up as cramp after cramp violently shakes his tortured body. Light blue foam is trickling out of the corner of his mouth, and his eyes are blown wide in absolute terror.

“Oh my God!” Gwen screams at the top of her voice, running up to him, closely followed by Arthur.

“Grab his arms and hold him still.” Gwen’s professionalism has seemingly pushed aside any personal feelings, and she’s gone into full nurse mode. Arthur’s too shocked to formulate any sensible thought and does as he’s been instructed, happy to let her take over. Gwen’s at the sideboard in an instant, grabbing a syringe and filling it with some kind of medication.

It takes all of Arthur’s strength to hold Merlin reasonably still so Gwen can inject him into each arm. Whatever she’s given him, it works wonders within a couple of seconds. With a tormented moan Merlin stops convulsing and sinks back onto the bed. For a short moment his eyes turn clear and they lock first on Gwen and then on Arthur.

“Ar fur…,” he rasps almost inaudible. “E...win…” And at that he stretches out his hands towards Arthur. But just before Arthur can react Merlin’s eye-lids drop and his head droops to the side as sleep embraces him.

Arthur stares at the broken man in front of him, touched by the way he reached out to him. Well, that’s the way it looked like, anyway. Thank God, Merlin’s at least at rest right now. “What did you give him?”

“Sedative, muscle relaxant, pain killer,” Gwen rattles off mindlessly, obviously still as shocked as Arthur while she strokes over Merlin’s arm that’s hanging over the side of the bed. “No.” she exclaims suddenly, drawing a breath in sharply.

“What?”

“Look at this.” Gwen points at a sting mark on Merlin’s vein. It is obvious even to a layman like Arthur that it’s fresh. A little drop of blood is oozing out if it, followed by a drop of very blue liquid.

“He’s been injected again,” Arthur voices breathlessly. In the sudden need of a seat he settles on the chair next to the bed.
“It certainly looks like it,” Gwen says while she gets an antiseptic wipe to clean the spot on Merlin’s arm.

“Edwin,” Arthur says more to himself than to Gwen. That’s what Merlin had tried to convey. How the fuck had the doctor managed to pull that off? As soon as Arthur’s asked the question, the answer dawns simultaneously. Edwin has magic. He must have. He’s enchanted Gwen and the nurse to get past them. Edwin has magic. Fuck.

Does Father know? For a moment Arthur’s head turns to a dizzy mush, and in an attempt to steady himself he holds on to the edge of the bed.

“Hey, it looks like you could do with some rest as well,” Gwen says kindly, busying herself to clean Merlin’s face and brow, but Arthur shakes his head stubbornly.


“Edwin did the same with the girl Peterson liked,” Arthur follows his train of thought, ignoring that this particular detail is lost on Gwen.

“And the girl died soon after. And then she disappeared. This isn’t going to happen to Merlin. At least not the last part. Arthur freezes at the realization he’s just admitted how dire the situation is. Fuck it, he swears inside his head. As long as he lives, as long as there’s one breath inside Merlin, I won’t give up fighting.

Arthur closes his eyes and wills himself to focus. This calls for action. Now. There’s no way he’s going to leave Merlin in Lamia House where Edwin could strike again at any time. Taking Merlin away from here is the only solution. To a place that’s safe and easily secured.

With a few words he shares his idea with Gwen, and half an hour later, Merlin’s on a stretcher inside an ambulance, and they’re hurtling towards the Lake Cottage.

The alarm is hundred percent set,” Percival says, doubt evident in his voice. “Not that it’ll keep any MUs out,” he adds rather huffily, and Arthur sighs, knowing the comment is nothing but well-meant.

He understands why his friend’s not happy. Coming to the Lake Cottage where MUs proved they could easily outplay the security system isn’t Percival’s idea of a safe heaven.

“I think sorcerers will be less of a problem than the Justice Squad,” Arthur says, wondering how long it’s going to take until his father’s informed of the missing prisoner. Under an hour, he estimates. And then it’ll take another to figure out it was me who instigated Merlin’s departure. But he’ll need longer to find out where we went, Arthur thinks with a smug grin. He’s done everything possible to cover their tracks.

Gwaine’s in the living room just now, busy falsifying the CCTV footage of their ‘escape’ while Leon’s stalling police action as long as he possibly can. John Marshall’s doing his best to withhold essential information about Merlin’s departure, while Fiodor and Percival have done everything in their powers to ensure they’re alerted to anyone who’s approaching the house.

“I hope we’ve bought ourselves enough time to work out what we’re going to do next,” Arthur mumbles and Percival nods. God, I’m lucky to have friends as loyal as that, Arthur thinks, fighting the lump in his throat.
“Arthur,” the female voice rips Arthur out of his thoughts. He looks at Merlin’s mother who’s just appeared out of the bed room Merlin’s been placed in. It was a stroke of ingenuity to phone her on the way, asking her to come along to look after Merlin. He’ll never forget the gratitude in her eyes when they picked her up at an agreed location.

“Mrs. Emerson,” Arthur says and manages a hint of a smile. “How is he?”

“Still knocked out. Gwen thinks he’s going to be sleeping through the night,” Hunith says as she walks up to Arthur. “And please call me Hunith.”

Arthur swallows, wondering if he’ll ever grasp the generosity and forgiveness of the woman in front of him. She hasn’t judged him at all. He’s noticed she’s been watching him, but he’s never had even the smallest negative vibe from her.

“Thank you,” he says thickly. “Are you comfortable in your room?”

Hunith smiles at him, and God, it’s a genuine smile. “Thank you, it is lovely. And so is Gwen. I’m so glad she’s here, too.”

So am I. Arthur can hardly express it. Without Gwen none of this would have been possible. She’d been more than willing to leave everything behind her at the drop of a hat to care for Merlin. She wouldn’t do that, if she thought he wasn’t worth it.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Arthur asks.

Hunith puts her hand softly on his. “I was wondering if I could help in any way?”

“Help with what?”

“You need to rest, Arthur. Just go and try to sleep.” Hunith says warmly.

“I can’t. There’s so much going on,” he mutters, noticing for the first time how much his body is crying out for relaxation.

“Go and sleep, Arthur. You’re not doing anybody any good if you’re not compos mentis.” This time Hunith sounds a lot more determined, as if she isn’t expecting Arthur to contradict her. Unsure how to react to the advice which sounded more motherly than anything else, he rubs his chin and looks around like a boy unsure what to do.

Hunith’s tone of voice doesn’t seem to give him any options, so, suddenly aware how much effort it costs him to keep his eyes open, Arthur agrees willingly. “Okay, I’ll take a nap, but if he wakes up …”

“I’ll let you know,” Hunith assures him. “Go on. You need to look after yourself, too.”


Hunith acknowledges him with a nod of her head and a few minutes later Arthur crashes onto the huge double bed in his bedroom. The same bed he and Merlin shared the last time they were together. The same place where Merlin tried to confess… He wanted to tell me. Arthur thinks drowsily. He was going to tell me everything then. Why is he suddenly so sure about that? On that note Arthur drifts off into an uneasy sleep.

It’s his mobile that wakes him a few hours later. Arthur grunts when he sees the time. It’s only 6:30.
He swears under his breath as he rolls over to grab his phone from his bedside table. As soon as he sees the caller ID his reluctance to answer disappears in a shot.

It’s Peterson.
**Day of Truth**

*It is true.* The words have been running through his mind like a song stuck on repeat. Peterson just confirmed the unthinkable. There IS Serum in his hypospray. Merlin’s told the truth.

*He told the truth.* Arthur pinches the top of his nose, trying to focus and get his shaking knees and pounding heart under control. He can’t decide what’s more staggering – the revelation that Merlin’s claim wasn’t a lie, or the fact that Edwin – and yes, it must be him – has been giving him medication containing the Serum for who knows how many years. Without Arthur’s knowledge.

Does Father know? Arthur wonders for the second time in 24 hours, and he closes his eyes as if it could stop him spinning the thought further. If Uther doesn’t know, this must be Edwin’s doing alone. But what for? And if his father’s aware of it, why would he allow it? Arthur lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

The Serum’s meant for sorcerers, it’s meant to contain their magic, so why…? Fuck. There’s only one logical answer – the one Merlin suggested in his letter. *I must have magic. Merlin said he’d felt it. How ridiculous! Surely I would have noticed something that monumental at one point in my life? Wouldn’t I?* Arthur stares down at his body in confusion. *Of course I wouldn’t notice, if the Serum kept the magic in check,* his logic argues.

He started taking the hypospray at the age of six, and he can’t remember EVER doing anything magical before that. Wouldn’t it have shown? Even as a little boy? Wouldn’t he be able to recall at least one occasion when his magic manifested itself? Of course, he was young then and it’s a long time in the past. Still.

*Maybe the Serum is part of my medication because a tiny amount is beneficial to my condition?* Arthur shakes his head as soon as the thought pops into his mind. No, that’s absolute nonsense. Taking his medicine has always only smoothed things over to allow him to function. No more, no less. His illness has been the bane of his life. The nausea, the dizziness, the fatigue, the weakness that’s crawling slowly but surely into every cell of his body.

Oh fuck! Arthur’s heart and brain stop working simultaneously for a split second. *I’ve just listed exactly the same symptoms Peterson mentioned when he spoke about the MU he’d fallen in love with. The girl that died. Why didn’t the similarity occur to me before?*

Arthur walks over to the window and opens it. The fresh morning air rushes into the room, and he takes a deep breath, while his eyes sweep over the beautiful landscape stretching out before him. Soft ripples of water lap against the shore gently, as the first rays of sun stream through the clouds, reflecting on the surface of the lake. The calm of nature stands in stark contrast to his inner turmoil.

*Do I really have magic?* How can he accept this without hard evidence? But if it’s true, and it seems that conclusion is forcing itself on him, then a million questions will have to be asked and answered. By his father, by Edwin and, most importantly by Merlin.

Merlin. Just the mention of his name sends a wave of raw emotion crashing over Arthur. He left a warning about the hypospray in his office. Something he certainly didn’t have to do on any account. Merlin had put his need to help Arthur above anything else. Like Arthur’s harsh rejection and bitter condemnation after finding out who Merlin really was. Or the fact that most MUs would have welcomed his death. Merlin had no reason whatsoever to wish him well. *Despite it all, he still wanted to save my life.*
And this wasn’t the first letter Merlin sent. Arthur pulls a crumpled envelope out of his jacket pocket with trembling hands. He’d kept the letter in the bottom drawer of his desk. He received it not long after he’d returned home after his abduction, but he couldn’t face opening it then. He wasn’t able to destroy it, either. He’d almost forgotten it until Merlin’s second letter reminded him of its existence. And just before they’d left for the Lake Cottage, he’d followed his gut instinct, dug it out under a whole pile of paper from the drawer and took it with him.

*I need to know what it says.* Without waiting a second longer Arthur rips the seal open and his eyes fly over the words. They’re almost identical to the ones he read the day before in Merlin’s other letter. Arthur drops his head into his hands and rubs his cheeks and eyes, trying to come to terms with the revelation. *He wanted to warn me even then, just a couple of weeks after I destroyed everything that was between us.*

Suddenly so many pieces of a wider picture fall into their right place. Merlin’s kiss after he collapsed the first time, the one Gwaine told him about. Merlin taking Morgana’s blow intended for him when they were kidnapped, Merlin diverting Alvarr’s deadly spell two days ago. Merlin, healing his wound instead of fleeing to freedom.

*Merlin did love me.* The bombshell hitting him shouldn’t have pulled the rug out from underneath him as much as it does because the fact has been in front of his nose all along. *Why couldn’t I understand it before? Gwaine, Gwen and Hunith all tried to tell me in one way or another, but I was too blind to see it. Until right now.*

Yes, Merlin had done some things Arthur could neither understand nor condone, but his own actions hadn’t been exactly commendable, either. God, all those damn awful things he’d said to Merlin that night when everything had gone to hell! He’d just panicked and clammed up, hiding in the safe confines of his preconceived image of magic, rather than listening to what Merlin had to say. And just two days ago, when they’d been alone in that cell, he’d let Merlin believe that he’d completely abandoned him when he knew he still cared. Arthur cringes at the mere thought of it.

*He loved me.* Arthur keeps repeating in his head all over again. And then, finally, Arthur can see past his fear of magic, his hurt pride, his doubts, and his anger. At long last, the deep abyss of betrayal and mistrust, which kept him from opening his heart and accepting his true feelings, is bridged by love and forgiveness.

*I need to talk to him, now.* Arthur turns to head for the door when trepidation washes over him. Merlin loved him then. But that was before he was tried and sentenced in the name of justice. *The justice I represent with my name.* But nothing about Merlin’s trial and sentence had been just. *It is my fault he’s dying. Merlin sacrificed his life to save mine. He is where he is now because he tried to help me.*

*Even if he doesn’t want to see me ever again, I will do anything to make this right.* Arthur squares his jaw in determination. There must be a way to save Merlin. There simply has to be.

When Merlin wakes this time and opens his eyes, he gasps in shock. His eyes drift across the room. He must be hallucinating. There can be no doubt that he’s in the Lake Cottage and that he’s lying in a luscious, comfortable bed, covered by a silken spread. That fact, utterly ludicrous in itself, is spectacularly topped by the presence of his mother, dozing on the chair next to the bed.
This must be a side effect of the Serum. It’s playing tricks on my mind. I imagine seeing things I want to see. Merlin closes his eyes again, willing himself to relive the moments before he fell asleep to trigger a sense of reality. There was Edwin, and the second injection, and there’s a vague recollection of Gwen and Arthur, and pain. Intense pain.

Merlin moans quietly at the memory. He’s not hurting at the moment, at least not physically, but the all-encompassing emptiness inside him is torturing him just the same. He craves to feel his magic, just like a drowning man desperate for air. He needs it to feel whole, to be himself, but whatever he tries, he’s unable to trace even a whisper of the gold inside him. Instead he hits a wall of ice, cold and impenetrable, and in total control of his body. Merlin shudders with the knowledge that the Serum is keeping his magic firmly subdued when it needs to roam freely. It won’t be long before it’ll seek an outlet somewhere else - by attacking the very body it is part of.

It seems it’s started already, his hallucination a herald of worse suffering to come. It’s not real. Merlin tells himself. No doubt, I’m back in that cell they threw me in first. Of course it’s not real. How could he be at the Lake Cottage, and even more laughable, with Hunith at his side? But when Merlin opens his eyes the second time, the mirage remains, and it feels bloody real.

“Merlin!” That’s definitely his mother’s voice, and when Merlin turns his head to follow the sound, he finds her right next to him, just like before.

“Mum?” he rasps with a throat sore, his voice impaired from screaming too loudly before he went unconscious.

“My boy,” Hunith answers with a trembling voice, and she puts her hand against his cheek, her thumb lightly brushing over his scruff.

“Am I dreaming?” Merlin whispers, disorientated.

“You are at the Lake Cottage and I’m here,” Hunith answers simply, stroking his face and Merlin leans into her hand this time, hesitant and careful, still unsure if he can trust his senses. Incredulously, her hand is warm on his skin, the soft touch comforting and soothing.

Merlin searches for answers in her eyes, but all she says is,”Later, Merlin. Let’s get you nice and comfy first.” That’s the phrase Hunith always used when he was ill as a boy, and it brings a lump to Merlin’s throat, but it also makes him feel safe - delusional or not.

“Are you hungry? Thirsty? Is there anything you want?” Hunith smiles at him calmly, ready to help in any way she can, despite the overwrought look on her face.

Merlin asks for a hot drink, the thought of food making him woozy. After a couple of minutes Hunith brings him tea, and he slowly takes it sip by sip. His stomach rebels for a second, and he’s uncertain whether he’ll keep it down. It’s seems like ages since he’s eaten or drunk anything. A couple of sips more and his body’s getting used to the hot fluid. Relieved, he slowly finishes all of it before he passes the cup back to his mother, mouthing a quiet ‘thanks’.

“Better?” Hunith asks, and rubs his arms affectionately.

Merlin nods, focusing on his immediate needs rather than on all the answers he so urgently wants. “A wash?” He asks, unsure whether this is possible, considering all the bandages on his body.

But Hunith isn’t deterred. “Hold on,” she says and leaves the room to return with another woman in tow.

“Gwen. So I did see you!” Merlin exclaims, or rather tries to, because his voice is so hoarse. So both,
mum and Gwen are here to look after me? Things are getting more mysterious and weird by the second.

“Yeap. Couldn’t help myself mothering you again.” Gwen winks at him, a warm smile on her lips.

Half an hour later, Merlin’s back in his bed, feeling clean and fresh, and much more alert. It seems his mum brought some of his clothes, and it feels oddly reassuring to step into his sweatpants and pull one of his T-shirts over his head.

“Right,” he eventually says to Hunith, as Gwen leaves the room. “Tell me, please.”

Hunith gives a short account of the events from the time she went to Arthur to the present, and Merlin sits on his bed in stunned silence for a couple of minutes once she’s finished. His mum spoke to Arthur? Arthur organized all this for him? That was hardly consistent with his previous behaviour. Why on earth would he do a thing like that? He would have run into trouble with Uther for it, surely?

“He’ll explain it to you himself,” Hunitih says, not giving away anything else.

“Arthur’s here?” Merlin gasps, getting more puzzled by the second.

“Where else would he be?” His mother says rather cryptically, smiling at him when he startles at her words. “Can I tell Arthur you’re ready to see him?”

What? Merlin can hardly believe his ears. Arthur wants to talk? This comes totally out of the blue, and Merlin has no idea what to make of it. Arthur made pretty clear what he thought of him the last time they met, and he hadn’t exactly hidden that Merlin was neither understood nor forgiven. Being in a room with Arthur, one to one, suddenly seems a rather daunting prospect. Merlin’s heart has been bleeding dry over all these months, is there any point adding insult to injury?

“Give him a chance,” Hunith says. “It’s only a talk.”

Why is she urging me to do this? Does she realize what she’s asking of me? Merlin swallows hard, torn between the subliminal urge to see Arthur, close up and personal, and the fear of further rejection. I couldn’t take any more of that.

“Okay,” Merlin agrees with a thumping heart after considering it. I need to see him at least once before I die. This might be my last chance.

“I’ll let him know,”Hunith says, and gives him a reassuring pat.

Merlin sinks back on his pillows as the door closes behind her. All this doesn’t make any sense. Maybe I’ve ended up in a parallel universe? Merlin’s head is spinning already, and he closes his eyes to relax. His shoulder’s quietly throbbing, and he shifts to make himself more comfortable. Seems the painkillers are wearing off, he thinks drowsily before he lets his mind wander and eventually dozes off.

“Merlin?” Arthur’s voice is penetrating his slumber, and Merlin makes an effort to open his eyes. When he finds the blond in the chair his mother vacated earlier, he’s suddenly wide awake. He stares at Arthur as if he was an alien who’s landed to abduct him to another planet. Their eyes collide and, spellbound, neither is able to draw his gaze away. He doesn’t look too hot, either, Merlin thinks while trying to figure out what’s going on behind that piercing blue.

What can he find in Arthur’s eyes? Is it disgust, or rejection, or just pity? Or even worse - total indifference? It seems none of those on a first inspection, as far as Merlin can tell. But he also can’t
make up his mind how to read Arthur’s facial expression. Is cagey the right word? Or reserved? Merlin doesn’t know what to think, and he’s so uncertain about what he should say or do, he momentarliy forgets all the questions he was going to ask.

It seems as if they’re both frozen in space and time, and the longer the silence lasts the more uncomfortable it gets. The air around them suddenly crackles with tension so intense it could power a whole city. Finally Merlin breaks the stillness, pushing out the first question that pops into his head. “Why am I here?” he asks, waving at the room, his heart racing with apprehension.

Arthur’s Adams apple bobs up and down nervously before he speaks. “You weren’t safe at Lamia House.”

“Safe?” Merlin can’t help but snort bitterly. Why the heck does he feel so bloody disappointed at Arthur’s matter of fact answer? “You know as well as I do I’m as good as dead.”

“Your mother came to me and asked …”

“…you to help me,” Merlin completes Arthur’s sentence impatiently. “She told me that. So you brought me here? To give her the chance to see me die? Thanks for that, Arthur. You might as well have left me in prison to spare her the torture.” Merlin says, his word dripping with bitter sarcasm.

Arthur’s eyes turn dark, whether out of anger or misery, Merlin can’t tell, but right now he doesn’t care. He has no idea why he’s lashing out at Arthur like that. It seems all the torment that’s been accumulating day by day over so many months, all the anguish caused by Arthur’s mistrust and resentment, has suddenly erupted out of nowhere. Merlin knows his words are unfair, but, unable to hide how much he hurts, he adds another dig under the belt. “You’re buying her silence by giving her time with me, so she doesn’t talk about the real effects of the Serum. Aren’t you?”

“You think I’m capable of doing that?” Arthur watches him with raised eye-brows, a hint of defeat in his voice.

Merlin takes a couple of breaths while he does his best to compose himself again. What is he supposed to say to that? He doesn’t know what to believe anymore, and he’s so exhausted, so uptight, so devoid of any hope, he can’t think clearly. When he remains silent, Arthur sits back in his chair abruptly, apparently trying to formulate something, but not quite getting there. When he does speak, Merlin’s head snaps round.

“I hurt you,” Arthur says quietly, “and I’m so sorry things turned out the way they did.” Merlin’s so shocked at the unexpected turn in conversation, his anger deflates like a burst balloon.

“Sorry? You are sorry?” Merlin asks, dumbfounded, but still on the defensive. “Is this your misguided attempt at apologizing to me?”

“I know ‘sorry’ will never be enough,” Arthur agrees, while fumbling insistently with the cover on the bed. “Particularly not for what happened the last two days.”

Merlin swallows hard. This isn’t the same Arthur he met at the cell in Lamia House. The man who looked at him with hatred and hostility. The man who’d implied he was just another sorcerer who wanted to harm Camelot. Does Arthur really mean what he says? A whisper of hope wants to make itself heard somewhere inside his heart, but Merlin silences it at once. What is there to hope for, anyway? Nothing will change the fact he’s dying and nothing will save his mother from the pain of burying him so soon after his father.

“I read your letter,” Arthur says, again out of the blue, following an agenda Merlin can’t grasp.
“You did?” He asks, completely taken aback. *Shit, he did give me the benefit of the doubt. How did that happen?*

“I had the hypospray tested.” Arthur’s voice has started trembling now. “You told the truth about it.”

“It contains Serum,” Merlin states, knowing he doesn’t need to ask.

“You wanted to save me.” Arthur’s eyes are burning into his imploringly.

“So you brought me here to pay back a favour? So I could die in comfort? Is that what this is?” Merlin asks.

Arthur shakes his head. “I was only told this morning.”

“Oh,” Merlin has to admit he’s puzzled. So Arthur had taken him here before he knew about the Serum. Right. Merlin’s head has gone all fuzzy. It’s a bit much trying to figure out what’s actually going on here while his body is fighting to upkeep its most basic functions.

“Is it true I’ve got magic?” Arthur presses his lips into a thin line, his voice faltering.

“It is,” Merlin answers simply, staring at the blond man in front of him to see how his words are received. A flurry of shock crosses Arthur’s face, but that is all. Apart from that his face remains calm, stoic even. *He must have been expecting my answer,* Merlin thinks as he scans Arthur’s face carefully. Is this new-found knowledge the reason for Arthur’s different attitude towards him? The idea he’s one of those people the Pendragon government has hunted down for years, must scare him shitless. Or does he feel soiled and humiliated?

“You said you felt it?” Arthur continues, apparently still in total control, but the quivering of his bottom lip gives him away, as does his whole body language, oozing uneasiness.

“I did.”

“When was that?” Arthur croaks, making obvious how much the answer means to him.

“The first time we made love,” Merlin mumbles, stumbling over the L-word with a tinge of guilt.

“You knew then?” There’s definitely blame in Arthur’s voice.

“Would you have believed me if I told you?” Merlin retorts quietly.

The expression on Arthur's face clearly indicates he wouldn’t have, and he swallows hard, his eyes filling with bewilderment and a touch of panic. “I don’t understand. How is that even possible? Me and magic?”

“Your mother must have it passed on to you.” Merlin has figured out that much. Because Uther certainly hasn’t got magic. Merlin would have detected that a long time ago.

“My mum?” Arthur pushes out. “She never practised magic, I’m sure of it.”

“That doesn’t mean she didn’t have any.”

Arthur shakes his head and stills, his fingers tightly interlaced, as if he needs to hold on to something. *He needs to take time to work his way through that momentous bit of information,* Merlin thinks and the forlorn look on Arthur’s face tugs furiously at his heart, whether he likes it or not.

“Why did I never notice when I was young?” Arthur eventually asks, incomprehension all over his
“I can’t answer that, Arthur. You have to talk to your father. He might be able to help you with that.”

Arthur nods as if he’s thought of that himself already, but Merlin senses how shaken and insecure he is.

“I suddenly don’t know who I am anymore,” Arthur whispers, his inner turmoil present in every word. Seeing Arthur like this, his nerves frayed and rattled to his very core, Merlin suddenly wants nothing more than to hold him and tell him not to be afraid of what’s inside him.

Merlin’s desperate to reach out to him, but he’s still not sure whether his touch would be welcome, and so he resigns himself to quietly reassure the blond. “You’re still the same person you’ve always been. Magic doesn’t change your soul, it just offers you a different perspective on what you can do.”

“Is that how you see it?” Arthur asks, eyes full of doubt and wonder.

“Do you feel different now from before you knew?” Merlin asks, expecting the answer he gets.

“No, I feel just the same.”

“That answers your question, Arthur. Magic doesn’t change your soul, it doesn’t suddenly make you a better or worse person. A sorcerer can be as good or as evil as a person without magic.”

Arthur nods again as if in a trance, looking so lost and dazed, Merlin slides a bit closer to him intent to grab his hand and offer his support. But just as before, he stops short, scared of the reaction if he goes through with it.

“Are you still taking the hypospray?” Merlin enquires, to steer the conversation onto safer, more practical territory.

“No, I binned the bottle two days ago,” the blond answers automatically.

Two days ago? Before Arthur knew for sure that the Serum was doing him harm? Merlin holds his breath at the revelation – Arthur had listened to him, which meant in return he must have trusted him enough to follow his advice. All of a sudden Merlin’s blood is racing, pushing tiny pearls of sweat onto his forehead.

“It really would kill me, wouldn’t it?” Arthur adds as an afterthought.

“You’ve seen what the Serum does to MUs.”

“Why have I survived that long then?” Arthur wonders, perplexed.

“You were given only a very small amount,” Merlin says, hoping Arthur’s able to fathom the logic behind it.

“What’s going to happen when the Serum is finally flushed out of my system?” Arthur sounds really worried now, but Merlin’s seen the question coming and is ready to ease Arthur’s mind.

“You’re going to feel a hell of a lot better, that’s for sure.”

“You think all the symptoms I’ve been living with for so long will disappear?” Arthur asks, his eyes widening in complete disbelief.

“I guess they will. You’re a question that’s never been asked. Nobody who’s been injected with the
Serum has ever lived as long as you have.”

Arthur’s hands are definitely shaking now and Merlin’s itching to ground him with a strong grip. But how can he? Nothing’s been clarified between them, even though they’re talking.

“And this magic inside me. Will it show?” Arthur sounds blatantly horrified.

“I assume it will, in one way or another,” Merlin answers truthfully and Arthur blanches.

“This is totally outrageous, I can’t… I’m not… no…” Stuttering, Arthur sinks back into his chair as if he’d received a death sentence similar to Merlin’s.

“It’ll take time to get used to the idea, and even more time to get to grips with all of this.” Merlin tries to sound as comforting as he can, but he knows how impossible it must be for Arthur to wrap his mind round this. It has to be mind-blowing to find out that, in essence, he’s the same as those people his father’s been persecuting all his life.

“Time.” The single term breaks out of Arthur’s mouth like a swear word, and he suddenly sits up to scrutinize Merlin from top to toe. “Time…” A strangled sob cuts the rest of the sentence short. “Fuck, Merlin. What kind of selfish bastard am I talking about me, when it’s you we have to discuss.”

“What?” Merlin says, the incredulous look on his face giving away that Arthur’s just said something totally inconceivable. “You want to talk about me? What for? I think we both know the score.”

The words are cutting through Arthur like a burning knife. *He has given up, on everything, including me.* Arthur clenches his fists in frustration, cursing himself for losing sight of what he came here to say first and foremost. He shouldn’t have let their conversation drift to his issues. He’d wanted to talk to Merlin about this whole magic thing, but not before he’d sorted a few far more important things.

“No one of this should have happened,” Arthur blurts out.

“No one of what?”

Why does Merlin have to be so bloody difficult? Surely Merlin understands what he means? Still, he’s going to clarify what exactly he’s talking about. “Your trial. Your sentence. You, being injected.” *You dying, and I don’t know what to do about it,* screams an agonized voice in his head, but the thought stays firmly inside his head.

It alarms Arthur when Merlin turns away from him to stare out of the room’s large window. “That won’t change anything now, Arthur.”

If a giant had slapped him with rough hands, the words and the action couldn’t have hurt more. *He has given up. I could see it in his eyes earlier. There isn’t even a spark of hope in them.* Desperate to make his point, Arthur continues.

“I should have stopped Edwin, I should have been able to save you, but I was too late … and now …” Guilt swallows whatever Arthur had intended to say, frustration at the cruel reality of Merlin’s situation making him feel nauseous.
“Always one for justice and righteousness, weren’t you?” Merlin says rather sarcastically. “If you feel so strongly about this, why didn’t you get up in court and defended your beliefs?”

Heat races through his body, flushing Arthur’s face and his neck. *Fuck, he thinks I abandoned him at the trial.* “I have no solid proof so far to substantiate that your trial was unlawful, so I couldn’t …”

“Doesn’t matter now. There was always only one outcome, anyway.” The curt dismissal sends Arthur’s heart reeling, but Merlin’s next words rip it into thousands pieces. “Why would you have wanted to save me anyway?” he asks, hardly audible.

“I can’t bear to lose you,” Arthur chokes out. “You are … everything to me.”

“I don’t understand,” Merlin whispers, his eyes never leaving Arthur’s face as if it was the only thing on earth to offer consolation. “Last time I saw you, you couldn’t have cared less.”

Arthur searches Merlin’s eyes and decides to confront this head-on. “I never stopped caring, Merlin. But I thought you’d lied to me and used me, I thought you loved Morgana, I thought you deceived me and cheated on me when I’d offered you my heart on a golden plate, and I was so angry, so hurt, so broken when you told me what you’d been hiding from me, I buried my feelings so deep inside I couldn’t find my way back.”

Merlin stares at Arthur, wide-eyed and in apparent shock. “Arthur,” he mumbles and lets his head fall back onto his pillow, pale and weak, his cheekbones painfully protruding out of his face, and his bony hands grabbing the bedspread as if it could keep him from crumbling into little pieces. “You’re not just saying this because I’m dying and my mum asked you to cheer me up?”

Arthur is near breaking point when he leans forward, wanting to be as close to Merlin as he can. “Shit, Merlin. I know I’ve fucked this up. I fucked this up for so many wrong reasons. I didn’t want to admit that my feelings for you never died. I couldn’t face it for so long…”

“What changed your mind?” Merlin asks, disbelief still written all over his face.

Arthur swallows hard. “You had every reason to detest me, and yet, you saved my life, and not only once. You even tried to save me at a time when you must have hated me with every fibre of your body.” And Arthur pulls out the first letter Merlin sent him so many months ago.

Slowly, very slowly something like comprehension dawns in Merlin’s eyes. “I could never hate you,” he says quietly.

“Merlin,” Arthur says hoarsely, his remaining composure falling apart doubly quick. *He doesn’t hate me, he used to love me, but that doesn’t mean he loves me still. I have to ask, and even if the answer kills me.* “The things you said in my office about … us…,” Arthur stumbles over the words, his voice strangled by excitement and worry. “Were they true?” There, he asked, all he can do now is wait.

To his horror, Merlin says nothing for a while, and the longer the silence lasts, the more nervous Arthur gets. *What if Merlin’s trying to figure out a way to tell him that he’d spoken the truth that day?*

Merlin finally lets out a deep sigh. “I remember what I said that day,” he starts, clearly unsure how to tackle whatever he wants to express. *I remember it, too. Arthur thinks with a heavy heart. I did what I had to do.‘ Merlin had said about their time together. And then he’d fawned over Morgana and her wound as only a lover would.*

“Did you mean it?” Arthur asks, so tense, the muscles in his jaws are hurting.
“I did mean it at the time,” Merlin says, and Arthur’s heart splinters in millions of little shards with a bang. Fuck. He thought he’d braced himself for that – far from it. He feels like someone just switched off every single light on the whole planet.

“Thanks for your … honesty,” Arthur pushes out with the biggest of efforts. Well, now that’s cleared up. He did ask and he did get his answer. What the fuck is he supposed to say or do now? But before he can think further, Merlin speaks again.

“Hey, I wasn’t finished,” he says softly, something in his voice making Arthur listen up. “I wasn’t myself then, I didn’t act out of my own accord.”

What kind of explanation was this? What the fuck was Merlin on about? “I didn’t see anyone forcing you to say those things.”

Merlin’s head snaps round and their eyes meet, blue piercing into blue. “Morgana twisted my mind. She used a love potion.” Merlin says, his gaze open and maybe just a tiny bit challenging.

He thinks I’m not going to believe him. Arthur swallows hard before he asks himself the sobering: Do I? A love potion? Is that what Hunith referred to when she said that Morgana would like to think Merlin loved her?

Arthur’s heart does a huge leap, his mind and blood racing like a chased deer. “So what you said at the break-in wasn’t real?” Arthur asks.

Merlin simply shakes his head. “Not from my heart…,” he whispers, his eyes widening, when Arthur lets out a pained sigh. “It’s always been you.”

“God, Merlin,” Arthur groans, his heart thundering from sudden relief. He’s never wanted to hear anything else more than this. And how can he not believe what he finds in Merlin’s eyes? The unbridled affection shining back at him pulls him right out of the black hole that almost sucked him into the darkest of places. “I was so blind.”

“You couldn’t have known about the potion. What else were you supposed to believe?”

How the fuck can Merlin be so accepting? So bloody understanding? It’s totally mind-blowing. How can that dark-haired skinny man he loves so much look at him with so much devotion when he let him down so monumentally? “It’s my fault…”

“Nothing’s your fault,” Merlin interrupts him vehemently, to add very quietly, ”I’m sorry, too,” and the pain in his voice grips Arthur’s heart and squeezes it until he gasps out loud. “I hated lying to you, I wanted to tell you everything, so many times, and then, when the moment came, last time we were here, Morgana and Alvarr appeared before I could even start.”

When Merlin places his hand over Arthur’s, the tingle washes over him as if nothing had ever changed between them. “It’s still there,” Arthur gulps in surprise, gaping at their hands before he follows his innermost urge and interlocks his fingers with Merlin’s.

For a minute or two they just sit there, connected, Merlin’s cold hand trembling under Arthur’s, the quiet buzz between them, each cherishing it like a long lost friend.

“It’ll always be there,” Merlin says finally.

Arthur furrows his brows in confusion. “It isn’t a spell?”

“It isn’t. It’s something that happens between us, something that happens between two people of
magic who are …meant.” The hesitation before Merlin’s last word, the uncertainty in his voice, feels like the worst punishment Arthur’s ever received. *He still doesn’t trust what I’ve told him. Not that I can blame him, but I have to make him believe.*

“Merlin,” Arthur starts again, but then instinct takes over and he moves next to Merlin onto the bed in a swift move. “Merlin,” he whispers once more, overcome with the desperate urge to prove his words.

Arthur opens his arms, unsure whether he can go that far so soon, but the sense of relief when Merlin leans forward to embrace him, leaves Arthur breathless. He pulls Merlin gently towards him and threads his fingers through his hair, revelling in the pleasure of holding him close, so close. Arthur inhales the scent of Merlin’s skin like a suffocating man who’s given oxygen. “I missed you,” he mumbles, “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too,” Merlin whispers, his breath caressing the soft skin on Arthur’s neck. “Every single day.”

Their lips find each other like the most natural thing, and Arthur moans at the intimate contact. God, Merlin’s lips are so dry and chapped, but so willing to receive him, so keen to draw him in. Arthur pulls back to run his thumb gently over them. “Careful,” he mumbles, worried he might hurt Merlin, but Merlin’s having none of it.

“Try and stop me,” he whispers against Arthur’s mouth and then leans in, to place a chaste kiss on it. Arthur almost somersaults at the tender gesture, and unable to contain himself one hundredth of a second longer, he cups the nape of Merlin’s neck, draws him in and connects their lips.

Holding Merlin, feeling him opening up under his searching mouth, is almost too much. Arthur groans with pleasure when Merlin sucks softly on his bottom lip, and he’s only too happy to return the favour. And then their tongues entangle, each trying to outdo the other and, for a moment in time, Arthur totally forgets everything around them. This is where he belongs and nowhere else. This is what he wants. This is his destiny, he’s sure of it.

Merlin suddenly shudders, and at first Arthur thinks it’s for the pure sweetness of their kiss, but then he understands with startling clarity that something isn’t right. Merlin’s body sags against his, before tremor after tremor runs through it, shaking him violently like a rag doll.

“Merlin!” Arthur shouts, panic flushing his heart. “Merlin! Can you hear me?” But there’s no reaction at all. “Gwen! Gwen!” Arthur roars on top of his voice now, and he hears the door flying open a second later.

“He’s collapsing. Do something, please!” There’s plain desperation in his voice, and he’s so grateful when Gwen calmly unwraps Merlin’s twitching body from him, and finds a vein to inject him. With a pained groan, Merlin rolls onto the bed a few moments later when the medication takes effect. “A..fur,” he slurs his speech before his eye-lids close.

Arthur stares at Merlin’s crumpled form, shattered by seeing him suffer like this and the knowledge that whatever they have left is on borrowed time. Unless he can find a way out of this bloody, fucked up situation.

“F..ee weeks,” Merlin stirs unexpectedly, trying desperately to make himself understood.

“Three weeks?” Arthur repeats and sees Merlin nod, and after a short confusion what on earth Merlin’s talking about, the horrendous realization shreds his heart into little pieces.
“E... win said,” Merlin makes a last attempt at explaining himself before the sedative is starting to do its job.

*Three weeks? Is that all he’s got?* Devastation crushes Arthur, and he doesn’t realize the tears rolling down his face as reality sets in. “I brought you here to find a way to save you. And I promise I’ll do anything, anything at all, to make it happen.”

Merlin’s head lolls to the side, finally in the land of dreams and night mares, and Arthur has no idea whether he’s been heard. He gently strokes over Merlin’s face, numb with pain.

*I have finally found him to just have him ripped away from me again.*
A matter of time

“Hunith!” Gaius stretches out his arms to embrace Merlin’s mother as soon as he enters the living room at the Lake Cottage. Arthur watches them with a heavy heart, sharing their quiet grief at the bottom of his heart. When they finally part, Arthur walks up to the old chemist to welcome him.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Arthur says, stretching out his hand. Gaius takes it with a firm grip and a piercing gaze. There is apprehension there, to say the least. *I bet he’s wondering if my intentions are genuine.*

“Can I see him?” Gaius asks, coming straight to the point.

Arthur introduces Gwen who gives Gaius the most essential details about Merlin’s injuries. A few minutes later they’re all standing around his bed, watching as Merlin’s chest is lifting and sinking, wheezing heavily.

“Looks like the first signs of respiratory problems,” Gwen says quietly, and Arthur’s heart sinks like a lead balloon. He remembers only too well, how difficult speaking and breathing had been for Balinor.

“How is that possible? It’s only been two days,” Arthur mumbles in horror.

“Don’t forget he had two doses of the Serum and his magic is more powerful than we can probably fathom,” Gaius says. Then he looks round at everyone present. “I can try and help him with his exterior wounds to make him more comfortable.”

As Hunith and Gwen nod, Arthur takes a nervous breath. It is obvious Gaius isn’t referring to any kind of conventional treatment. *He has magic. And he’s going to use it right in front of my eyes.*

When nobody speaks, Arthur realizes that all eyes are on him, quietly waiting. Unsurprisingly, using magic in the house of a Pendragon must appear completely incongruous to them. *Little do they know!*

“Is that okay with you, Arthur?” Gaius asks.

“Go ahead, please,” Arthur says, trying to hide his uneasiness behind a cough. Of course he would do and allow anything to make Merlin feel better, but it’s difficult to will away all the prejudice about magic in one single day. Gaius searches his face, and then acknowledges him with a tiny smile and knowing eyes.

Arthur suddenly feels hot under his collar. *Gaius knows.* He has barely accepted he has magic himself. Finding out someone else, apart from Merlin, has that information makes him feel uncomfortable. He’s hardly spoken to Gaius and has no idea what the man could do with that information. But for Merlin he’s willing to take that risk. It’s more important he receives some help.

Gaius folds Merlin’s blanket back to examine him slowly, getting more details about the nature of his injuries from Gwen as he goes along. “I’ll try my best,” he says. “It’s been a while.”

“But back then you were one of the best!” Hunith puts her hand on Gaius’s arm and smiles at him. “No need to be that modest.”

Arthur stares at him as he lifts his hands and then, one by one, touches Merlin’s wounds while he mumbles what’s clearly a spell. “Ic þe þurhhæle þin licsare. Ic þe þurhhæle þin licsare!” he repeats it again and again, until he’s seemingly satisfied.
Even though Arthur witnessed the healing spell Merlin used on Morgana, he’s shocked to see the scratches and bruises on Merlin’s face fade away before his very eyes. And when Gwen carefully removes the bandages of his other injuries, it is evident that Gaius isn’t that much out of practise.

“The broken rib will need another couple of treatments,” Gaius says.

“Thank you,” Hunith mumbles, her eyes glazed by tears. “At least he doesn’t have to suffer those any longer.”

Dumbfounded, Arthur brushes his fingertips over the spot on Merlin’s face where the raw scar of a deep cut disappeared only a few minutes before. Merlin’s skin looks as good as new. “I didn’t know …,” he whispers in amazement.

“That magic can be used for so much good?” Gaius suggests quietly, and Arthur tilts his head to acknowledge his words. Magic isn’t all evil. Being with Merlin has taught him that much, but seeing this, close up, has made him understand on a completely different level. And suddenly the thought that some of this magic also resides in his own soul doesn’t feel that threatening anymore.

“We need to talk,” Arthur says, and Gaius nods.

A few minutes later the two men have settled on the sofa in the living room with a drink in their hands.

“Can you produce an antidote if I give you the formula of the Serum?” Arthur asks straight out.

Gaius does a double-take. “Give me the formula? Just like that?”

“Isn’t this the only way to help Merlin?” Arthur asks back. “So, can you do it?”

“I can, but I’m not sure it’ll be ready in time to save Merlin,” Gaius says gravely, a big frown on his forehead. “Things like that take months, sometimes years to develop.”

“We haven’t even got three weeks if we believe Edwin,” Arthur says and recounts what Merlin told him before.

“Did the slimy sneak say that?” Gaius raises his right eye brow, but then lets out a huge sigh. “It’s easily possible. Merlin’s more powerful than anyone can fathom.”

“Is he?” Arthur gasps out. “More powerful than you?”

Gaius chuckles. “In the world of cars I would be a tractor and Merlin a Ferrari, if that makes it a bit clearer.”

Arthur chews on his bottom lip trying to take that in. He was more than impressed by what Gaius had done earlier, and Merlin’s powers are way beyond those? *I would love to see his magic. I could learn so much from him. But that's never going to happen if we don’t find a way to save him.*

“Unfortunately that also means the Serum’s going to finish him off a lot sooner,” Gaius continues.

“Can you not use magic to speed up the production of the antidote?”

“I can have a go at that, but the time frame we have might still be too short.” Gaius looks heartbroken, as he says it. “Believe me, I would do anything for that boy in there. He’s like a grandson to me.”

“But you will try?” Arthur asks anxiously.
Of course. You don’t need to ask,” Gaius says with conviction.

Arthur nods and pulls a memory device out of his trousers’ pocket. “It’s on there.”

“The formula?” Gaius asks, raising his eye brow once again. Arthur can hear the shock and surprise in his voice.

“Take it,” Arthur says. “We must save him.”

Gaius’s eyes are moistening. “I would have never thought the day will come…” But then he pulls himself together, takes the memory stick to stow it away in the inside pocket of his jacket. Once he’s done he looks up, straight into Arthur’s eyes, to ask a question Arthur didn’t expect.

“How are you?” And by the tone of his voice Arthur understands exactly what Gaius is talking about.

“You know.” Arthur states the fact, but there’s one thing he can’t figure out. “How?”

“Not long after Merlin started working for you, he sent me some hypospray and asked me to check it out,” Gaius answers.

“Really? Why did he do that?” Arthur raises his eyebrows. Did Merlin suspect foul play so early on?

“Gut feeling and curiosity, I guess. He’d watched you suffering from your ‘condition’ and how much you were affected by it, and simply wondered if an analysis of your medication would provide any clues to your illness.”

Some gut feeling! Arthur’s digesting the news slowly. Even then he sensed the hypospray wasn’t doing me any good. Even then he was trying to help me.

“I assume you’ve stopped taking that concoction?” Gaius throws him a concerned glance.

“Merlin made sure that message got to me,” Arthur says hoarsely, a knot forming in his throat. Effectively he saved me from the fate he’s facing himself now. What a fucking irony!

“Good,” Gaius says rather pleased and then eyes Arthur from top to toe. “So how are you holding up?”

Arthur considers the question for a second. He hasn’t taken his medication for three days, and he’s experienced the beginnings of withdrawal symptoms, just like half a year ago, when he was kidnapped. A wave of nausea, here and there, some dizziness and a dull headache have come and gone, but so far it hasn’t been really awful. Certainly nothing like the first time when he stopped taking the hypospray. It’s funny actually, how it isn’t that bad, and Arthur explains as much to Gaius. The old sorcerer scratches his cheek, as if he’s weighing up some facts.

“It’s amazing how you managed to survive that ‘treatment’ for so many years,” Gaius says.

Arthur shrugs his shoulders, unable to comment. He’s going to have that conversation with his father, and in the immediate future. Until then all he can do is accept the fact and get on with it.

“Hold on!” Gaius suddenly shouts out, as he jumps up from the sofa – well, as much jumping up a man of his age can do. “Oh my God! Why didn’t I think of that earlier?” His eyes are as wide as saucers and his voice is shaking with excitement. “Good God. This might just work.”

“Tell me!” Arthur almost growls with impatience.
Gaius rubs his chin, standing silently, his brain clearly immersed in some kind of idea. When he focuses on Arthur again, a tiny smile’s playing on his lips. “You have taken the Serum in small quantities for so many years, and yet, you’re still alive. “

The question mark over Arthur’s head must be elephant-sized, but Gaius is already spinning his thought further. “That means, it MUST mean, you’ve developed some kind of antibodies against the Serum which makes you immune to a certain level of it in your blood.”

Arthur stares at Gaius. “Could you filter this out and give it to Merlin?”

“It’s not as simple as that, but it would give me a hell of head start.” Gaius seems to have forgotten Arthur’s there, as he’s pacing up and down the living room like an antagonized lion in a cage. “Yes, I could …” He mumbles ending in some technical gibberish Arthur can neither make head or tail of. “I need to take your blood.” Gaius has stopped right in front of Arthur. “Now.”

Fifteen minutes later Gwen hands a vial with Arthur’s blood stashed away in a pack of ice over to Gaius.

“Anything you need, you’ve got my number,” Arthur says for the third time, as he accompanies Gaius on his way out. Just before the old man heads out of the door to step into the private car Arthur sent for, he turns round to face Arthur.

“I can see why Merlin likes you. You’re a good man, Arthur Pendragon, and I’m sure ALL citizens in Camelot will have a better life once you become the Governor.” And with that he gets in the car, and a minute later it speeds down the road, and then out of sight.

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What an amazing dream! Arthur was holding and kissing him as if there was no tomorrow, his eyes full of love and regret. Merlin holds on to the image in his mind, while subconsciously taking stock of what’s happened and how he feels. It seems the last few days have consisted of nothing but a rapid succession of waking and sleeping, leaving him in a state of perpetual confusion.

He notices the lack of bandages on his body and the ease with which he can move his limbs out of a sudden. Have I been sleeping that long? he wonders, but when he touches his face and finds the scar on it gone, another option springs firmly to mind. Somebody must have healed me. How did that happen?

He breathes in deeply, a massive mistake, as he notices a split second later because it triggers a bout of coughing and a sharp stinging pain emanating from his lungs. Fuck. Merlin has no delusions what that means – it’s the beginning of the end.

Unwilling to think about it he pushes the thought away, preferring to slip back to the image he barely left behind a few minutes ago. Arthur, close up to him, whispering his name with fondness. Merlin turns onto his other side with a wanton sigh, and, to his bafflement, bashes straight into something warm.

Automatically he stretches out his hand to figure out what it is. When his eyes snap open he stares at the man lying next to him with bewilderment. It’s Arthur, wearing sweat pants and a T-shirt just like him and seemingly fast asleep.
Shit, I didn’t dream it. Merlin’s heart jumps, mesmerized by the revelation. We did have that conversation. I just can’t remember what happened after that. God, Arthur. He could hardly believe when Arthur said all the things he’d been craving to hear for so long. And now the man’s right here, slightly snoring and puffing air out of his mouth. He looks beat, but Merlin’s never seen a more welcome sight.

Merlin simply HAS to touch him, he’s got absolutely no choice about it. He lifts his hand and strokes over Arthur’s arm and side. I can’t believe he’s here, and he kissed me. The ache inside his heart chokes him momentarily. God, I wish, I wish I could live to be with him. To really get to know him. Our time together was far too short. And the way things look, time isn’t on their side now, either.

Merlin moves a little closer to bask in the warmth of Arthur’s body. Hell, doesn’t that feel amazing! He runs his finger-tips across Arthur’s chest, following the movement of his chest, to finally rest his palm over his heart. The steady drumming and the knowledge that this heart will keep on beating, long after he’s gone, offers more comfort than Merlin could ever express.

When Merlin takes his hand away, he jerks in surprise at the dozy, “Don’t stop!” coming from Arthur.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Merlin mumbles, a little guilty to disturb the sleep Arthur so desperately needs. But, instead of complaining, Arthur wraps his arm wordlessly round Merlin’s waist and pulls him tight.

“Don’t stop,” he repeats, and Merlin’s never followed a request with more enthusiasm. He slips his hand under Arthur’s T-shirt and traces circles along the bottom of his back, relishing how Arthur relaxes into his touch.

“So good,” Arthur sighs, his eyes still closed.

“Better than good,” Merlin answers, and to underline his words he runs his thumb over Arthur’s stubbly chin, before his lips follow the same path. The smell of Arthur’s skin and the scent of his masculinity so close to him wash over Merlin. Overcome, he follows his instincts and lets his mouth roam over Arthur’s neck and cheeks. The stifled groan escaping Arthur’s mouth lights a fire inside him he’d almost forgotten.

Their lips collide, and they explore each other’s mouths, as inquisitive as if it was the first time. When their kiss deepens and none knows where he ends and the other one begins, Merlin presses his body flush to Arthur’s, aware of every move, every ripple of muscle and every tremble that runs through him.

“Merlin,” Arthur rasps when they pull apart for the need of air. “Careful, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Hurt me? Do I look as if I’m hurting?” Merlin snuggles into Arthur’s arms, ignoring the stinging pain inside his guts and the knowledge that the Serum is working relentlessly to bring him closer to his end every single second.

He melts into Arthur solid warmth, revelling in the happiness of the moment. He can hear the pounding of Arthur’s heart while his is thumping like mad against Arthur’s chest. And then it hits him. This is the time to say it. The words he’d been unable to express before because too many uncertainties had been hanging over them.

“Arthur,” he says, lifting his face up to the man in his arms, “…there’s something I have to say … something important that’s way overdue …”
“Stop rambling and spit it out,” Arthur mutters, drowning his face in Merlin’s hair, completely oblivious where this is heading.

“I love you,” Merlin says, simply and almost shyly, before he holds his breath. Arthur pulls a bit away to meet his eyes. His pupils are wide with wonder when he cups the back of Merlin’s neck and connects their mouths, sending a shiver of desire down Merlin’s spine.

“I’m yours.” Arthur breathes into Merlin’s mouth before he leans in again and presses another kiss on his lips. “Always.”

There’s nothing Merlin can do about the tears welling up in his eyes. It means everything to hear those words and to know Arthur loves him back before his world crumbles to dust and he has to leave everything behind that’s dear to him.

Merlin tightens his embrace and languidly strokes Arthur’s back, aware his insides aren’t only aching from love. The pain when he breathes is ever present, reminding him continually of his mortality. Not now! Merlin kicks the thought into the deepest corner of his mind and lets his hand slip under Arthur’s T-shirt one more time, allowing the feel of his skin under his hands take him somewhere completely different. In silent understanding Arthur draws his T-shirts over his head in a swift move, to then gently remove Merlin’s.

Merlin can feel Arthur’s eyes on him, taking in his skinny frame, his protruding ribs and the hard edges of his collarbones. A shadow of pain crosses Arthur’s face for the fraction of a second, Merlin’s sure about it. It’s distressing for him to see me like this. But just now no darkness should come between us, none at all.

“Don’t,” Merlin says tenderly, catching Arthur’s eyes and holding his gaze steadily.

“I’m so sorry,” Arthur says, hesitant and full of regret. “This is my fault.”

“Arthur,” Merlin says, “You can’t take the blame for this. This whole situation was fucked up right from the start.”

Merlin opens his arms and Arthur readily sinks into the embrace, their lips finding each other for another earth-shattering kiss. Merlin lets his hand wander over Arthur’s taught back, rediscovering every plane and ripple right down to the curve of his butt. When he meets the resistance of Arthur’s sweat pants he tugs at them in a quiet request. Arthur complies immediately, pushing them off to then stretch out next to him in his full naked glory.

“You are stunning,” Merlin mumbles as his eyes roam over Arthur’s body, taking in every little delicious detail as if he wants to commit it to memory.

“Of course, that’s why you fell in love with me,” Arthur lips quirk when he says it, and Merlin understands instinctively he’s trying to lighten the mood, and Merlin’s more than happy to go with the flow.

“Egotistic arse,” Merlin says with so much affection Arthur’s eyes light up.

“Impudent sorcerer,” he retorts with a warm smile, and they both grin at each other like they used to.

“Did you just use ‘sorcerer’ as a term of endearment?” Merlin smirks cheekily, unable to hide his amusement. Who would have ever thought that?

“What do you think?” Arthur teases and presses his lips to Merlin’s temple.
“I missed this.”

“My radiant charm, my sparkling charisma, my undeniable magnetism?” Arthur whispers into Merlin’s ear, making his lips twitch.

“Your capacity of self-deception,” Merlin moans as Arthur’s sinks his teeth into the outer shell of his ear. *Damn, he still remembers how to drive me crazy.*

“You’re overdressed,” Arthur mumbles with frustration when his hands slide over Merlin’s hips to pull him close.

“Do something about it then,” Merlin challenges him, and a few seconds later, they both gasp when their bodies connect skin to skin, from top to toe.

“Merlin,” Arthur rasps and finds his lips yet again. And the outside world just fades away, reducing to this - Arthur’s lips moving over his, his tongue licking its way into the depth of his mouth passionately and his teeth nipping at his chin. A surge of want and heat grips Merlin, letting him forget everything burdening his mind. All he feels and sees and hears and tastes is Arthur. Arthur who is here at his side and who loves him, proving it with every little kiss and lick and caress.

“Touch me,” Merlin murmurs, unable to contain the need for more any longer.

“But you …” Arthur starts, but Merlin places a fingertip on his mouth before he can finish what he doesn’t want to hear.

“I want you, one more time before…,” Merlin doesn’t need to continue.

A deep rumble erupts out of Arthur’s throat as he cuts Merlin’s words short with a blazing kiss. “Anything. Let me take care of you,” he whispers into Merlin’s ear, his voice like gravel. Their eyes meet and Merlin contentedly drowns in the sea of blue he’s so often fantasized about in his mind.

Arthur leans over Merlin, trailing a series of kisses along his torso, while running his hands along his sides, teasing and tickling, until Merlin is covered in tingly goose-bumps all over. *Fuck, this is heaven already.* Merlin barely manages the thought, giving himself totally up to Arthur’s hands and mouth.

Arthur traces a line along Merlin’s sternum, twirling his fingers through the short hair smattering his chest. When he lightly circles his nipples with his tongue, Merlin arches into him, impatient and so ready for more. The need to feel Arthur everywhere, fuelled by the knowledge that they might never be together like this again, is all-consuming.

And Arthur understands that, too. Merlin can sense it in the intensity of his touch and the urgency of his kisses. They both know that in a couple of weeks they’ll probably be ripped apart forever, and it makes every single contact more significant and meaningful, and so bitter-sweet.

“Arthur,” Merlin whispers, when the blond palms his arousal and squeezes it lightly. He shudders and drops his head to Arthur’s shoulder, dizzy from the feel of Arthur’s hand moving in steady strokes. In some agonized sort of teasing, Arthur’s fingers swirl over his most sensitive spot, spreading silvery lines over his hardened length, the feathery touch taking him closer and closer to the edge. Impatiently, he pushes himself hard into Arthur’s hand, seeking friction and some sort of temporary relief.

“Easy,” Arthur says, removing his hand to Merlin’s chagrin, but making it up with a slow and thorough kiss. Then he climbs over Merlin, placing a hand on either side of his chest to keep his full weight off. Being encased in Arthur’s heat and scent makes Merlin giddy with elation, and when
Arthur locks their hips, their hard lengths pressing against each other in the most luscious way, he lets out a husky growl.

“Merlin,” Arthur mumbles, bending down to sear his lips over Merlin’s, his tongue pushing and demanding, the passion shaking Merlin to the core. The core where a pain resides that doesn’t want go away. I don’t care, I need this, and if it’s the last thing I do, Merlin thinks defiantly, looking up to the man he loves to find his own feelings very much reflected in Arthur’s eyes. This is the place where I want to be. Forever, if that was an option.

Arthur starts to undulate his hips over Merlin’s, brushing their cocks together in an ever increasing rhythm. Merlin knows he won’t be long, and as Arthur rocks against him, thrust after thrust, he’s bucking his hips helplessly against him, the most delicious agony unfurling inside him.

A whole sky-full of stars explodes inside Merlin’s mind just at the mere thought that Arthur still loves and desires him and that the heat and passion radiating off the man are for him and him only. To hear him panting with want, see his beautiful body working for both their pleasure and to feel his erection rubbing, teasing, pushing against him, dripping with desire, solid and hot, pushes him finally over the edge.

When he erupts he hears himself cry out Arthur’s name and his whole body vibrates with the most blinding pleasure he can remember. Arthur follows him just an instant later, groaning with the intensity of his release, before he collapses next to him.

The unshed tears Merlin held back earlier are falling fast now, rolling over his cheeks, but he doesn’t even notice before Arthur brushes them aside with his thumb. Wordlessly Merlin links his fingers with Arthur’s and squeezes his hand as an affirmation of their bond, in body and in mind.

“Okay?” Arthur sounds worried.

“Okay?” Merlin chuckles, noting subconsciously his breathing’s suddenly so much more work. “Are you kidding?” He turns his head at that to find Arthur staring at him, his eyes ridiculously expressive, condensing all his conflicting emotions in just one look. Love, fear, tenderness, desperation, all wrapped into one single gaze.

“I love you,” Arthur whispers as he presses his forehead against Merlin’s, both savouring the moment of coming home, but it lasts no longer than a couple of minutes.

Merlin starts to cough out of nowhere, and first he simply tries to shake it off. But it’s quickly becoming a coughing attack on a major scale, and within a few seconds he’s struggling to breathe. “Can’t …”

“Shhh. Don’t talk,” Arthur murmurs as he sits up quickly to hold Merlin steady while his chest convulses rapidly. Every cough slices through Merlin like a knife, leaving him more and more breathless, and then it gets so intense he has to curl on his side from the pain cutting through his insides. He presses his hand against his mouth automatically as if he could stop the attack by such a simple gesture. His body is shaking from the effort to put air into his lungs, but then it suddenly all stops with a huge cough, and Merlin going limp.

“Merlin!” He can hear Arthur’s anxious voice next to him, wanting to answer, but he isn’t able to find the energy to do so.

“Come here,” Arthur says and lifts him to put a pillow under his head. The angled position seems to help Merlin to breathe better and when he does, he finally manages to speak.
“Tired,” he whispers, as his eyes are drooping.

“I’ll get you cleaned up and then you can rest a little while,” Merlin hears Arthur say from somewhere in the distance, and he vaguely takes in Arthur’s wiping his chest with a warm cloth and dressing him before he dozes off.

Arthur’s frantic with panic and fear. To drop from the high of holding Merlin in his arms and making love to him to the low of seeing him crippled by the Serum, was more than cruel. In fact, it’s ripping his bleeding heart out.

No, no. no. This is all too soon. He’s going to die before Gaius has even started. And I can do nothing about it, nothing at all. Nothing. Arthur clenches his fists in frustration. Facing reality hurts.

A reality that has Merlin on his bed, dozing in an exhausted sleep, his chest rattling with every breath. Maybe we shouldn’t have …, Arthur wonders for a split second, but then he shrugs the thought off. Merlin wanted it, we both wanted it, needed it, and I won’t regret loving him.

I need to get Gwen to check on him. Arthur heads for the door when it opens to reveal Gwen popping her head in. “All right?” she asks tentatively. "I heard him coughing.”

Arthur quickly describes Merlin’s symptoms, Gwen listening intently. “It’s his lungs. They’re usually the first organ to be affected. Let’s have a look at him.”

Gwen examines Merlin carefully and is about to turn round to give her verdict when her eyes fall on Merlin’s hand. Her face blanches and Arthur’s throat goes dry at her look. When he walks closer and sees what Gwen’s looking at, his heart drops rock bottom. There’s blood in Merlin’s palm.

“He’s coughing blood,” he says faintly, a big hollow trying to swallow him up in one big gulp. He tries to look away, but he can’t hide his emotions from Gwen.

“I know it’s hard to watch, but he doesn’t want your pity. He needs you to be you. That’s all. And we’re not going to give up hope, until there’s no more hope to be had.”

Arthur swallows hard, acknowledging her encouraging words with a pat on her arm. “Is there anything at all I can do?”

Gwen seems to instinctively understand that Arthur NEEDS to do something. Needs to busy himself. “Keeping him occupied would be a good thing,” she says. “If you keep his brain going it’ll take his mind off what he’s going through.”

“Thank you, Gwen. I’m so glad you came.”

“Me, too,” Gwen smiles. “And now let’s go and get breakfast. I can’t have you faint on me as well.”

Arthur follows Gwen’s advice and two hours later, when Merlin wakes, he takes him through to the living room where he’s prepared a loadful of cushions on the sofa for Merlin to get comfortable. Fuck, he looks so ill.

“How about eating something?” Arthur suggests, but he knows the answer before Merlin gives it.

“Can’t. My stomach…,” Merlin shakes his head, a surge of coughing drowning the rest of the
“You want a drink, then?” Arthur won’t give up that easily, and to his delight, Merlin agrees. “Tea, please.”

“Your mum’s preparing some soup for later, “Arthur says for no apparent reason, and Merlin attempts a grin.

“Stop mothering me, Arthur.” But then he bends forward and grabs Arthur’s hand to kiss its knuckles. “Thanks, I do appreciate it.”

Arthur wills himself to keep his composure and distracts himself by coming straight to the point. “I wanted to talk to you about Edwin.” And then they share the information they have accrued independently from each other to arrive at the same result.

Edwin has magic. He’s working with Alvarr and he’s trying to undermine the government.

“He used me to discredit your father?” Merlin says in astonishment, when he hears Arthur’s assumptions about his trial.

“Yeap, and it looks like he was quite happy getting rid of me, too,” Arthur adds.

“Killing you with the hypospray.” Merlin throws him a weary look. “Any more withdrawal symptoms?”

“They’re there, but not as bad as I’d expected,” Arthur says, tilting his head in thought. “Gaius said I might have some antibodies against the Serum in my blood. Wonder if they play a part in this?”

“Gaius was here?” Merlin exclaims in surprise, and of course, that’s something Arthur needs to fill him in, as well. Once he’s finished, Merlin whistles quietly.

“So it was Gaius who healed me,” Merlin says, a grateful smile playing around his lips. “And he thinks there might be a chance of developing an antidote in time?”

“He was very vague about that,” Arthur greets through his teeth, aware how much he hates saying the words.

“He has to be,” Merlin says. “It would be unreasonable to promise something like that. I’ve worked on a couple of antidotes against poison before, and things like that simply take time, effort and a lot of accuracy.”

Arthur scratches his chin, realizing he’s never heard Merlin talk about his real profession before. “You like your job?” he asks, remembering the time at the Research Lab in Lamia House when Merlin got side-lined by all the equipment around him.

“I love it. Every aspect of it,” Merlin’s eyes are smiling at him.

“And I have been told you’re one of the best?” Arthur says, unable to hide a certain pride in his voice.

Merlin shrugs his shoulders. “Guess so. That’s what they say.”

“You must have hated your job as a PA with me,” Arthur wonders, throwing him a pensive gaze.

“It did have its perks,” Merlin’s lips are twitching, and Arthur smiles back at him.
“How the heck did you manage to pull it off?” Arthur asks.

“I used all my resources,” Merlin mumbles and goes quiet.

Shit. That’s the last thing I wanted. Making Merlin think about his magic. Shit, shit, shit. Arthur swears inside his head, cursing the silence spreading between them. It’s time for diversion tactics.

“So what do you think Edwin’s up to?” he asks, drawing Merlin’s gaze to him.

“Apart from trying to do you and your father serious harm?” Merlin says, taking a laboured breath. “Seems he’s after the power.”

“But even if he has the support of some citizens, he can’t possible topple the government just by himself?”

“He does have Alvarr, and Alvarr has twisted the minds of quite a lot of harmless MUs to do his bidding.”

“True,” Arthur agrees, but then shakes his head ferociously. “It still doesn’t make sense. If Edwin wanted to get to power with the help of sorcerers, why would he kill them with the Serum? We’ve never got as far as formulating an idea why he would do that.” A second later he blanches. Shit, I’ve done it again. Brought the topic back to Merlin dying. Am I an idiot or what? I’m supposed to take his mind OFF it!

“Arthur?” Merlin asks quietly, and when their eyes meet, Merlin looks softly at him. “I can cope with you mentioning things about … my fate. Okay? It’s important we talk this through, right?”

Seeing through me like glass. Arthur sighs and answers quietly, “Point taken.”

“Coming back to your question: Why did Edwin kill those sorcerers at Lamia House? From what you’re saying, quite a few MUs have disappeared there over the years. The question remains why the heck Edwin pumps extra Serum into MUs? My gut feeling tells me that the key to understanding what’s going on lies there.”

And with that another serious coughing fit rips Merlin apart, and when he’s finished Arthur’s horrified to see a trickle of blood dripping out of his nose and mouth.

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An hour later Merlin’s back in his bed, dozing. No wonder he doesn’t last long. He hasn’t been only fighting the Serum, but he also hasn’t been eating solids for a few days, Arthur thinks, as a tight band around his heart is pulling even tighter. When he closes the bedroom door behind him with a sigh, he finds Leon and Percival waiting for him outside.

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“Arthur!” Leon says. “Can we have a word?”

“Sure.” Arthur heads towards the living room, when Percival stops him. “In private.”

Arthur raises his brow a bit bewildered. What is this all about? “Is there something going on?” he asks, as he leads them into the library, demonstratively closing the door behind him.

Both Leon and Percival look a tad uncomfortable, but eventually it is Percival who speaks up.
“Arthur, you know we both trust you with our lives. You know there’s nothing we wouldn’t do for you.”

“That’s quite a little speech, Percival,” Arthur grins, wondering where on earth this is heading. “What do you really want to say?”

Percival has the grace to blush, but then gives himself a visible push to speak. “You sure that this was wise?”

“What are you referring to?” Arthur asks, definitely alarmed now.

“I heard from Hunith you gave the Richardson guy the formula,” Percival says, pressing his lips together as he finishes.

“I did,” Arthur confirms quietly. “And?”

“I kind of understood why you brought Merlin, here,” Leon continues.

“Kind of?” Arthur is slowly catching on to what this is all about. “What exactly does that mean?”

“He’s a committed criminal. Breaking and entering, infiltrating the government are all clearly defined offences. Taking him away from Lamia House could seriously backfire on your career, you as a person and the Pendragon government.”

Arthur breathes through deeply twice. Of course Leon’s right. He’s taken a huge risk releasing a man who’s been branded Camelot’s enemy number 1 in the media. A man Leon should be searching for, not hiding. Have I been asking too much of my friends? Have I compromised their integrity?

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this,” Arthur says. “I couldn’t leave him there. He stood no chance against Edwin. I want him alive to see his trial declared unlawful. I accepted coming here as a calculated risk.” And I love him. Arthur knows that they’re all thinking it, and he suddenly feels incredibly selfish. “I shouldn’t have put you into danger for my sense of justice,” he says, but before he continues, Percival intercepts.

“This isn’t what we’re trying to say, Arthur,” Percival throws him a concerned look.

Leon picks up where Percival left off immediately. “As I said, I do get why you acted the way you did for most of the part.”

“So what …?”

“How could you give the formula away? Bringing Merlin here is one thing, but that is on a completely different scale! This concerns everyone in Camelot. As soon as word is out, all MUs will go crazy. I have no idea how we can possibly stop them when it comes to that.”

“It won’t come to that,” Arthur says, full of conviction, and both his friends throw him a questioning look.

“How can you be so sure?” Leon wants to know.

“First, I trust Gaius to keep this a secret. He’s using the formula to develop an antidote for Merlin in the first instant. We have to wait and see whether he’s going to succeed before we worry about anything else,” Arthur says, his insides knotting at the thought that Gaius might fail. “Second, I have come to the conclusion that not every sorcerer is to be feared just for his magic. Many MUs are just normal people like you and me.”
Leon and Percival look at Arthur as if he’s just grown wings, turned bright pink and proclaimed he likes girls now.

“I know we had cases where MUs were not treated right. I remember the family that was sentenced for no reason at all. But saying that sorcerers are just like us?” Leon clearly struggles with the concept. “That’s definitely taking it too far.”

“You reckon?” Arthur says, deciding on the spur of the moment to go for this. “If you say ‘like us’ does that include me?”

“Of course it does,” Percival says, puzzled at the strange question.

It’s an all or nothing situation. Either his friends will freak or they’ll stand by him, as they’ve always done. Arthur sincerely hopes for the second. He’s trusted these guys all his adult life, and they trusted him, but considering the enormity of his announcement he can’t be sure. *Is this too much of a risk? At least if I get this out of the way now, they can’t blame me for keeping the truth from them later.*

Funny, how he’s suddenly able not only to accept there’s more than blood running through his veins, but also feels the need to share it with those who’re closest to him. Arthur’s mind is made up, and he takes a deep breath before he says it.

“Interesting, Percival,” he says slowly, gauging their reaction, “because I’m definitely more like them than you think.”

When Leon and Percival stare at him in total confusion, apparent concern about his mental health written all over their faces, Arthur adds the vital explanation emphatically.

“I’m a sorcerer and I have magic.”
The air is suddenly so thick Arthur could cut it with a knife. He notices Leon throwing Percival an alarmed look.

“I think all this has been too much for you, Arthur,” Percival says gently, walking up to him. “You’re confused and need to rest.”

“Just stop there and listen,” Arthur says, trying to sound as rational and together as he can. To his delight and relief, Percival does as he’s asked. Both men are staring at him with wide, incredulous eyes. Can’t blame them, Arthur thinks before he clears his throat and tells them everything.

The silence that follows is more than disconcerting. Are his friends going to believe him? And more to the point – how are they going to react? Arthur nervously scans their faces. They both look more dumbfounded than horrified. That’s a good sign. Their continued quietness isn’t. No wonder, Arthur’s story isn’t exactly easy to digest.

Percival’s the first one to speak. “That bloody fucking bastard’s been poisoning you all your life?” Arthur can’t remember seeing Percival that furious before. And God, is that a wonderful sight! He’s on my side. He didn’t even doubt me for a second.

“Apparently, that’s the case.”

“He wanted to get rid of you like that?” Percival continues, the frown on his forehead and the scowl on his lips getting more intense by the second.

“It certainly looks like it. If you consider it, the idea’s pretty perfect.”

Percival scratches his head, anger and embarrassment equally mirrored in his eyes. “All these years, and I never…”

“Nobody could have figured that one out,” Arthur tries to pacify his friend.

“Merlin did,” Percival mumbles. “Thank God for that.” Then the tall man sends an uneasy look towards Arthur. “Are you going to be okay now?”

“I stopped taking the hypospray, and Merlin thinks I’m going to be a lot better once it is out of my system.” Percival nods, somewhat reassured, but he still looks as if he’s already planning to rip each of Edwin’s limbs off.

“Leon?” Arthur asks very quietly, unsure what to make of his prolonged silence.

“Fuck,” Leon whispers and gives Arthur an indistinguishable once over. “This is quite weird.” Arthur bites his lips in anticipation. Leon’s always been one for dissecting all the facts before he makes up his mind. Upright and incorruptible, he never rushes into things. It’s obvious he’s mulling over what he’s heard, weighing up everything on a fine scale of logic and sincerity.

“This puts you in quite a precarious situation,” he finally says, “The son of the Governor, a sorcerer. Once this comes out, there will be lots of repercussions.”

Of course Leon will always think ahead. It’s what he does. It is one of his strength that make him an excellent Chief of Police. But he does see it from my side of things, Arthur thinks. That’s a relief.
“Looks like you’ve been a victim rather than a criminal,” Leon adds, seemingly coming to a conclusion.

“Does that mean you’re still with me?”

“I’ve known you all my life, Arthur,” Leon says earnestly as he faces Arthur directly. “And I’ve never seen anything else but honesty, integrity and goodness in you. If you have magic, and from what you’re saying there’s no doubt about that, then magic can’t be as evil as we’ve been made believe all those years.”

Arthur lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, and then his eyes blur. Momentarily he’s lost for words. What is there to say at such an incredible show of loyalty?

“Thanks, both of you,” Arthur mumbles, grabbing their arms in turn in a soldier’s salute before he searches their gaze. “There’s been a lot of injustice and misconception about sorcery in Camelot, and I intend to do something about this. Saving Merlin and unmasking Edwin is only the first step.”

Leon nods, and Percival claps Arthur’s shoulder. “I think I can speak for the both of us, Arthur, but we’re with you. Magic or not.”

I would have never have expected them to accept this just like that, Arthur thinks, a tight knot forming in his throat, humbled by their testimony of trust and friendship. Thank God, Leon changes the direction of their conversation before he gets too emotional.

“Your father must know,” his friend says, and Arthur’s body goes rigid. He’s come to pretty much the same conclusion, but so far he’s been pushing the thought into the back of his mind. There will be no avoiding THAT confrontation, and it seems like the list of things he has to discuss with Uther is getting longer by the second. But this isn’t the time for delving into it.

“I guess I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.” For now though I have more urgent issues to deal with, Arthur thinks, putting the thought on hold.

“It might happen sooner than you think. I can hardly keep Uther off my back. I bet he’s smelling something’s not right. And I have the funny feeling he’s developed his own little theory where you and Merlin are,” Leon says. The warning reaches Arthur loud and clear.

“Right,” Arthur mumbles, sure that the next meeting with his father will be nothing less than explosive.

Morgana’s pacing round the living room at the secure flat behind the Ealdor Health Centre like a caged tiger. It’s really not very surprising she’s close to snapping.

It’s been nine days since Hunith returned from her meeting with Arthur bearing the most devastating news possible. Merlin had already been injected. Each time Morgana thinks about it the remains of her shattered heart scream out in horrified agony.

He’s going to die. He’s going to die. I shouldn’t have left him behind. I should have dragged him along. I should have…. But no ‘should have’ is going to make this any better or easier. And Morgana’s only too aware of it. And it hurts like hell.
She’s been running ragged with guilt and desperation for a whole week now, and things might have been more bearable if she’d had someone to talk to. But Hunith had left later the same day with no more than a mysterious, “Don’t worry about me. I’m safe, but I have to go.”

Morgana HAD been worried and she still IS. Of course she noticed that Hunith hadn’t only thrown some of her own clothes but also some of Merlin’s into the suitcase she took along with her. Which left only one possible interpretation. Somehow, Hunith was going to see Merlin, be with him, most likely look after him.

And what about me? Where have I been left in all this? Morgana stares in the mirror on the landing. Hunith is with Merlin. No doubt, Arthur must have played a part in this. Nobody else would have been able to grant her access to a committed sorcerer. Of course none of this has appeared in the media. Of course not.

Morgana has read the papers, covering every little detail of Merlin’s trial, and listened to the discussion about the verdict on TV. They’d listed all his crimes, as they called them, all his offences. He got the blame for virtually every magic-related crime over the past half a year. Whoever persecuted him certainly went out of their way to get him sentenced. Morgana was dismayed by the atrocious reports, tearing Merlin’s reputation apart and depicting him as personified evil.

Bastards. Particularly that Edwin guy. The one the papers glorify as Camelot’s superhero. In fact he’s been in the media every single day since the trial. His life story has been covered, his career, his role in the development of the Serum and his close relationship to Uther. Morgana can tell there’s a wave of public sympathy towards the man who caught the MU who supposedly endangered the life of all upright citizens in Camelot.

Merlin, endangering other people’s lives! What a joke! He wouldn’t even touch Arthur when he had the opportunity to kill him. Morgana’s seething, not only with rage for the injustice that’s been done to Merlin, but also – and maybe mainly – because guilt’s eating away at her insides for what SHE did and didn’t do.

I wonder where they are. The question has been driving Morgana crazy. Are they at Lamia House? Or has Arthur taken them somewhere else? Maybe Merlin’s dead already – and nobody’s bothered telling her. Morgana grits her teeth in utter frustration. I MUST see Merlin. I MUST make peace with him. I need to tell him everything.

She’s lost count how often she’s stared at her mobile, her finger hovering over Hunith’s number. Surely she could talk her mother round to letting her know? Hunith knows better than anyone else how she feels and why she needs to speak to Merlin before it’s too late. But her mum asked her not to phone.

“Any communication between us might be detected, and I’ve sworn I won’t give away any information about this,” she said, and Morgana’s respected her wish. So far. But Morgana has no idea how long she’ll be able to stick to her promise not to contact her. Her nerves are so frayed she’s bound to crack sooner or later.

Maybe she can at least try and speak to Alvarr. She hasn’t seen or heard anything of the rebel leader since the night of the break-in. Fair enough, he’d instructed her to lie low for a while, and indicated he would do the same. But so far all communication between them has stopped completely which is quite unusual.

I need to know whether he found out who informed the Justice Squad that night. In Morgana’s mind there can be no doubt they were betrayed by someone, somehow. It’s still hard to understand because Alvarr was so meticulous preparing for their coup. Of course most MUs in their group had
known what was going to happen and when, but only the three of them, Merlin, Alvarr and her, had exact knowledge of the how.

Did somebody in the group warn the Justice Squad? Morgana can’t imagine it. We’ve been working together, hand-in-hand for so many months, have shared our worries and successes, have trusted each other with our lives. And yet – how could the police have pin-pointed the moment of their attack so precisely?

Morgana hits the living room door with her fist in frustration. I need to find Alvarr and talk this through. And maybe he can help to figure out where mum and Merlin are.

She’s refrained from contacting Alvarr until now, simply for security reasons, but she’s had enough of being idle. As soon as she’s made her decision she jumps into action. First she has to find out where Alvarr’s hiding, and she knows exactly where to start. Daegal’s always had a soft spot for her, and he’s always been close to Alvarr.

Fifteen minutes later Morgana smiles for the first time in a week. It was almost too easy to twist Daegal round her little finger and divulge the information she wanted. Alvarr’s in a flat attached to a derelict factory hall at the outskirts of Camelot.

Edwin takes a moment to breathe through his stress. Meeting Alvarr in person had definitely not been on the cards. Not until the final moment. But Merlin’s disappearance has propelled Edwin into action. It’s a foregone conclusion that Arthur’s had a hand in this, and the thought makes him anxious and irritated.

I’m so close, just a couple of weeks at the most and all this will end, he thinks with determination. Nothing will stand in my way now. Nothing. I’ll not let this happen. Fuck Arthur for interfering in the last moments of his preparations.

Edwin has to get to Merlin to give him the third injection. Only then will the sorcerer’s magic be beaten into submission enough, condensed enough, to be ready for harvesting.

It was a stroke of genius when Edwin realized so many years ago that it was possible to draw the magic out of a sorcerer. All it needed was a large enough dose of the Serum to compress it to its very essence. He’d found out through trial and error, what exact dose to use, how many injections were necessary and what time frame to leave between the administration of the drug.

Most importantly though he knows now that the magic needs to be removed within four days after death. If it is left longer, it seeps back into the depths of the universe, returning to the magic ever present in the world around them, unseen and unfelt, but still the core of every living, breathing creature.

That’s why finding Merlin is essential. He WANTS Merlin’s magic. More than anybody else’s. Edwin’s collection of gold is extensive and he can finish the Elixir with the magic he’s got, true. But this would be his ultimate possession.

He’s taken care to manufacture his Elixir with only the best. The magic of the most effective healer, the most talented seer, the best warlord. The magic of those MUs outstanding in one field or another. He’s amassed them all, and invented a way to bring their powers all together to create magic more
powerful, more potent than anyone had seen before.

Up to now Merlin’s magic has been praised as second to none. Edwin chuckles. It’ll be nothing compared to the power HE will possess. He’s finished mixing and mingling, blending and brewing a new kind of magic, one that will remain unsurpassed forever. Fusing together the best of what magic can offer will create a super power, an invincible force nobody will be able to resist, man or sorcerer. And it’ll be HIM, Edwin Richter, who’s going to be the only one who knows its secret and who has access to it.

Merlin’s magic will be the icing on the cake, the ingredient in his Elixir that’s going to take his new magic to heights not even he could have imagined. And it will be the beginning of a new era. A time where all men, magical or not, will kneel before him. An age which will be the dawn for a new world. That’s why he’s here. He needs Alvarr to get access to Merlin before it’s too late to inject him the last time.

Edwin’s men had tried for a few days to trace Arthur and Merlin's hideout, but they failed to locate them for quite a few days. Bloody Arthur’s done a fucking perfect job at covering their tracks.

That’s when, by a stroke of luck, Uther himself put Edwin on the right track by voicing his suspicions that Arthur might be hiding in one of their own properties. Not a place where Leon would look, that’s for sure. It had taken Edwin’s spies a couple of days to check through all these addresses, until – bingo – some suspicious activity at the Lake Cottage was spotted. It was soon identified as the place Edwin was looking for. This was where Arthur and Merlin had found shelter.

“Any other idea how we could get in there?” Alvarr rubs his chin, his fingers drumming impatiently on the table. They’ve been discussing all kind of options for the best part of two hours, but haven’t come up with any sensible suggestion to this point.

“We’re running out of time,” Edwin grumbles. The third injection has to be given exactly ten days after the second one. In plain words, the following day. Edwin’s patience is at its end.

A knock at the door startles both of them. Alvarr’s hide-out is as good as untraceable. Another knock has Alvarr on his feet. He motions Edwin to retreat into the kitchen before he cautiously walks up to the entrance, his hand stretched out before him in case he has reason to defend himself.

There’s the knock again, and Alvarr must recognize it because he drops his arm. Still, it’ll be safer to remain out of sight until Edwin’s sure of it.

“Morgana!” Alvarr exclaims when he opens the door, and Edwin’s heart drops. Morgana? The girl who’s got the same name as Nimueh’s child. Merlin’s sister. What the heck does she want here?

“Come in,” Alvarr says and quickly closes the door behind the lithe young woman with the pitch black hair.

“How did you find me?” Alvarr asks, and Morgana explains in a few words.

“I think I need to have a word with Daegal,” Alvarr says with a clipped voice, but Morgana mollifies him immediately.

“Don’t take it out on the poor boy. He stood no chance against my charm.” Edwin hears her say, and it makes him smile. Quite a formidable young woman, this. Sudden curiosity gets the better of him and he walks up to the kitchen door to carefully peek around it.

As soon as Edwin’s gaze falls on Morgana’s face, he freezes. From top to toe. Because the image forcing itself on his mind is too unreal. It’s Nimueh. The woman he loved. The one person he’s
doing all this for. Morgana is the spitting image of her.

_She must be her daughter,_ Edwin thinks breathlessly. She has to be. This similarity can be no coincidence. Nimueh’s daughter. Merlin’s sister? What an irony of fate! But maybe also a sign their fates should intertwine again?

It’s like being transported back to days long gone by. This random meeting must be meant. _Nimueh!_ Edwin whispers inside his head like a prayer. _Your daughter was sent back to me, to look after her, to make her part of the glorious future I hold in the palm of my hand!_ Isn’t that just fitting and right?

“Have you heard about Merlin?” Morgana asks, and Edwin watches Alvarr making an effort to keep a straight face.

“I have. Looks like he got what he deserved.”

Morgana’s head snaps up, her eyes irked and angry. “How can you say that, he’s one of us!”

“He never was, Morgana, and at the bottom of your heart you know that,” Alvarr says calmly, completely unfazed by Morgana’s scorn.

Morgana shakes her head ferociously. “Merlin helped us to get into Arthur’s office.”

Alvarr snorts bitterly. “And what did he do once he was there? He saved the young Pendragon from certain death. He remained behind to tend to his wound. Is that what you call acting for our cause?” Alvarr’s voice is snippy now, unrelenting and cruel, and his words visibly rattle the young woman. “He could have changed our world that night, but he chose not to. He PICKED Arthur, not YOU, not ME, not any sorcerer in Camelot. By choosing a bloody Pendragon he made his bed and now he has to lie in it.”

“No, Alvarr. You don’t understand. Merlin is…,” Morgana says, her voice faltering.

“He’s nothing but a misguided fool, and he’s paid for betraying all of us. Will you ever get that into that pretty head of yours?” Alvarr’s walked up right into Morgana’s personal space and takes her hands into his own. “Morgana, I know you’ve always had a soft spot for your brother, but what he’s done is inexcusable. He was turning into a liability, into a loose gun that could have given us away at any time.”

Morgana stares at Alvarr, all silent and pensive, her mind clearly reeling from his words. Then an understanding sparks in her eyes. “I see,” she says quietly, as she slips her hands out of Alvarr’s and turns her back on him.

“Did YOU tip off the police, Alvarr?” Morgana’s voice is low and, if Edwin interprets this correctly, full of outrage.

Alvarr follows Morgana and, in a gesture of pacification, puts his hands on her shoulders, “Morgana, I couldn’t endanger our whole community for one man. Merlin’s views and actions betrayed every one and each of us…”

“Oh my God, you did.” Morgana cuts him off. Edwin can’t see her face, but he can hear a tremble in her voice. How is she going to react? Alvarr told him before how protective Morgana had been where Merlin was concerned. Will she see reason or hold on to her childish feelings?

“It was the only choice to save us all,” Alvarr says with conviction. “Merlin and his naïve belief in what the Pendragon could do would have ruined everything we were working for! It was him or all of us!”
Edwin can’t help grinning. His accomplice is pretty impressive being impressionable. But will Morgana cave under it?

“You had Merlin get caught to take the blame for all our actions and more?” Morgana’s still facing away from Edwin, but it seems she’s composed herself, talking calmly, as if she’s starting to understand.

“That was his contribution to all of us. It is because of his sacrifice, his suffering we can take a step further in the right direction, to create a world where magic and sorcery are free forever.”

Edwin’s shudders at Alvarr’s words. Yes, these are his intentions, even if Morgana might interpret it a little bit different from him. But she is Nimueh’s daughter. She can be part of my plan. Be part of the glorious future at the tip of my fingers. Yes, she should be. She has to be. She will be. And at that, Edwin makes a spur-of-the-moment decision.

“Morgana,” he says and steps through to the living room, causing both, Morgana and Alvarr, to spin round in surprise. Edwin gives Alvarr an almost imperceptible nod to reassure the man, while he walks towards the young woman. Nimueh! She is just like Nimueh! Morgana recognizes him, it’s obvious by the twist in her face when he comes closer. Good. That makes things easier. “You know who I am?”

Morgana nods, speechless and pale. “You and Alvarr?” she stutters, as she tumbles backwards against the sofa, as pale as a sheet, her eyes flitting from one man to the other.

“There’s no need to be alarmed, Morgana,” Edwin says soothingly. “Alvarr, and you, and everyone who’s worked against the Pendragon government in the name of magic, you ALL have paved the way for the most extraordinary future you can imagine.”

Morgana still stares at him, her face an iron mask, her shaking hands the only sign she’s been listening. “What future?”

“A future your mother would be proud of,” Edwin says with a satisfied smile. Surely Morgana will react to that!

“You knew my mother?” Morgana gasps, her eyes dark and disbelieving.

“Your mother was the most wonderful woman I ever met,” Edwin says, looking straight into Morgana’s-oh-so familiar eyes.

Confusion and shock cross Morgana’s face, but to Edwin’s delight, she keeps her outer cool. She does have her mother’s callousness, and her talent for persuasion, I bet. “What kind of nonsense is that?” she says in a challenging tone instead.

Edwin chuckles. “Nonsense? Far from it, Morgana. You are the daughter of Nimueh, one of the finest, most powerful witches of her time.”

Morgana shakes her head with a derisive smirk. “Are you really expecting me to believe this?”

Edwin realizes that it needs more than words to convince Morgana of the truth. Wordlessly he puts his hand into the inner pocket of his jacket to pull out an old photograph. He always carries it next to his heart, just as Nimueh will always be right inside it. He takes a step towards Morgana to hand it to her and tentatively she accepts it.

Her eyes widen. No wonder. Edwin knows that the woman in the picture is virtually identical to Morgana. “You’re tricking me,” Morgana’s visibly trembling now. “This can’t be …”
“It is,” Edwin confirms. “This is your mother.”

For a couple of seconds Morgana doesn’t utter a sound, just stares at the picture, unconsciously gulping for air. “My mother.” Eventually she tears her gaze away from the photo. “How did you know her?”

“We worked together when we were young, and we shared a dream of a country where magic was free.”

Morgana runs her tongue over her lips, her whole body tense and taut, as if ready to snap. “A photo isn’t proof of anything.”

Edwin smiles at Morgana widely. “You have a moon shaped mole on the back of your right upper thigh.”

Morgana looks as if she’s going to keel over. “How…?”

“I was there when you were born,” Edwin says, his words dripping with emotion. Of course it had been him who had supported Nimueh through the long hours of her labour. Uther, as to be expected, had been too ‘busy’ to be there for her.

Surely this would open Morgana’s eyes and make her believe. And it does. Morgana’s coming round, he can sense it in every fibre of his body, and she’s read his sentimental response correctly.

“You … you loved her?” Morgana asks hesitatingly.

“More than you can imagine.” His heart’s still singing at every mention of her name.

“Are you my father?” Morgana whispers and looks at him with the same intensity Nimueh used to when she was under distress.

“I wish I was,” Edwin says sadly. “Unfortunately that honour wasn’t mine.”

“So who…?” Morgana’s unable to finish the question, but there’s no need to complete it. It’s obvious what Morgana wants to know. *This might just work in my favour.* Edwin smiles inwardly, a plan forming in his mind.

“I’m not sure it’s a good thing for you to know,” he says, deliberately holding back.

“I need to know,” Morgana whispers. “I’ve wondered all my life.” She throws an imploring gaze at Edwin. “Please.”

Yes, *she does need to know, and when I tell her, in the right way, she will have no choice but to join me. I want her at my side. Like Nimueh should have been. She’s mine.*

“He’s the same man who was responsible for the death of your mother.”

“Oh,” Morgana’s getting more fragile and uneasy by the second. “My mother’s dead?” she asks, her eyes glued to his lips.

“She died in my arms,” Edwin whispers hoarsely. “I will never forget the day. You were only two.”

“Two…?” There’s a glimmer of recognition in Morgana’s eyes, when she turns to face him. “Was it you who took me away, to the house of that sorcerer?”

So, she does remember something about her past, even if it isn’t a lot. “It was. Your mother wanted
you to be safe.”

“Safe?” Morgana looks rather puzzled.

“From him.” Giddy excitement spreads in Edwin. Morgana’s getting close to asking the vital question, the answer to which will change everything.

“From my father?” Morgana squeezes out, horror on her face.

“He killed my mother?” she states tonelessly. Her eye burning like wildfire. “Why?”

Edwin nods. “He found out she had magic.” A little white lie surely wouldn’t do any harm. Particularly as it was pretty close to the truth. Uther had always been aware of Nimueh’s powers, what he hadn’t known was that she’d used them against him, twisting his feelings in her favour.

“Who is he? Tell me.” Morgana’s voice has gone shrill and high, and the driven look in her eyes tells Edwin she’s frantic to hear the answer.

“Don’t you remember anything about him or her?” Edwin delays one more time.

Morgana appears to be giving it thought, but then shakes her head. “Sometimes in a moment between waking and sleeping I see a face, so similar to mine, with hair like mine, but I thought I was dreaming about me, my future.” Morgana stops in amazed surprise. “It was her. It must have been the shadow of a memory.”

“I’m sure it was,” Edwin puts his hand on her arm in reassurance. “She was an amazing woman and a wonderful mother. She would have done anything to protect you.”

“She was good?” Morgana asks almost shyly.

“Good and brave and clever. And so beautiful.”

“And he killed her for her magic?”

Edwin nods. _She’s ready. She’ll drop into my basket like a ripe cherry._ And he’s right because Morgana’s demeanour has changed. Edwin can sense the blinding rage emanating from her, he can feel her magic turning and twisting in uproar.

Morgana seems to be fighting for control when she repeats her question: “Who is that bastard?”

“Your father is Uther Pendragon.” Edwin lends the sentence as much gravitas as he musters, and Morgana’s reaction shows him he’s succeeded in turning her world upside down, inside and out.

Morgana’s lips open in a silent cry as she sinks onto the sofa. Staring into a space that doesn’t exist she remains motionless until Edwin sits down next to her.

“You’re lying,” Morgana crackles between her teeth. “I can’t be …”

“He IS your father, and I can easily prove it.”

Morgana’s breath comes short and fast now, her face ashen and her eyes wild. A strangled cry escapes her throat, so pained, so raw, it reminds Edwin of a tortured animal. _Yes, let your anger, your frustration out. That is exactly what I need._

“No. No. No!” Morgana’s body is riddled by desperate sobs, and unhinged by the momentous revelation, she sinks off the sofa onto her knees shaking violently. Indiscernible sounds of anguish
slip out of her mouth while tears pour over her cheeks. The fists she’s formed thump crazily against the sofa, hitting anything that comes her way.

“Morgana,” Edwin restrains her in a warm embrace, his voice calm and smooth and comforting. “It’s alright. It’s okay. I’m here.” And then he holds her, and she’s clinging to him like a daughter would, quietly sobbing into his chest. The warm feeling spreading inside Edwin is alien, but none the less so very welcome.

“Edwin,” a voice says next to him, and when Edwin looks up he realizes he’s totally forgotten Alvarr’s still there. He’s holding a glass of water, meant for Morgana. He passes it to her, and she gulps down a few sips.

“I hate him,” Morgana snarls out, her voice full of venom. “I’ve always hated him and now I hate him more than ever.”

Good. Brilliant, in fact. Edwin’s heart’s beating faster. This has gone better than I could have hoped for. “Uther needs to go. Both the Pendragons have to go. It’s the only way to save our kind for now and forever.”

Morgana nods emphatically, repeating his words like a prayer. “Yes. It’s the only way.”

“And I need you to help me make it come true,” Edwin says softly, and his heart rejoices when Morgana lifts up her eyes to him in reverence.

“I’ll do anything. Tell me what to do.”

“Anything? Even something that might hurt you?” Edwin digs in a little deeper.

“If it means Uther’s going to get what he deserves, anything.”

“I need you to go to Merlin.”

“Merlin? You know where he is?” Morgana says, a hint of excitement crossing her tear-smeared face.

“We do.”

“What are you asking me to do?”

“We need to save Merlin’s magic,” Edwin says as a patient father would.

“His magic?” Morgana’s eyes are wider than a sauce-pan.

“If we want to be strong, stronger than any force Uther can throw our way, we need a weapon more powerful than anything the world has seen,” Edwin explains, twisting the truth just a little bit to make his idea more palatable for Morgana.

“Merlin’s magic is,” Morgana whispers. “But how …?”

“Just let me say that I can,” Edwin says before he has to go into too much detail and give information away Morgana might react to adversely. “I need you to be strong for this, my child. But the future of magic and every single MU in Albion rests on your shoulders.”

“Tell me what to do,” Morgana says with quiet determination.

“You realize Merlin is going to…. die in the near future? There’s no way round that. You understand
that?” Edwin says, checking carefully whether his words alarm Morgana. What a relief when she nods in agreement. “Wouldn’t it make you happy to help him leave a legacy behind he can be proud of?”

“His magic.” Morgana concludes correctly.

“Yes, by taking his magic, he’ll help us to deal with Uther, and he will be remembered by all of us as the sorcerer who gave everything to bring that bastard down, rather than the man who betrayed his own kin by taking sides with the Pendragons.”

Morgana manages a tiny smile. “I’m sure he’d like that.”

“Good, good,” Edwin rubs his hands in excitement. “Do you think you could gain access to the Lake Cottage?”

“Is that where he is?” Morgana asks, her brows furrowing in thought. “I could contact my moth …” Morgana stops to rephrase the last word. “I’ll contact Hunith. She is with him. She’ll understand if I want to see Merlin.”

“You think you’ll be able to persuade her to let you come?” Edwin raises his brow.

“I’m sure I can, if I play my cards right,” Morgana says. “What do I have to do when I see Merlin?”

Edwin pulls out a little metal case and opens it. He hears Morgana gasp at the sight of the syringe with the blue liquid in it, and then she looks up at him with a furrow on her brow.

“I don’t understand. You want me to do this to Merlin? Just like you killed so many… and Merlin …,” Morgana stammers, looking from Edwin to Alvarr, her eyes dark with confusion.

Edwin’s immediately on alert. Morgana needs to understand, needs to see the bigger picture of what he’s doing. And he knows she’ll understand. Just like Nimueh always understood him.

“These MUs were heroes in their own right. They helped to develop a power greater than anything you have encountered before. A power that is going to beat Uther Pendragon. A power that will bring magic back to all of our kin. Those people who died of the Serum – they sacrificed themselves for the greater good and will live in our hearts forever. Just like Merlin. His contribution will be the biggest of all. And nobody will ever remember he almost let all of us down in the most treacherous way.”

Morgana squares her jaws, her face sombre and contemplative. Edwin’s not sure if it shows anger or sorrow until a single tear is rolling down her cheek, and she snuffles, holding back more. “Merlin never understood our cause. He was always too soft, too lenient when it came to dealing with the real issues of MUs. At times …” Morgana’s voice is breaking with anguish. “…I wanted to shake him up so he could see the truth. At times … I was embarrassed to call him my brother.” And at that she places her face into her hands, her shoulders twitching with sobs she’s trying to suppress. “But this…?” She asks softly, returning her gaze to the syringe.

“Don’t worry, Morgana. He isn’t going to feel any pain when you inject him. In fact, it’ll shorten his suffering. You’ll do him a favour twice over – you’ll save his reputation and you’ll make him go more easily.”

Morgana takes the syringe out of the box and lifts it up to stare at the blue liquid sparkling in it. Her stoic gaze gives nothing away at all. For a second Edwin thinks he might have lost her, but just then she lifts her head and says.
“Explain what I have to do exactly.”
It’s the first time ever Arthur’s aware that his night-mare is about to begin. It’s a weird feeling, but not as strange as the sensation that he’s in this dream twice.

The blond boy is him. He’s never been that sure before. But he’s also there watching himself like in a film, and what he sees feels like a prequel to his usual dream.

_The blonde boy’s hiding in the shadows of the huge wardrobe next to the oak bed. He’s gaping at the man and the woman who are arguing violently in the middle of the room. He can’t understand why his parents are so upset with each other._

“You lied to me,” his father snarls at his mum. “You kept THIS a secret from me!” he shouts at the top of his voice, and the blond boy starts shaking quietly witnessing his rage.

“I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t sure …” Ygraine whispers, the words hardly audible under her sobs.

“Whether you could trust me? With something that vital? Something that will affect Arthur’s whole life?” Uther shouts back. “Haven’t I been lenient with your perversion? Haven’t I turned a blind eye to it? I married you, for God’s sake!” The words are pouring out of Uther, and although only six years old, the boy understands how agitated his father is.

“You made me promise to never use my magic,” Ygraine says, her eyes tainted with sadness.

“But you did anyway. How else would you have managed to keep from me that something was amiss with Arthur?”

Ygraine lowers her head guiltily. “I felt I had no other choice. I wanted to protect him.”

“Protect his magic? Why would you? You and I know what it does to people. Magic twists people’s minds. It corrupts the goodness in their heart. It poisons them from the core. And the more you use it the worse it gets!”

“So what does that make me?” Ygraine asks quietly, sorrow and resignation transcending nonetheless.
“You’ve always been the exception to the rule,” Uther says.

“We’ve had this conversation too often, Uther,” Ygraine sighs. She sounds so tired, so defeated it hurts the little boy inside and out. “I’m not the only MU who would never hurt anyone else. Magic itself isn’t evil.”

“It’s an illness, a condition that needs to be eradicated. And I won’t allow it to contaminate my son. I will get him treated.”

“You will do no such thing!” Ygraine snaps back. “Magic isn’t a perversion, it’s a talent of a different kind.”

“A talent MY son can live without. I’m going to ask Edwin to assess him.”

“You want to give him the Serum?” Ygraine sounds horrified.

“It’ll help to keep his magic under control,” Uther pushes out between his teeth.

“You can’t do that. What about the side effects!?”

“Edwin’s going to fix that.”

“Edwin, Edwin, Edwin!” Ygraine raises her arms as desperation turns to anger. “You trust that man more than me! And he’s a sorcerer!”

“He’s been loyal to me for years. He’s never lied to me, and he has every reason to hate MUs,” Uther says, cool venom in his voice.

“Please Uther. I can’t believe you would do a thing like that to your innocent son. You can’t subject a young boy to such cruelty. You’re condemning him to a life of misery.” Ygraine begs, appealing to Uther’s heart.

“Better than being debased by sorcery…,” Arthur’s father counters swiftly. “He might be innocent now, but once the magic spreads…,” he leaves the sentence unfinished, but the blond boy knows what he was going to say, the tone of the words making his views ever so clear.

“You’re really willing to let Arthur go through life, without having any idea who he really is? He’ll never feel whole.” Ygraine’s body is trembling as she looks up to her unforgiving husband, tears streaming down her face.

“Arthur will always know who he is. He’s my son, and he will never know anything else.”

“He’ll remember he did magic,” Ygraine says with a bitter smile.

“Edwin can take care of that, too.”

“I’m not going to allow it,” Ygraine straightens up and pulls her shoulders back to face Uther. Her eyes are blazing with determination.

It’s obvious her firm stance infuriates her husband. “You are my wife, you’ll do as I say,” Uther roars.

The blond boy flinches with fear and dives behind the huge oak bed. Panic grips his heart so tight he can barely breathe. He cowers down, his arms thrown over his head and his body shaking with the eerie knowledge that evil is in the air. He presses his hands firmly on his ears hoping to blank out the fierce argument that keeps raging on.
He knows, he simply KNOWS something bad is going to happen. Something really bad.

The last rays of the setting sun throw long shadows on the wall behind him. And as the comforting light fades, the room is tinged with ghostly semi darkness. The blonde boy hears his mother crying out gently, explaining, begging, shouting, and begging all over again.

But with every sentence his father’s words turn colder and more hateful. Stop it! Stop it! The boy shouts inside his head, barely aware of the tears streaming down his heated face.

The voices get louder, more agitated, escalating into a crescendo until it all culminates in a high-pitched scream. Then, an ominous thud, followed by accusing silence. The boy’s too terrified to move, to even breathe, but he feels compelled to open the eyes he so desperately squeezed shut all along, and when his blurry vision snaps into focus, his blood freezes.

There’s a body on the floor, pale and motionless. No! This can’t happen. It can’t! Horror takes completely a hold of him, paralyzing his legs and rendering him helpless to the person who’s approaching with heavy steps. Closer and closer.

The blonde boy’s gagging for air, desperate and lonely in his plight, aware that it’ll be only seconds before he’s caught. Before he’ll be punished. Before he’ll feel the wrath of his father. The shadow of Uther’s tall figure falls on the floor next to him, and suddenly the boy’s fear, his shock, his dread bundle together, and he screams. He screams like he has never screamed before and something inside him bursts free, comes alive and then …

The windows of the rooms shatter in a thundering explosion. And the blond boy keeps screaming until Uther grabs his arms and drags him away from the bed and through the room.

“Sorcerer!” Uther mumbles in a gruff, broken voice, as he tears him past his mother whose lifeless body’s lying on the floor, blood trickling from her head. The scream loosening from the boy’s chest is so intense, his mind shuts down and the last thing he’s aware of are Uther’s arms, holding him down in an iron grip.

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“Arthur!” Merlin’s voice brings him back from the terror of the dream, and when Arthur comes to, his body’s drenched in sweat and he’s shaking all over. Merlin’s holding his hand tight, just as he used to when Arthur needed grounding after the night-mare.

“Breathe,” Merlin whispers into his ear hoarsely, and Arthur does until the world around him is taking shape slowly. Merlin’s sitting up in bed next to him, one hand in Arthur’s while the other cups his face, a thumb running calm circles over his cheek. “It is over.”

“Oh my God,” Arthur barely manages to voice it. “Oh my God.” The night-mare that’s been torturing him all his life was never a dream at all. He knows what he’s seen actually happened. It was a memory, a memory of a day he deleted from his brain, or was it erased from his consciousness by magic?

How do you deal with the knowledge that your father killed your mother?

“Breathe, Arthur,” Merlin reminds him. Arthur hasn’t even noticed how shocked tension took away his breath, and the relief of air flooding through his lungs freely is sweet and liberating. Arthur
focuses on the man next to him and gratitude spreads in his chest. *I’m so glad he’s here, I want him to be here always.*

“*You want to speak about it?*” Merlin asks, his voice ragged from the effects of the Serum, but compassion and warmth shining through nevertheless.

*Can I speak about this? Can I say out loud what my father did?* Arthur remembers the day when they’d visited Balinor. It was the first time it occurred to him his father might have some dark secrets. He’d wanted to believe in Uther’s innocence then, but now…now the truth has unfolded, and Arthur can’t ignore it.

His father knew about his magic. His father knew about the Serum in his medication. His father killed the mother he loved, may it be accidental or deliberate. Because she defended him and his magic. His father watched him suffering for over twenty years. He could have put an end to it at any time because he knew exactly what caused Arthur’s condition. His father deceived and betrayed him for as long as he can remember.

Arthur’s not quite able to wrap his mind round these hurtful truths. How could Uther do that to him? His son? How could he? How could he look him into the eye knowing what he’d done?

Merlin coughs quietly, ripping Arthur out of his thoughts. “*Merlin.***” It comes out like a silent prayer. “*Merlin,*” he mutters again as he pulls Merlin towards his chest as gently as he can. Merlin’s health has deteriorated dramatically in the last few days. His cheeks are hollow, his body looks skeletal, his legs are weak. The skin on his arms is paper-thin and wrinkled with dark veins protruding through the yellowish surface. He hasn’t been able to eat since the first injection, and the fact there’s a little bit of energy left in him is only thanks to Hunith who’s been feeding him nutritious soups and drinks.

*My father did this,* Arthur thinks, and the burning rage erupting inside him is blinding. *My father.* The word’s a mockery. A stab to his heart. A twist in his guts.

Merlin cuddles into his chest, his breath rattling painfully through his lungs. He’s still holding his hand and Arthur squeezes it lightly. How is it possible that just the mere presence of Merlin helps him to face up to this? *Because he loves me and he accepts me the way I am. Always has. Even when he got nothing in return for it.*

Unlike Uther. The man who calls himself his ‘father’.

“You okay?” Merlin says quietly.

“No,” Arthur says, running his fingers along Merlin’s neck, playing with his dark locks distractedly, revelling in the solace it provides.

“I’m here if you need me,” Merlin says, and Arthur almost screams in agony. *Still here, but not for much longer. Because of my father.* Then it all bursts out of him, every little detail. His dream, his memory, his devastation.

“Are you sure this really happened?” Merlin tries to be rational, asking logical questions, and Arthur appreciates his calm. *God, I wish I wasn’t as certain as I am!*

“I am,” Arthur answers reluctantly. “I have no idea how, I simply know.”

“Edwin must have attached a spell to the Serum suppressing any memories of your magic,” Merlin speculates while his fingers run absent-minded patterns on Arthur’s back. “Otherwise you would have remembered it at one point in your life.”
“And now the Serum’s gone, my memories of having magic are breaking free,” Arthur concludes, bile rising in his throat. “How could my … father” and he stumbles over the word yet again, “do this to us? My mother, me? What kind of man is he?”

“Sometimes people do things out of anger or love they don’t mean. Actions we can’t condemn without knowing the full picture.”

Arthur chuckles harshly. “I wish I could believe that, Merlin. But I find it hard to give my father the benefit of the doubt.” Arthur feels Merlin nod against his shoulder.

“I understand,” Merlin whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

Arthur kisses the side of Merlin’s head. Do I feel sorry? No, he doesn’t. First and foremost he feels betrayed. He always thought his father loved him, in his own peculiar way. He’d always been touched how Uther had looked after his medication and how worried he’d appeared to be about his health. Fuck him. He just did it to pacify his fears about magic.

When he says as much to Merlin, the skinny man in his arms squeezes him a little tighter. It’s not much of a squeeze because he hasn’t got the strength for that, but Arthur appreciates it for what it is. A tender gesture of support.

The most horrifying realization hits Arthur a second later. “I’m his son. I do have his genes. What if …?” he can’t finish the question, but Merlin answers it anyway.

“You aren’t your father, Arthur. You never will be. That heart in here…” and Merlin places his palm on his chest. “…is worth thousands of his. And once he’s gone, you will be a more just and more honourable Governor than he ever was.”

Arthur can’t really put his finger on why, but Merlin’s heartfelt words, the sincerity in his voice, tip him over the edge. Tears start falling rapidly, painting salty patterns on his cheeks and trickling on the pillow to leave dewy patches of sorrow behind. Arthur sobs quietly, his face pressed into Merlin’s hair and his arms holding on to him tightly, and here he finds what he needs most: a place to be safe, a place where he can be who he is without being judged for it. Merlin grounds him just like an anchor in a ferocious tempest.

It’s the first time in ages Arthur has been able to let himself go completely, and as he weeps, he feels the tension inside him ease and the hurt lessen. And as he’s just marvelling how Merlin can cause such a miracle, a huge thump in the room makes him look up.

“What was that?”

Arthur’s jaw drops when he sits up, and Merlin lets out a little gasp at what unfolds before them. Although it’s not quite day yet, there’s enough light to reveal that every piece of furniture has been moved out of place. The wardrobe is nearer to the door, the sofa is suddenly flush against the back wall, and all the smaller items, like the coffee table, the standing light or the bookshelf are randomly strewn across the room. There’s only one thing that could have caused a strange occurrence like that.

“Magic,” Arthur whispers, dazzled and unsure.

“Yeah, that didn’t happen by itself.” The pleased grin playing on Merlin’s lips gives Arthur the push to comprehend what happened. He still hesitates before he asks, “Did I do that?”

“It can’t have been me,” Merlin answers drily, and Arthur flinches.

“Shit, Merlin,” Arthur starts, regret washing over him for being so bloody insensitive, but to his
surprise Merlin smiles at him.

“Looks like your magic’s coming alive.”

“But I didn’t do anything … in particular.”

“Not willingly, but strong emotions can cause reactions like that,” Merlin explains.

Arthur’s heart’s pounding wildly. Is it from excitement or fear? Probably a bit of both, and sadness at the thought that Merlin has to watch Arthur’s magic unfold while his own might be lost forever. I have no idea what he must be going through. Arthur clenches his jaws in frustration. Just then Merlin’s body convulses and Arthur hears a little suppressed moan.

“Are you in pain?” Arthur asks, ready to get Gwen in to help.

“You’re the only pain in this room,” Merlin croaks back in cheek, and Arthur feels his eyes moistening again.

They’ve tried to be as ‘normal’ as possible over the past few days, to act and talk as if everything was just fine. But there’s nothing bloody normal about Merlin and the situation he finds himself in. Yet, despite it all, the inner strength radiating from him, the steely resolve he shows dealing with his fate, the never-ending kindness he displays around everyone is leaving Arthur stunned and humbled. He’s never met a better man before, and he must be saved, as impossible as it seems at this moment. Arthur has to believe it, otherwise he’d crumble under the weight of hopelessness.

Arthur’s spoken to Gaius virtually every day to ask about any progress, praying for the tiniest ray of hope. But nothing, nothing at all has come to pass. Gaius is as frustrated, as anxious as he is, but you can’t hurry a process like that. What if Merlin was right when he said it might take longer than he had? Arthur pushes out an anguished puff of air.

“Don’t think too much,” Merlin sits back to find Arthur’s eyes and teases him with a glint of mischief in his eyes. “You might hurt yourself.”

“At least one of us has a brain,” Arthur banters back, his heart constricting from the effort of being ‘normal’. “But if you’re agreeable, I might share it with you.”

Merlin snorts quietly and presses his body flush against Arthur’s, so fragile, so damaged, so fucking weak. “Define agreeable.”

“Once you’re well again, I’ll let you know,” Arthur says, hiding the need to hang on to the hope that Merlin will get through this under a blanket of a seductive jibe.

“Is that a promise?”

“Promise.” Arthur bends down to kiss Merlin lightly on the lips. “I can’t wait for you to find out.”

Instead of answering Merlin lets out a small unsettled groan as his head sinks back on Arthur’s chest. He doesn’t believe it’s going to happen. It couldn’t be clearer if he’d written it in bold giant letters.

Arthur wants to say something, wants to cheer Merlin up, but there’s nothing to say they haven’t said before, and so they just lie there for a little while, close up and personal, each savouring the other.

“Thanks,” Merlin says out of the blue.

“What for?”
“Morgana.” Merlin answers in only one word, but of course Arthur knows what he’s talking about.

Hunith received a phone call from Morgana the previous evening, asking to see Merlin, to make peace with him, to be with him for as long as …. Well.

He was aware Hunith had asked her daughter not to contact her, simply for security reasons. Morgana had phoned anyway. This fact alone riled Arthur. But letting Morgana come to the Lake Cottage? That was a lot to ask for after what she had done to Merlin and him. Actually, it was totally out of order and, to be honest, bloody dangerous.

They had an impromptu meeting as this was something concerning them all. Percival, Fiodor, Hunith, Merlin, Leon who’d just returned from Camelot with the latest update of events and him. Arthur would have liked Gwaine in on this, too, but he’d decided to go back to the Ministry from where he could access much more intricate technology to break into Edwin’s computer. “Maybe that’ll help to figure out what he’s up to,” he said as he parted.

“Morgana wants to come here?” Arthur had never seen Percival that furious. “Are you completely out of your mind?” he shouted in exasperation. “That woman has tried to kill you twice!” Shouting wasn’t something Percival ever did, particularly not at Arthur. It shows how deeply he cares, it brings home how much Morgana worries him. Arthur could hardly blame his friend.

Fiodor’s reaction was similar, if not as outspoken. Leon kept shaking his head, listing all the things that could wrong, the most prominent that Morgana could take any of them apart with just the blink of an eye.

“I know how it looks,” Hunith stood up eventually, sure to make eye-contact with each of them before she continued. “I fully understand all your concerns. Morgana’s record goes before her. But just like Merlin, I know my daughter. She’s followed the wrong path – there’s no excuse for that, and I wouldn’t dream of asking you to condone her behaviour. But she’s realized her mistake, she’s come to terms with the truth and I know all she’s looking for is redemption.”

Hunith exchanged a quick look with Merlin who sent her a quiet nod. “Morgana would never harm any of you now. She was misled and misguided in her choices, but she could become a valuable ally if we need to face Edwin. Nobody here will stand a chance if that man decides to stop us with magic. But with Morgana at our side, we have at least some hope.”

Silence fell after Hunith’s speech, each man deliberating. Arthur had to admit very reluctantly there was some truth in what Merlin’s mother had said. If it ever came to a show-down with Edwin, how could they defend themselves? His own magic was too raw, too undeveloped, too unknown – he certainly wasn’t able to wield it in any deliberate way.

“Morgana wants to see me before I die,” Merlin said quietly and all eyes snapped round to him. “You’re not going to die,” Arthur pushed out between his teeth, his insides as tight as a drum. “I know you’re doing everything possible to avoid that bit, Arthur. But looking at it realistically, we have to face the fact that my time’s running out.” Merlin coughed heavily, his whole body going rigid with pain every time air is pushed in and out of his lungs.

“You want to see her?” Arthur asked, while scanning Merlin with worried eyes. Watching Merlin fade away before his very eyes was the single most hurtful thing he’s ever had to endure. What an irony, that in contrast, Arthur had been getting better day by day! The energy he’d been missing for so many years was slowly building up inside him, and it seemed headaches and nausea had completely left him.
How can I refuse him a wish like that? I simply have to take the risk and make this work. For him. I’ll do anything for him. Arthur checked the faces of his friends to get some feedback about their opinions.

Percival had calmed down, but he was still sitting there as if Christmas had been cancelled. Leon looked deeply in contemplation while the others kept throwing guarded glances at Merlin.

“So what is it going to be?” Arthur finally said, his gaze taking each of them in. “You know what I am going to say.”

“I’m going to pick her up personally, and I swear, the smallest wrong move and …,” Percival grunted. He’s doing this for me, he’s willing to take the risk for me.

Arthur bit his lips to avoid getting too emotional.

“She won’t try anything. I’ll let her know I vouched for her,” Hunith said at that moment.

“She won’t try anything. I’ll let her know I vouched for her,” Hunith said at that moment.

“Morgana would never go behind mum’s back,” Merlin added, and at that, the tension broke, and Arthur sensed everybody’s agreement. He was relieved because he wouldn’t have liked to push the issue by ordering his friends to let Morgana in, but he also wouldn’t have liked to refuse Merlin such a heartfelt wish.

“Right, so we’re agreed to ‘invite’ Morgana for tomorrow.”

Why does this feel like I’ve ended up in a B-movie? Morgana knows this is a rhetorical question. The big, tall, muscly guy who picked her up in a quiet backstreet in the outskirts of Camelot is not far off the stereotype of a Mafiosi bodyguard. Not only because he’s tight-lipped and wears a permanent scowl on his face. He also put her into the back of a car with the gruff warning he was going to watch her EVERY move VERY CLOSELY, and should she move ONE muscle to harm anyone he’d make sure she would regret it forever – and yes, he did stress it like that. In the fashion of a henchman to a super-villain, he put a mask over her eyes without any explanation, and then settled next to her, his eyes fixed on her continuously. Not that she can see it – for obvious reasons – but she doesn’t need to.

“I promise I’ll blast a bullet right through that pretty little head of yours, if you even move half an inch out of place,” he said harshly a minute earlier, as if he didn’t make himself clear enough before. Seemingly Percival, that’s his name, isn’t particularly happy to take her to Merlin and Arthur.

Morgana gets it. From their point of view letting her anywhere near Arthur is a highly uncalculated risk. Particularly after what has happened before. And they realize the implications of the fact that she’s got magic and they don’t. Hunith must have done a hell of a job convincing them to allow her to visit Merlin. Well, Morgana cried and pleaded her case, and even resorted to begging in the end, but it was worth it because now she’s exactly where she wants to be.

To be honest, the fact she’s been granted access to Merlin must also mean that he didn’t refuse to see her, which is a relief in itself. How else would she have been able to deliver her little surprise?

The metal case inside her coat pocket presses against her rib-cage and Morgana shudders, reminding her of what happened the day before. Not that she needed much reminding. In fact, she’s thought of nothing else.
Edwin and Alvarr, Uther and Nimueh. Merlin and the Serum. Her mind’s been running in circles non-stop. But strangely enough, now she’s on her way to Merlin, she feels oddly relaxed. The rolling car combined with the consoling darkness provided by the mask prove temptingly soporific. For the first time since the break-in at Arthur’s office she feels safe. Safe and sound.

When the car stops with a jolt all of a sudden, and Percival mumbles something that sounds like “We’re here.” Morgana realizes she must have dozed off. The mask comes off as soon as she’s out of the car, and the first thing she sees once her vision clears is Hunith.

“Morgana!” Her mother walks up to her and hugs her full of warmth.

“Mum,” Morgana mumbles, the words sounding estranged and out of place. “Thank you.” She follows Hunith into the house, Morgana noticing in passing how spacious and beautiful it is.

“I’ll take you straight to Merlin,” Hunith says, and a few moments later she’s led into a gorgeous bedroom off the main corridor. She isn’t able to spot Merlin right away, but when she does, her world grinds to a halt.

It’s only been ten days. Morgana’s screaming inside her head. Only ten days, and he looks like this. Edwin’s probably right. The third injection would be a godsend rather than a condemnation.

With a hurried “I’ll leave you to it.” Hunith closes the door behind her, and silence descends, only interrupted by Morgana’s footsteps clinking on the floor as she makes her way to settle on a sofa chair opposite Merlin who’s leaning into the backrest of the sofa with his eyes closed. Now, that she can see him close up, her heart dies even more. I could have saved him, I could have saved him that night.

“You can’t take the blame for this,” Merlin says suddenly, causing Morgana to jump. “Not this.”

“I shouldn’t have left you. I followed Alvarr when I…,” she whispers, unable to finish as desperation settles in her stomach heavily.

When Merlin finally opens his eyes, Morgana scans his face nervously. “Merlin,” she says breathlessly. “God, Merlin.”

“Why did you do it?” Merlin’s asks without further ado. He’s struggling to speak. Morgana hears the strain in his voice, the will-power to make himself understood, and the emotional pain obvious in his words. She doesn’t need an explanation what Merlin’s asking. This time she’s going to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, even if it shreds her insides to tiny pieces.

“I loved you all my life,” Morgana starts, “I loved you when I was at school. I loved you when you went out with Freya. I loved you, but you never saw me.” Morgana lets out a little sob. It bloody hurts to admit it. “Not like that.”

“So you made me look at you with different eyes,” Merlin states, his eyes piercing into hers.

Morgana nods, too ashamed to answer.

“I loved you, too, Morgana, right from the first day when dad brought you home,” Merlin says quietly. “I had no idea….”

“No, you certainly didn’t,” Morgana snorts bitterly. “And I wanted you so much. I was always condemned to watch from the side lines. When you fell in love with Freya, when you kissed her, when you smiled at her, when you looked at her as if she’d hung the moon.”
“And when Freya died?” Merlin asks.

“I thought I could make you see me then,” Morgana mumbles, avoiding his gaze in embarrassment.

“But I didn’t,” Merlin whispers, his eyes so very sad.

Morgana sniffs and wipes her face just to keep her hands busy. “No, you didn’t.”

Merlin closes his eyes again, apparently from exhaustion, and Morgana flinches at the sight, every fibre in her body aching with regret, shame and despair.

“Arthur…,” Merlin rasps.

“I knew something was different about you and him, right from the first time you mentioned him in the café,” Morgana says.

A wide smile unexpectedly lights up Merlin’s face. “There is.”

“I couldn’t understand. I couldn’t grasp it. I didn’t want to,” Morgana admits, not only to Merlin but to herself. Then she continues haltingly.

“When he rejected you, I thought you’d come round. I gave you plenty of time. I supported you. I did everything for you!” It comes out as a desperate cry.

“Apart from respect my feelings, my free will and my dignity,” Merlin says, his voice tired and worn from their conversation. The words would have slain a dragon, they certainly hit Morgana straight where she hurts. For a moment she’s left speechless, unable to formulate any fitting response.

“No apology will ever be adequate for what I did,” she whispers eventually, hoping for Merlin’s forgiveness, praying for it from the bottom of her heart.

“No, there won’t,” Merlin says, sadness crossing his haggard features, and Morgana falters. “I understand why you did it, Morgana. I really do, and I’m sorry I can’t love you the way you want me to.” Merlin has to stop to take a break, when a sharp cough is slicing through his frail body.

Morgana’s up on her feet with the intent of helping in whatever way, but Merlin just waves her off. “It’s okay,” he pants and then he regroups to continue.

“What worries me more is how easily you were pulled into using magic for your own good, how you excused your action in the name of love, how you didn’t stop and think how heartless it was to violate my feelings.”

Morgana swallows hard, but the lump in her throat is refusing to move. He’s right. I behaved like a heartless bitch, he’s just too kind to call it by its name.

“Merlin, I …,” she starts, but Merlin cuts her short.

“Promise me, Morgana,” Merlin says huskily, his eyes probing into her soul, looking through her like glass. “Promise me to learn from this. Promise me you won’t abuse your magic like that again. Promise me,” he says imploringly as his head sinks back on the headrest with a heartfelt sigh.

Morgana’s eyes are brimming with tears, and with the intent of stifling the sobs so eager to rip through her chest, she presses her hand hard over her mouth. He’s more hurt by my depraved use of magic than being abused himself. Oh Merlin.

Morgana’s efforts to swallow her tears prove fruitless, and she breaks down completely. Merlin
simply lets her weep. “I promise, I promise it,” she stammers through her subdued cries, still unsure whether she’s forgiven.

“Good,” Merlin finally whispers, the word more recognizable by the shape of his mouth than by the sound of it. Morgana gets up and dares to sit next to him, desperate to find salvation.

“Forgive me,” she says quietly. “Please.”

Merlin slowly lifts his hand to find hers. The cool touch makes Morgana jolt, the bony hand sends shivers of despair down her spine. But then he gives her a little squeeze, gentle and tender, and the relief racing through Morgana leaves her light-headed.

“Thank you,” she mumbles. “I will prove my worth to you, you’ll see.” And Merlin smiles at her with kind eyes.

“Sure, you will.”

“I mean it, Merlin. You’ll see what I mean in a second because I’ve brought you a little present. Something that’ll help us to shape the future.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this and just a little reminder that the next update will be in two weeks! :)
Sins of the father

Chapter Notes

Sincere apologies to all of you for being late this time. I have just returned from holiday this evening and had no earlier opportunity to post. I hope the chapter makes up for your longer wait! As I have had little time to write over the last month, it will be another two weeks until the next chapter. Really sorry about that, but I’d rather take time to write properly than rush. Hope to get things going from then on. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Merlin can’t believe his eyes. A syringe filled with icy blue. In Morgana’s hand. She was certainly right calling this a surprise.

“The Serum?” Merlin asks the rhetoric question just to get over his initial shock.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it,” Morgana says in awe, her eyes running up and down the syringe, “how much damage a little thing like this can cause.”

“How did you get it?”

“Edwin gave it to me,” Morgana states indifferently, her mind seemingly preoccupied.

“What for?” Merlin has no idea why he’s asking such a stupid question because it’s pretty obvious what Edwin would want to do with it. But he simply can’t wrap his mind around the idea of Morgana executing Edwin’s dirty business. The same woman who begged him for forgiveness just a few minutes ago, who cried to be forgiven and promised never to abuse magic again.

Morgana takes a couple of steps towards Merlin, when a sharp voice stops her short.

“One step further, and you’re dead!” Percival and Arthur are hurrying into the room to come to a halt next to Merlin, each armed with a laser gun pointing directly at Merlin’s sister. Merlin knows they’ve both been keeping watch outside the half open door, just to make sure.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Arthur hisses out, and Merlin recognizes his seriously-pissed-off voice.

Morgana stares at the two men with wide eyes, her mouth gaping open. “What?”

“Put that syringe down NOW,” Percival’s commandeering tone leaves no doubt he’s ready to do whatever it takes should she not comply.

“Sure, but I …?” Morgana sounds utterly confused for an instant, but then sudden understanding crosses her face. “You didn’t think, you didn’t think I would …” she stammers while her eyes are flitting between the syringe and Merlin.

“What else would you do with it?” Arthur snarls.
Morgana takes the metal case and places the syringe in carefully. She closes the lid and puts it on the
coffee table with trembling hands. When her eyes meets Merlin’s, he finds nothing but dread and
dismay in them. “I would never harm you,” she whispers. “Once was enough for a lifetime.” And
then she slowly turns to Arthur, her face pale and serene.

“I love him as much as you probably do, Arthur. I couldn’t…, I could never...,” she mumbles
hoarsely, her voice faltering, while her pleading eyes flip back to Merlin. “You know I wouldn’t,
don’t you?” she says. Then, suddenly unsure, she repeats the question imploringly. “Don’t you?”

Merlin believes his sister. He’s seen her remorse, heard her assurances and accepted her apology. It
was genuine enough, he’s sure of it. He can’t sense any animosity in her. No, on the contrary,
Morgana seems more shocked and frightened than ready to attack. But seeing her with a syringe of
Serum certainly did stagger him for a moment.

“I do, Morgana,” he says, “but I think we’re all dying to know how this came into your possession.”

Arthur flinches visibly at the ‘dying’ part of the sentence, but it doesn’t deter him from letting out a
grumpy “I for one, bloody well do.” His eyes are blazing with anger and the tension radiating off
him feels like shockwaves after an earthquake, and God, is he glorious in his outrage! The strength
of love shimmering through Arthur’s action, his protective concern, the determination to keep him
safe, do all kinds of things to Merlin’s heart. He loves me. He really does. God, it feels so blooming
good to say it, think it, all over again. It also hurts like crazy because how much time together have
they got left? A week? Ten days if they’re lucky?

“Why don’t you all sit down?” Merlin suggests, and Arthur complies, settling next to him, the laser
gun remaining firmly in his hand, while Morgana sinks into the sofa chair opposite once again.

“I’d rather stand, if you don’t mind,” Percival says, and Merlin gives him a small nod. It’s so typical
of the forthright man to be cautious.

“We’re all ears,” Merlin says, giving Morgana an encouraging smile, and they listen to the beginning
of her story.

“So Edwin wanted you to switch sides,” Merlin interrupts a few sentences in.

“Yes, once I realized it was Alvarr who’d betrayed us the night of the break-in I knew I had to be
careful.” Morgana manages a tiny smile. “That bloody bastard was deceiving all of us. We believed
every single word he uttered. We followed his instructions for all those months, I …,” she swallows
hard,” trusted him completely while he worked for Edwin all along.” Morgana has talked herself into
one of her angry little speeches, and Merlin can’t help but smile. This is the Morgana he’s always
known. The sister he could rely on. The hot-blooded woman with a kind heart.

Merlin chuckles despite it all. “Must have been a hell of a job for you to keep your cool.” Morgana’s
certainly never been the patient kind.

“It sure was,” Morgana says, her annoyance visible to all. “But when Edwin appeared on the scene I
knew I would never stand a chance against the two of them, and so I played along with Edwin’s
plan. I had to clench my teeth and nip my arm to keep me from blasting someone through the wall.”

“You’re certainly good at that,” Arthur retorts drily, but his whole posture is way more relaxed than
earlier. It seems he does believe Morgana, too. As for Percival, he hasn’t moved an inch and still
focuses on every move Morgana makes.

Morgana has the grace to blush, and her eyelashes flutter nervously when she faces Arthur, “I’m
sorry for that, too. I thought … I was protecting Merlin.” Her stammering delivery sounds close to sheepish. “I would have never thought a Pendragon could be so …” Morgana’s desperately looking for the right word, but Merlin is quick to help her out. “Open-minded? Willing to listen? Honest?” Morgana nods, carefully watching the Arthur’s reaction.

He remains silent for a couple of minutes, his inner struggle apparent to Merlin. He’s not sure how to react. Can he see past what Morgana did to him? It can’t be easy for him after such a short time to let his suspicions go. Merlin sends him a hopeful look when Arthur’s eyes meet his. Give her a chance!

“If Merlin can forgive you, so can I,” Arthur says simply, and then locks eyes with Morgana’s. “That doesn’t mean I trust you.”

“That’s … that’s… thanks,” Morgana stutters, a little flustered and unsure. For a second she looks like bursting into tears. Her mouth quivers and her knuckles are white from clenching the arms of the chair tightly, but she catches herself in the last minute to focus on the task in hand.

“Edwin wants your magic, Merlin.”

“My magic?” Merlin shakes his head in disbelief, but then remembers Edwin’s words after the second injection. “I’m sure that’s what he must have meant when he told me he was looking forward to my contribution in his scheme.”

Arthur looks totally stunned. “Remove the magic from a sorcerer?”

”How is he even going to do that?” Merlin asks. “That’s like ripping out someone’s soul.”

“He said the third injection is essential. He didn’t tell me why. But once I had injected the Serum and you were dead, I was to push the empty syringe straight into your heart …” Morgana needs to stop at that point to steady her voice, “and then the core of your magic would flow into it.”

“By itself?” Merlin’s surprised. He’s never heard anything more unlikely.

Morgana shrugs her shoulders. “That’s what Edwin said. And it had to be done within four days of your death.”

Merlin leans back and goes over the latest information with what he already knows. It takes only a couple of moments before a lightning of understanding hits him. “Three doses of Serum must compress the magic inside a sorcerer to a state where it becomes possible to siphon it off. It must be so compressed, bound so tight, it uses the syringe as an outlet when the pressure is relieved by the sting of the needle.”

“Edwin injected Peterson’s girl-friend a few times. Remember? He did to her what he’s trying to do to you,” Arthur says, and Merlin couldn’t agree more.

“He must have done it to all those MUs who disappeared at Lamia House. God knows what their bodies looked like after Edwin finished with them,” Merlin says.

“But what would he do with the magic of so many different MUs?” Percival seems finally relaxed enough to join in the conversation.

“He was babbling something about a new future, a weapon he would create to use against the Governor. From what he said I got the impression he would be in charge of it.” Morgana explains.

“A weapon?” A shiver runs down Merlin’s spine. “If he can fuse all that magic together and make it
a whole, he would create unimaginable power.”

“Is that possible?” Arthur asks, disbelief written over his face.

“Looks likely he’s found a way,” Merlin says, his mind racing. If Edwin’s able to merge all magic into one giant force and make it his own, he’s going to be invincible.

“We have to get to him before he gets too powerful,” Arthur says quietly, as if he’d been reading Merlin’s mind. “From the sound of it nobody might be able to stop him after that.”

“He’s waiting for me to deliver Merlin’s magic to him. That’s going to buy us some time,” Morgana suggests.

“But he’s not going to wait forever,” Arthur mumbles. “How long do you think you can stall him?”

“Edwin wants me to report back to him in four days at the latest.”

“So he expected you to inject Merlin today?” Arthur presses out between clenched teeth.

Morgana nods. “He did emphasize he wanted Merlin’s magic as soon as possible.”

“I’m sure he did,” Arthur mutters, his voice dripping with sarcasm, as he paces up and down the room. “In any case, it means we’ve got a maximum of four days from now until Edwin expects that syringe back filled with gold.”

“Four days to get that bastard nailed,” Percival chips in grim-faced.

“I need to speak to Leon and get Gwaine back here,” Arthur says. “We have to sit down together to …”

“Arthur! Arthur!” Fiodor’s appearance at the door interrupts Arthur in mid-sentence. His red face and breathless tone suggest he’s been rushing down the corridors to get here as quickly as possible. The young man scans the room to finally focus on Arthur. All eyes are glued to him when he drops the bombshell.

“Arthur! Your father’s just arrived outside! He’s demanding to see you.”

Merlin hears Arthur swear under his breath as he hurries across the room to follow Fiodor. Is Uther here with the Justice Squad trailing behind him? How is he going to react when he finds Merlin in this house? Or does he know already? What is he going to do to all those who’d helped his son? And how will he react to Arthur?

Merlin instinctively tries to get up, but his body fails miserably. With a desperate sigh he stops, when Percival puts his arm on Merlin’s shoulder. “You stay here, Merlin. I’ll look after him alright.” And with that he’s out of the door to join Arthur.

“Merlin,” Morgana draws his attention by the strange tone of her voice, like there’s more bad news.

“What is it?” Merlin says softly, encouraging her to speak up.

“Edwin told me something else. Something … truly awful,” Morgana whispers, staring into space as if she was recounting the most horrible experience.

“You can tell me,” Merlin can’t help a little bit of sarcasm. “If you want to I’ll swear to take it to my grave.”
Morgana throws him an exasperated look, then she takes a deep breath and starts.

“Get the fuck out of my way,” Uther snarls first at Fiodor who’s opened the door to let him in, and then at Percival who’s planted himself into the door frame of the living room. Arthur can hear Uther swearing another couple of times, and before things can escalate he gives Percival a small nod to let Uther through.

And then he is there, facing Arthur like in a stand-off. Uther Pendragon. The Governor. His father. The man who betrayed him. The man who killed his mother.

It’s inconceivable. Arthur’s always respected Uther, loved him as his father, even if Uther was never what you’d call a hands-on parent. But he was there for Arthur, stood by him when the going got tough. Like the times when Arthur was attacked by the press for his numerous affairs and promiscuous lifestyle. Or when Arthur had a bit of a mental melt-down after he broke up with his first boyfriend. Not that Uther talked with him about it, but he sent Arthur on an action-packed holiday to the Caribbean to take his mind off it. Arthur understood it was Uther’s way of showing his support.

\textit{I thought he cared. I really did.} Arthur presses his lips together, disillusionment and intense disappointment clenching his insides tight. He hasn’t allowed himself to ponder about the revelations of his dream. Maybe he pushed the thoughts away deliberately up to now because it hurt too much to think about it. But now he has no choice but to face the music.

For the first time Arthur looks at Uther with detached eyes and what he sees startles him. Uther’s outer appearance is immaculate - his grey hair is styled in a flattering cut and he’s dressed in casual-smart, dark chinos and a light-blue button down shirt. His posture is oozing confidence, his steely gaze undoubtedly commanding. In short, he appears like the man of power he is.

But when Arthur looks past the image his father’s so carefully groomed, he finds an old man, consumed by self-importance and self-righteousness. Hard lines surround his mouth, his face is twisted, and his eyes, rimmed by dark shadows, are piercing into his with acrimony. Is this the man he used to call father? The man he trusted to keep him safe?

Arthur knows all the tell-tale signs when his father’s so boiling with rage inside. He has experienced it often enough over the years. Uther’s thin lips are pressed together in a straight line and a little muscle’s twitching in the right corner of his mouth. His grey eyes have turned the colour of molten lead while he’s gritting his teeth in an effort to keep himself under control.

Arthur bites his lip and braces himself for Uther to speak. He doesn’t have to hold out for very long.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Uther snaps.

“What do you think I’m doing?” Arthur turns the question round, trying to remain calm.

“Do I really have to spell it out to you?”

“Please do.”

“Breaking a convicted murderer out of prison, harbouring him, hiding him from the justice he
deserves. And that’s only the beginning. You’re behaving like a bloody criminal, for fuck’s sake! Do I really need to make clear to you what’s going to happen if this becomes public?"

“Is it going to?” Arthur raises a brow in challenge which seems to infuriate Uther even further.

“Save your bloody impudence! Of course I kept a lid on it so far, but if we don’t amend the situation soon, I can’t guarantee for anything! Particularly not after the rough time we’ve had with the media over the last few months,” he bawls.

“So you’re here to talk sense into me?”

“You bet I am,” Uther replies in a clipped voice.

“So what would you have me do?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Merlin has to return where he belongs – to Lamia House. I have no idea what you want with him here anyway. He’s been injected and he’s going to die. So none of your shenanigans will do him any good. And you’re going to do yourself and your career inconceivable harm if you keep this farce up."

A flush of heat rushes through Arthur, making his hands clammy and his neck uncomfortably sweaty. So he does know what the Serum does. He must have always known. Not that Arthur hadn’t suspected it anyway. But hearing it confirmed by Uther himself still feels like a blow below the belt.

“Merlin’s going to die? Is he? And why would that be?” Arthur asks casually, wondering whether his father’s going to tell him the truth.

Uther’s face falls and he goes very still for an instant. The calculating look he throws Arthur indicates he’s understood the implication of the question. “I see you’ve figured out that the Serum’s got a couple of minor adverse reactions.”

“The harrowing suffering these people go through can hardly be called that!” So far Arthur’s done very well keeping the bubbles of annoyance deep down in his gut, but now they start rising up of their own accord, each bursting into a little flame of anger when it pops to the surface.

“People? MUs aren’t ‘people’ in the normal sense. They are perversions of nature, deceitful and treacherous from the core, corrupted by the gold that lives within them.” Uther’s eyes are blazing as he gives his lecture, and the loathing in his eyes cuts through Arthur like a sword.

“Is that so?” Arthur says very, very quietly, and he hears the threat in his own words. Remaining calm and level-headed is gradually becoming a thing of impossibility.

“You doubt it? I’ve taught you better than that!” Uther shouts, the veins on his neck straining under his anger.

Arthur clenches his fists. It’s the only way he can keep his composure. How can he say all that, right into my face? When he knows...

“Yes, you taught me to fear and despise sorcerers for as long as I lived.” Arthur agrees.

“Then you should understand why they need to be kept in check, why we can’t let them roam and use their magic freely. The Serum helps us to achieve that, and yes, there are side effects, but those convicted deserve every little bit they get.” Uther’s walked up pretty close to Arthur, he’s just at hands-length, and there’s a warning in his eyes Arthur didn’t detect earlier.
“They DESERVE it, do they?” Arthur draws out the word while he holds Uther’s gaze in a battle of will power.

“I think I made myself crystal clear,” Uther says. There are no second thoughts about it. There’s no compassion for the misery the Serum causes and not the slightest concern for those affected.

“Is this why you gave it to me? Because I deserved it?” The silence stretching into every nook and cranny of the room is deafening. You could have heard a needle drop. That’s it. That’s the moment of truth. Arthur’s heart is pounding double quick as he watches Uther blanch and take a small step backwards.

“Gave you what?” the older man says defiantly, but flickers of fear have replaced his earlier indignation.

“You want me to say it, don’t you,” Arthur asks hoarsely, scrutinizing Uther’s every move and every expression. His father looks decidedly uncomfortable now. Good.

Arthur gets himself ready. He straightens his shoulder and stares back at Uther. “There is Serum in my hypospray. Always has been. And YOU have known all along!”

Uther jolts at every sentence, but he’s not ready yet to admit to anything. “How…?”

“Does it matter how I found out? The fact is YOU watched me suffer for over twenty-five years, watched my physical strength go to hell and my life down the drain with it, when YOU could have stopped this at any time!”

“It was for your best. It was necessary to prevent far worse damage.” Does Uther actually look a bit guilty? It certainly seems like it. Weird, because that isn’t an emotion Arthur has ever seen on his father’s face. Not to Arthur’s knowledge at least. Instead of answering, Uther just stares at him, pale, shocked and holding his breath.

For some reason the vague explanation riles Arthur. Why does Uther not simply own up to what he has done? Is he not man enough to admit he was knowingly poisoning me because of my magic? Coward! Arthur screams in his head. Coward! You’re avoiding the truth for as long as you can!

Arthur’s had enough of this cat and mouse game, more than enough. It’s time to hit this where it hurts most. “Worse damage? Like having a sorcerer as a son?”

The effect’s immediate and devastating. Completely shell-shocked, Uther gasps out loud and takes a step backward to hit the sideboard behind him and send a vase tumbling over. “You know,” he croaks.

“I remember,” Arthur whispers, barely able to keep his voice steady. “I remember that night.”

Uther’s eyes widen with recognition and his jaw drops in horror. “No, no. That’s not possible. Edwin said …,” he blurs out, realizing a second later he’s given himself away.

“…I would forget anything to do with my magic as long as I took the hypospray. Isn’t that right?” Arthur says, his lips curling with dismay.

“But I remember what you did that night,” Arthur continues, suddenly icy cold inside. “You killed her. You killed her because she defended me and my magic.”

“Oh my God. No. Arthur,” Uther pants, pure horror reducing him to a shaking mess. “No! I didn’t kill her, I didn’t!”
“I might have been a young boy, but I know what I saw. So stop bloody lying to me!” Arthur says, his voice frozen with anger. His eyes snap up to Uther’s once again, and, haunted by the image of a fragile body on the floor in a darkening room, the accusation comes quite easily. “You killed my mother.”

Uther lets out a strangled cry and sinks on the chair next to the sideboard. He’s hyperventilating, his breath rapidly coming and going, his hands trembling and his legs shaking. “I loved your mother. I loved her with all my heart.”

“Why did you kill her then?”

“It was an accident. I … lost my temper, I smacked her, she fell and hit her head on the edge of the coffee table on the way down. I heard the crack. That crack!” Uther sobs quietly. “I still hear it in my dreams.” With a forlorn look he recounts the rest. “She was dead before she hit the floor. There was nothing I could do. One second she was there, the next she was gone.”

“So that’s what happened, is it?” Arthur’s voice is crippled with hurt while the image of Ygraine’s sobs and cries plays in his mind all over again.

“I have carried that guilt with me ever since, and missed your mother every single day,” Uther mumbles, his voice crackling under the emotional restraint. “I’ve been punished to live with this memory for my whole life, and there isn’t one minute I don’t regret what happened that night.”

Arthur takes a deep breath to ground himself. His eyes scan over the ashen-faced man opposite him. Strangely, he believes his father. Uther must have loved Ygraine to marry her, despite her magic. His words are heart-wrenching, his demeanour’s genuine. His mother died in an accident, directly caused by his father. Does that make him a murderer?

Maybe not, but it still doesn’t excuse what Uther did to her and to him. “Do you also regret wrecking my life with that poison?” Arthur whispers, and when Uther faces him he knows the answer before he hears it.

“You have no idea what it was like when I was young. Camelot was crippled by sorcery. MUs taking liberties wherever they could, using magic ruthlessly to get what they wanted, killing with the click of a finger or the blink of an eye. They humiliated us whenever they could. It was a curse spreading rapidly, and someone had to take a stance against them. Someone had to make sure the citizens of Camelot could lead a safe life, and that someone was me. I learnt early on magic was too powerful to let it roam.”

Uther pauses to take a shaky breath. “But Ygraine – she was beautiful and sincere, and she swore on her life not to be dragged into the depths of magic corruption. Apart from Edwin, she was the only MU I ever fully trusted - until that night.”

Uther’s shoulders drop as he relives the moment that changed Arthur’s life in so many different ways. A single tear loosens from his father’s right eye and trickles over his clean cut cheek. He swallows hard while he wipes the dampness away. Then his gaze returns to Arthur who’s been watching him wordlessly.

“Your magic would have grown and spread and suffocated the goodness in you. I had to save you from that fate.”

“Is that how you justify what you’ve done?” Arthur walks over the large patio window overlooking the lake. “You’d rather have me die than let me be who I really am.”
“You wouldn’t have died. Edwin made sure the dose of Serum in your hypospray was small enough not to harm you, but adequate to keep your magic from appearing. You were only young after all, and your magic was just emerging. I spared you a fate a lot worse than fighting the inconvenient side effects of your medication.”

“Inconvenient side effects?” Arthur snorts bitterly. “Is that what you call the hell I’ve been going through for most of my life?” He closes his eyes for an instant to take a moment of reflection. “I’m not taking the hypospray any longer.”

Uther’s eyes darken in panic at the revelation. “No, Arthur, no!” he blabbers, “You have no idea what…”

But Arthur cuts him short. “No idea? After years of feeling like shit, years of hopelessness and worrying if I could make it through the day, you tell me I have no idea?”

“Anything was preferable to magic taking my son from me.” Uther sounds decidedly defensive. “I hated what the medication did to you. I would have wished a different life for you, free from pain and constrictions. A life where you could have had a family and given me heirs.”

Arthur’s brain pulls the breaks in an emergency stop, as an ugly thought unfolds in his mind, snaking through his thoughts to curl round his heart, strangling it. It takes a couple of moments to compose himself enough to cross the room and stop straight in front of his father.

“Have you any idea how often I wondered why you never gave me a hard time because I preferred men? Why you didn’t pressurize me to meet some politically valuable socialite and make lots of little babies just to carry on the Pendragon line, no matter what my sexual preferences were?” Arthur runs his fingers through his hair, unaware his locks are sticking up in all directions.

“I had the illusion you did it for me. I thought your silence was a sign of your support and I believed you respected my personal choice! God, was I naïve!” Arthur cries out. Fuck, his heart was bleeding before, but this…. THIS is pure agony.

“Now I’ve finally sussed out why you never spoke about things like marriage and children!” Arthur rubs the back of his neck in jerky, little movements. His conclusion is devastating.

“YOU,” Arthur lets out the sob that’s been sitting at the back of his throat. “You didn’t WANT me to marry and have children because you were worried I’d pass my magic on to them! You were happy I was gay because it saved you a lot of trouble containing the spread of magic in your family!”

Uther’s reaction confirms the truth. He crumbles under Arthur’s words like a sandcastle in a heavy storm, rubbing his forehead with a heavy hand and shaking his head nervously. But Arthur’s not finished with him. The fury that’s been building up steadily inside him, reaches for his insides, twists them and fills his heart with aching resentment. And Uther’s silence, his inability to accept he was wrong, his unwillingness to admit his wrong-doings, pushes him on further.

“You are nothing but a hypocrite!” Arthur yells, waves of rage crashing over him in ever-increasing intensity, crushing any common sense and attempts of understanding. He’s too far gone, too hurt to make a rational decision. His anger needs release, before it implodes and leaves more destruction behind.

“You condemn magic, but you condone its use whenever it suits you. You kill sorcerers, but you claim it’s for their own good! You pretend you acted for my own good, when you were happy to jeopardize my health and my future to squash your fears!” The words echo off the walls as heartbroken as they sound, and as they fade to give way to an empty silence, a thunderous blast of energy
forces the two men to cover their ears.

When it dies down every piece of glass in the living room is broken or cracked. The toppled-over vase on the sideboard is smashed to pieces, the mirror above it shattered into tiny shards, the glass of every picture damaged or completely demolished.

“Oh my God!” Uther murmurs when he looks around the room. “You … your magic… God no. It’s already starting.”

“This is what you’re afraid of, isn’t,” Arthur says, inwardly as shell-shocked and dazzled as his father. “Magic. The power of it. It has petrified you all your life and determined all your actions. It has paralyzed you and clouded your mind so much you sacrificed your family for it.”

Uther slowly straightens, gets off the chair and stumbles over to Arthur. “Everything I did, I did out of love. You are my son and I love you. Even now…”

“Even now.” Arthur lets out a bitter laugh. “How generous of you! What am I? A leper? You say you loved my mother, you love me, but you have no idea what that word actually means. Everything you did was fuelled by your selfish fears and ambitions.”

Uther puts his hand on Arthur’s shoulder in an apparent attempt to pacify his son, but Arthur brushes him off and moves a step away. “Arthur, listen to yourself. The Arthur I know would never stand against me like this.”

Arthur grunts in frustration. Uther can’t or won’t understand. So much is obvious. “I’m the same man I was a few days ago. Having magic has changed none of the beliefs I had before. It hasn’t changed my view of what’s right and what’s wrong.”

Before Uther can answer Arthur continues, drawing his father’s eyes to him. “You asked me what the heck I was doing here. I’ll tell you exactly.”

“I’m here because justice has been perverted. A man’s been tried and sentenced on false pretence. Merlin was condemned to death for crimes he didn’t do.” And then, after a pregnant pause, he adds, “And it was you who instigated this mistrial. You needed a scapegoat to take the blame for the magic unrest and you didn’t hesitate to take the law into your own hands to get what you wanted.”

“You can hardly deny Merlin broke into your office? He tried to kill you!!!” Uther counters on top of his voice.

“He tried to save me when the police found us,” Arthur says. It is high time to put the facts right.

“Are you delusional? He was just about to finish you off!”

“He was in the procedure of healing my head wound.”

Uther stares at Arthur with unbelieving eyes, for one moment and another one and then totally unexpectedly, his gaze turns soft and mellow. “I understand now what’s going on here. I saw the first signs of it when I spoke to you before the trial. You wanted to help that bastard, then. Merlin enchanted you, put some kind of spell on you. He brain-washed you into taking his side, into twisting the truth. Arthur, look at you. You’re not acting like yourself!!”

“You will NOT call Merlin a bastard,” Arthur hisses, choosing to ignore the rest of Uther’s nonsensical statement.

“Can you hear yourself? You’re defending him! That sorcerer’s made you into his puppet! I bet it
was him who put you up to stop taking your hypospray!” Uther cries out exasperated.

“That sorcerer saved my life. He saved yours, too. You might have conveniently forgotten that little
detail. That sorcerer is the most honourable man I know. That sorcerer is the man I love.”

Uther takes a sharp intake of breath and blanches. In a sudden move he grips Arthur’s shoulders.
“Arthur! Listen to me! You’re NOT in love with that man! It’s nothing but an illusion. You’ve been
in love with every PA you had the last few years. It’s a pattern you follow, and he’s taken advantage
of it!”

“Merlin didn’t enchant me. He’d never do a thing like that!” Arthur says emphatically. His resistance
to listen to Uther and to stand down from his point of view visibly rile the older man. Uther’s face
has reddened and his demeanour screams tension and animosity. When he turns away from his son,
bitterness is engrained on his face.

“And you seriously believe that?” Uther says. “You’d believe that repulsive, foul piece of filth?” The
accusation hangs between them like a challenge to be picked up. “You’d believe a sorcerer over your
father?”

existed.”

“Can’t you see that every word you say is proof how much your mind’s been turned? To think I put
that deceitful bastard at your side! And now he’s poisoned you to oppose me!”

“I didn’t need Merlin for that,” Arthur can’t believe how stubborn and narrow-minded his father is.
“Merlin never used his magic for his own purpose. But you, you were only too willing to consort
with sorcerers when you needed them to get what you want.”

Uther’s momentarily too baffled to reply, and so Arthur clarifies it for him. “Edwin has magic, hasn’t
he? Another little detail you never cared to share with me.”

“Edwin has magic, but he hates the magic community almost more than me.”

“So that makes him trustworthy?”

“He’s proven his worth a thousand times over. He’s my staunch ally, a man I always could rely on.”

“You trust that sorcerer over your son?” Arthur asks, his voice laced with sarcasm as he throws
Uther’s earlier words back at him. His father grunts in dismay before he turns away shaking his head
furiouas.

But Arthur isn’t finished. “I can prove Edwin was behind all the crimes organized by MUs recently.
He’s the one you should fear because he’s been planning your downfall for months, if not years.
And if we don’t stop him, he’s going to succeed, too.”

“Edwin?” Uther clenches his jaws and lets out a derisive laugh. “So now you’re telling me Edwin’s
the villain in this story? Just to save Merlin’s ass? What do you take me for? It is more than obvious
you’re not in your right mind, but it’s my fault this has happened. I’m not going to lose you. I will
put this right.” The hard determination shining in Uther’s eyes underlines his intentions more than his
words. “I can have the Justice Squad here with the snap of a finger. I’ll have you arrested and taken
into care. And that sorcerer will go back to where he belongs.”

He can’t see past his fear of magic. He’s never going to accept me the way I am now. The way I was
supposed to be. He needs to be stopped. His campaign of vengeance against magic must stop. He
can’t be allowed to hurt any more innocent people.

Arthur stands strong and tall, ready to do what needs to be done. “You will do no such thing,” he says, his composure nothing short of a king. “Percival!” he calls for the good friend who’s been right outside the living room, waiting on stand-by in case Arthur wanted him.

“Percival, the Governor needs a rest. He has the use of the blue bedroom at the end of the corridor, and he will remain there under your guard until I say otherwise. Make sure he’s got no means of communication.”

“You’re putting me under house arrest?” Uther shouts, his eyes bulging out of their sockets. “You dare insult me like this! You …” Uther’s aggression is strangling his breath, and his tirade ends in coughing and snorting.

“Take him away,” Arthur says to Percival quietly. Just as his friend’s huge hand lands on Uther’s shoulder heavily, Morgana comes rushing into the room, frantically waving her arms in the air in alarm.

“Arthur, please! Merlin! It’s Merlin!”

“Nimueh!” Arthur ignores Uther’s short outburst as he sprints past him and Percival, preparing himself for the worst.

Chapter End Notes

Just a reminder that the next chapter will be posted on Friday in two weeks time.
Thanks!
With Morgana close on his heels Arthur races to Merlin’s bedroom, but he screeches to a halt on the doorstep at the scene unfolding before him. Gwen and Hunith are cowering next to the sofa where Merlin’s body lies lifeless and awkwardly slumped to the side.

Everything inside Arthur goes numb and time comes to a sudden stand-still. Merlin! No! is all he can think as he walks towards the small group as if in slow motion. Emotionally drained after the conversation with Uther, his brain refuses to take on board what his eyes are telling him. Merlin! Arthur can’t and won’t think any further.

“What’s happening?” he pushes out when he kneels down next to Gwen who’s just put a stethoscope to Merlin’s chest. The hoarse rasping of Merlin’s lungs, labouring with every inhale and exhale, is barely audible.

“He suddenly collapsed,” she says quietly. “His breathing has deteriorated again, his heart-beat is highly irregular and his temperature’s off the chart.” Gwen looks up at Arthur, her kind face grave and her voice full of trepidation. “It looks like some of his vital organs are starting to shut down. I’ve no way of knowing what’s going on exactly with the sparse equipment I’ve got.”

Arthur hears her words through a haze, nodding automatically. Panic swoops down on him like a bird of prey ready to strike, crushing his usual calm.

This can’t be happening. It’s too soon. Too soon. He’s supposed to have a few more days. I can’t lose him. I promised I would save him. It’s too bloody, fucking soon!

“Arthur!” Gwen’s determined voice forces him to focus on her, rather than get lost in the momentary chaos of his mind. “We need to get him to a hospital. They can probably stabilize him for a little while to buy more time.”

More time. He needs more time. It’s the push that propels Arthur into action. He gets on his legs in a swift move, ready to make a couple of phone calls. The first to organize an air ambulance, the second to speak to Tom Anderson at the hospital, the third to Leon.

“The air ambulance should be here in no time,” Arthur instructs when he turns round to Hunith and Morgana. "Maybe you can pack some of his things?"

It’s not as if Merlin really needs anything special – St. Odin’s provides pretty much everything a patient requires. It isn’t the top private hospital in Albion for nothing. But Arthur’s seen the horror in Hunith’s face, he’s noticed the fear in Morgana’s eyes. Giving them something mundane to do will help them cope, for a short time at least.

While the two women busy themselves, Gwen keeps monitoring Merlin’s heartbeat and his breathing. Arthur returns to her side to let her know what’s going on.

“I filled Tom in on the situation and they’re preparing for Merlin’s arrival as we speak,” he mumbles and takes Merlin’s bony hand, shocked by the intense heat radiating from it.

“Will he be safe there?"

“They’ve got a special suite for patients who want to remain completely private and we can have use of that. I asked Leon to send someone to set up CCTV for it.”

Gwen lets out a sigh of relief while her eyes run over Merlin’s body, “Can you stay with him while I
get my stuff together?” Arthur throws her a tiny smile and moves closer to Merlin when she gets up to collect her things.

God, Merlin looks so ill, so removed from life already. Arthur’s seen people shortly before they pass on and Merlin doesn’t look that different. Arthur suppresses the sob that’s been clogging his throat the last few minutes and bites his bottom lip so hard he can taste a tiny drop of blood on his tongue. This can’t be the end. It can’t be. He pushes an unruly lock of hair out of Merlin’s face and gently rubs his thumb over Merlin’s hollow cheek, trying to connect somehow with the man he loves.

“Merlin. We’re so close! So close. Hang in there just a little longer,” Arthur whispers, his voice urgent and imploring nonetheless. He has no idea whether Merlin can actually hear him, but it doesn’t matter. He needs to speak to him, needs to do something before he starts overthinking the situation. When he bends forward to press a kiss on Merlin’s head, the feeling of being watched creeps up on him.

Arthur looks up to meet Morgana’s eyes, and in the shortest of moments, something like understanding passes between them. In this, their fight for Merlin, they are on the same side. Arthur’s sure of that now, even if he doesn’t trust the woman as far as he can throw her.

Arthur’s still holding Merlin’s hand and mumbling all kinds of endearments when they hear the air ambulance land on the heli-pad outside. The EMTs are rushed into Merlin’s room and only a few minutes later he’s been transferred onto a stretcher and carried into the waiting helicopter. While Gwen takes a seat next to Merlin, Hunith and Morgana buckle themselves in at the front. Before Arthur joins them he’s got to sort one more detail.

“Percival!” he shouts down the corridor to get his friend’s attention. “We’re leaving for the hospital. We have to transfer my father.”

Arthur can hardly leave the two men behind. Percival would hate being separated from him at a time when danger awaits them at every corner. Uther needs to be put in a place where he can do no harm until Arthur can talk to him again and deal with his issues properly.

“What about Ragnor House?” Percival suggests and Arthur nods immediately in agreement. He knows Leon has got some private cells at this prison which are easily guarded and out of the public’s eye. It’s where Leon put the young MU caught after the escape staged by Balinor. As far as Arthur remembers, the police chief has a trustworthy guy there who could keep Uther in check for a day or two.

A short phone call later it is all set up. “Leon says to take him to Ragnor House. Owen Montgomery’s going to be briefed about the situation and will be in charge of Uther once he gets there.” Arthur says and Percival acknowledges the instruction with a tiny nod. “I will join you at the hospital as soon as I have delivered Uther there.” Arthur claps Percival’s shoulder a couple of times and then dismisses any further thoughts about Uther. This is for later. For now his priorities are clear. As he rushes towards the ambulance, Merlin is all on his mind and whether Gaius has made any progress with the antidote.

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Morgana is so tense she’s surprised she hasn’t snapped in two. She’s been trying to keep her composure ever since they arrived at hospital, but realizes she’s near cracking point.
Seeing Merlin attached to about every monitoring device possible with tubes sticking out of his body and needles piercing his arms and hands is hard to take. The machines he’s linked to are beeping quietly, recording every minor change in his condition. There’s a monitor checking his heart rate and respiration activity, another one helping him to breathe more easily, and another of couple of monstrosities for who-knows-what.

It’s been a long day and it seems like a lifetime since Percival drove her to the Lake Cottage this morning. It’s almost midnight now, but she hasn’t been able to close her eyes to relax or sleep. Her mind is overloaded with thousands of questions and her heart’s heavily weighed down by a plethora of emotions. So much has changed in such a short time!

Was it only yesterday that Edwin revealed Uther as her father? Was it only this morning she met the man? She’d heard his outcry when he spotted her in the door behind Arthur. “Nimueh!” he’d called her, and the terror in his voice told her more than any long explanation could have.

“He was horrified,” Morgana mumbles to herself replaying the moment all over in her head. *He knew I was his daughter as soon as he saw me.* Uther Pendragon’s daughter. She simply can’t wrap her mind round it. She can’t imagine at this stage that she ever will. *Out of all the men in this world, HE is my father.* Morgana shakes her head in disgust and disbelief.

She’s tried to work her way through the confusion the revelation’s caused, but with so many unanswered questions careening through her mind, she doesn’t know where to start. Did Uther have a proper relationship with her mother? Did he love her? Did he know she had magic? Why did he kill her? And how? Did Uther ever look for Morgana after her mother’s death? Did she ever mean anything to him? Or did he just hate her very existence right from day one?

Morgana’s wracked her brain trying to piece together the glimpses of memory she has of her early childhood. Her mother’s face. A laugh. A smile. It’s all too vague, too fuzzy to really make sense. The urge to find out more has always been there, but now it’s overwhelming. What she does remember is Edwin taking her to another sorcerer, and she definitely has a clear image of the first time she saw Hunith and Balinor. And Merlin.

Morgana’s mind flips back to the present and her gaze falls on her foster brother who’s been struggling for survival for hours. *He forgave me. Wholeheartedly.* Morgana’s throat tightens with the unshed tears she’s had no time to let loose. *I love him. I want him to be proud of me.* Morgana swallows hard. It’s not as if she can switch her feelings for Merlin off, even though she’s acknowledged he’ll never be hers.

No, Merlin made that pretty clear. His heart belongs to Arthur. No doubt about that. Morgana’s watched Arthur and she’s watched the two of them together. Not to mention the time she saw more than she should have. She’s noticed the small little touches they share, the glances they throw each other, the light in their eyes when they look at each other. It’s bloody torture.

Morgana lets out a heartfelt sigh of frustration. In earnest, she couldn’t fault Arthur, even if she wanted to. Just a day in his presence made very clear what kind of man he is. All the prejudices she’s carried around with her for so many years were easily squashed by his caring attitude and the dedication he showed for Merlin.

And yes, she does regret blasting him through a wall … twice, even if a small part inside her wonders if she has a bad conscience more for Merlin’s than for Arthur’s sake.

Arthur. A flash of unrelenting truth hits her like a sledgehammer. Weird, this hasn’t crossed her mind before, but the last couple of days have been an emotional roller-coaster, and, today, Merlin’s sudden collapse has dominated her thoughts. She’s had hardly time to digest everything that’s happened,
everything she was told.

But this! It’s almost laughable she hasn’t connected the dots. *If Uther is my father, then Arthur is my half-brother.*

Despite everything, Morgana has to chuckle. *I bet Arthur’s going to be ecstatic about the riveting news.* Mind, it isn’t exactly easy for her to process the fact either. *I guess I’d rather be Arthur’s half-sister than Uther’s daughter,* Morgana smirks rather sarcastically, then shakes her head. Has she actually just given the young Pendragon a compliment?

Morgana ponders about the wider implications of her realization. It is more than mind-blowing. How do you come to terms with the fact that the two people you’ve despised most for the best part of your life turn out to be your closest family? And how do you cope with the idea that the brother who’s related to you by blood is in love with the brother you grew up with? So many lines between relationships are blurring, Morgana’s head is close to explosion.

As if on cue Arthur appears in the doorway. The generously appointed medical suit has allowed them all to stay as near to Merlin as possible. Out of the two bedrooms, Hunith and Morgana have taken one and Gwen the other. Arthur decided to bunk on the pull-out sofa in the living room to be up and available should he be needed. Tom Anderson had to promise Arthur he would be notified of every change in Merlin’s condition. The young doctor had also recommended Arthur should take a rest, but it seems the blond hasn’t been able to relax any more than Morgana.

“No change, is there?” Arthur asks rhetorically. Morgana knows she doesn’t have to answer, but she shakes her head anyway.

“When’s Gaius coming tomorrow?” Morgana asks, just to say something.

“Sometime in the morning,” Arthur mutters, no doubt reliving his last conversation with the old family friend.

Arthur had phoned Gaius on their way to the hospital in the hope of encouraging news. Morgana was aware the chemist had been working relentlessly on the antidote since the day Arthur gave him the formula of the Serum and a sample of his own blood.

When Arthur put the phone down the expression on his face needed no further explanation. It was blatantly obvious the news wasn’t good. The time for concocting something as intricate as an antidote had simply been too short. Gaius had come as far as producing the early version of a substance which could be developed into an antidote, but it was too rough, too unrefined to be tried on a living being. Not to speak of a human who was desperately ill.

The empty look on Arthur’s face had said it all – there was no antidote for Merlin. None of them had wanted to think about what that actually meant. But any hopes for some sort of miracle cure were brutally crushed by the report.

“I shouldn’t have left him behind,” Morgana says hoarsely, the old guilt stirring inside her yet again.

“In my office?” Arthur asks and Morgana nods.

“I let Alvarr drag me away, when I swore I would back Merlin up,” Morgana continues, her eyes deliberately avoiding Arthur’s.

“He stayed for me,” Arthur says quietly. “Don’t you think that’s been haunting me every single minute since?” His head turns towards Merlin, his voice faltering. “I would have been fine, but he…”
“…couldn’t help himself,” Morgana finishes for him. “He’s always been like that. Trying to help without any thought for his own safety. He’s a bloody danger to himself, really.” Morgana snorts in exasperation, her twitchy fingers fiddling with the edge of her jacket.

“He saved my life, not only once,” Arthur says, completely choked. “It was my turn to return the favour. But now…” His voice trails off without finishing. There’s no need though, Morgana understands anyway.

They both fall silent, each left to their own thoughts, each wondering painfully what could have been. And their shared anguish, their shared love for the man in front of them entwines their souls in a way Morgana would have never thought possible. Whether she likes it or not, she can’t deny the blossoming of a bond between them. A fragile bond based on a mutual goal and common understanding, but a bond nonetheless.

“I misjudged you,” Morgana says quietly, and she finds Arthur staring at her in bewilderment. “I was adamant you were brainwashing Merlin when it was Alvarr twisting my mind all along. He used me, he used all of us, while you …” Morgana stops to take a deep breath, trying to keep her shame in check.

“I was too blinded by the cause I thought we were fighting for,” Morgana continues, intent to clear the air for once and for all. Merlin would appreciate it, she’s sure of it. However, she isn’t doing it for her brother alone. She may be a hot-head and act impulsively on occasion – well, maybe a little bit more often than that – but she was raised by Hunith and Balinor, who’d taught her what was right and wrong.

She was also brought up to own up to her mistakes, even if it cost her an arm and a leg. “Right,” she looks at Arthur with determination, plucking up the courage to say what has to be said. “I was wrong about you and made assumptions without really knowing you.” Arthur’s eyebrows shoot up at her apparently unexpected speech and he’s about to reply when Morgana holds out her palm to stop him. She has to get through with this before she loses the will to finish.

“That day at your office,” she says, swallowing hard twice, “I wanted you dead. I won’t and can’t lie about that.” Morgana looks straight into Arthur’s blue eyes, gauging his reaction to her confession. “I believed I had you all sussed out, but I should have trusted in Merlin’s judgement of character, instead.” She takes another pause, working herself up to come to the point.

“I do regret what I said and did to you.” Morgana closes her eyes in relief once she’s pushed it out. “All of it.” Arthur appears tongue-tied for a moment, and for a second Morgana thinks he’s going to leave her hanging.

“That was quite an apology,” he says eventually, his eyes resting kindly on her.

“It was. I don’t do things half-way,” Morgana says with a self-deprecating grin, still in turmoil and unsure if she’s reading his reaction right.

“So I’ve noticed,” Arthur replies dryly. “I would hate to get into your bad books again.” A small smile’s playing around his lips, making Morgana hope she’s been absolved.

“Apology accepted,” Arthur finally says, and Morgana can’t help letting out a sigh of relief.

“Good,” she says, regaining her composure in no time at all and ready to downplay how important it was for her to hear that. “Because I’m not going to do it again.”

Arthur chuckles quietly. “Merlin did mention you were a bit stubborn.”
“A bit? He didn’t do me justice then,” Morgana says in mock annoyance which is in complete contrast to her shy smile.

*My half-brother. We are of the same blood.* She scrutinizes his face searching for any likeness between them. *We must both take after our mothers. We don’t look remotely like each other.* In fact they couldn’t have been more different: Morgana is slim, delicate and dark-haired, her figure and complexion in total contrast to Arthur’s tall, broad-shouldered build, and of course there’s his flaxen hair. Arthur’s a few years older than Morgana, which means…the question’s out before she’s thought about it.

“Did you know Nimueh?” she asks breathlessly.

Arthur’s head snaps up in surprise at the sudden change in topic, but there’s a glint of comprehension in his eyes. “After my mother died when I was six, Father sent me to boarding school. I was hardly home, but I did meet her on a few occasions.”

“What was she like?” Morgana’s heart is beating wildly. Somehow getting a first-hand account from Arthur means so much more than hearing it from Edwin.

“She was very beautiful,” Arthur gives her a small smile and a knowing look. “Just like you.”

Morgana’s pulse races double-quick in shock. “You know?”

Arthur shrugs his shoulders and runs his eyes over her figure. “I’m no Sherlock Holmes, but you two resemble each other far too much for it to be random.”

“She’s my mother,” Morgana mumbles. Saying it out loud makes it feel more real for her, too. “And apart from that?”

“The few times I saw her, she was very nice to me. She smiled a lot. She made my father laugh,” Arthur says, his brows knitting together pensively. “She struck me as a bright, successful woman, as far as a kid’s able to judge things like that.”

*He knows I’m her daughter, but does he know we have the same father?* Morgana nervously digs her fingernails into her palms. Can she really risk spilling the whole truth just now? It doesn’t seem to be the right time, the right place. It’s too much, too soon. She’s hardly recovered from her apology. It takes only a split second to take the decision. No, she’ll keep that revelation for later.

So Morgana nods gratefully and wishes she could recall her memories in more detail. “I hardly remember her. Just faint images of dark hair and gentle smiles,” she says.

“I know what you mean,” Arthur says softly, genuine compassion detectable in his voice. Morgana can’t hide her amazement at his empathetic response, before it hits her. Of course Arthur lost his mother, too. At a much later age than she did, but it’s obvious he can relate to her experiences.

“Thanks,” Morgana mumbles. Suddenly, overwhelmed by it all, the tears she’s held back for far too long begin to fall. And Arthur surprises her again when he takes a couple of steps towards her, silently offering a hug. The sensitivity displayed by his action, the tenderness in the gesture are all it needs for Morgana to break down completely, and she sobs into his shoulder uncontrollably, seeking comfort in his strong arms.

When she slowly regains her composure, she gasps at the unlikelihood of the situation. Here is Arthur Pendragon, comforting her and giving her strength, and she isn’t only grateful for his support. No, she’s happy to have a man like him at her side and call herself his sister.
She breaks away to hold Arthur at arm’s length, and when their eyes lock, they both know the relationship between them has shifted. Morgana’s sure it’s for the better, even if it’ll take a while to gain Arthur’s complete trust.

Just as Morgana lets go of him, she becomes aware of something she hasn’t picked up in her grief. Surely her exhaustion must be playing tricks on her, or are the events of the last few days finally proving too much for her?

Surely it can’t be? How is that even possible?

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Arthur watches in puzzlement when Morgana’s eyes suddenly widen and her breath hitches. The whole conversation has been nothing short of a miracle. Morgana’s apology, her remorse, her vulnerability have taken Arthur by surprise. The woman next to him is nothing like the wild, bloodthirsty Valkyrie he met before, something he’d have never expected in his wildest dreams.

“What…?” he starts, while Morgana blurts out “You have magic?” at the same time.

Arthur scratches his head on the side, a tad awkward. For some reason he can’t put his finger on at this very moment, he feels a bit odd about Morgana knowing. Her lips still mouth a silent ‘o’ while staring at him, totally shell-shocked.

“My mother…” he says, and it seems the two words are enough of an answer. Morgana is still unable to utter even a syllable and continues to stare at him with wide eyes. If Merlin’s account of Morgana can be trusted, her response is completely out of character. Remaining silent isn’t something Morgana usually does.

“I haven’t long found out,” Arthur leaves it at that, even if it doesn’t explain anything.

Morgana’s about to speak when a hoarse voice from the bed calls out to them. “Glad you two are talking,” Merlin croaks weakly.

“Merlin,” Arthur’s at his side in two steps and lifts his hand, careful not to disturb the intravenous needle stuck in the back of it. He holds it and then places a small kiss on Merlin’s knuckles. Arthur refuses to register how faint the tingle between them is when they touch.

“A’feel like a cyborg.” Merlin says, slurring his speech while he attempts a cheeky grin. “Resistance is futile, and all.”

Merlin joking just now is almost doing Arthur in. The man’s lying there half-dead and he’s trying to cheer THEM up. It’s beyond comprehension. But Arthur’s more than willing to jump on the bandwagon of a lighter conversation.

“Quoting Star Trek? You really are a nerd, aren’t you,” he quips back.

“It takes one to know one,” Merlin says cheekily, and then adds, “And you love me for it, don’t you?” Arthur sees the smile in Merlin’s eyes and his heart contracts so hard he almost gets dizzy from it.

“I do,” he says, totally serious this time.
“Same here,” Merlin whispers, squeezing Arthur’s hand a little bit harder while his body’s shaken by a violent cough.

Arthur hears Morgana rustling somewhere in the background, muttering something like “need some sleep”, and a second later the door closes behind her, leaving them completely alone.

“You have to stop doing that,” Arthur says, aware of the underlying anguish in his words. Judging by the shadow crossing Merlin’s face, he’s noticed it, too.

“Doing what?”

“Almost dying on me.” Arthur leans forward to run his hand tenderly through Merlin’s hair.

“I wish I could, but I can’t promise,” Merlin says, every word a battle of will. And yet, his eyes are firmly on Arthur’s face, taking in every little expression. “I’m so sorry for putting you through all this.”

Arthur lets his head sink lower trying to hide the trembling of his lips. “The doctors have been able to stabilize you. It’ll buy us a little more time.”

Merlin acknowledges the comment, but doesn’t respond.

“I’m so hot,” he whispers, barely audible, as he’s staring into a space behind Arthur. “It’s like a wildfire devouring my body from inside.”

You must be strong for him. Stay strong. Arthur clenches his teeth and gets a grip of the emotions threatening to overpower him. “I’ll call the doctor to adjust your medication,” he says, but when he looks up he realizes Merlin’s slipped back into the unconscious. Just like that. The machines around Merlin beep away in the background, every single sound emphasizing how little time he has left.

The silent scream erupting inside Arthur shatters his heart, its debris burying his soul underneath.

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Gaius is later than Arthur expected. By the time he arrives at the hospital it’s almost midday. Arthur’s near breaking point. He’s been pacing up and down next to Merlin’s bed like a caged tiger for hours, or so it seems. After the interlude the previous night, Merlin’s state of health has deteriorated further. Although Tom was able to get his temperature under control, his liver’s giving up and his heart goes from racing violently to almost stopping completely in infrequent rhythms.

Hunith and Morgana have been with him all morning, each taking their turns sitting next to Merlin, holding his hand and talking to him, while Gwen has made herself useful in every possible way. It all looks so bloody desperate, so final, Arthur wants to bang his fists against the wall and scream until he’s hoarse.

It doesn’t take much for Gaius to assess the situation when he enters the room. He quickly embraces Hunith and Morgana before he approaches Merlin.

Arthur gives him a minute to digest the gravity of Merlin’s condition before he asks the question he’s had on his lips ever since he spoke to the old chemist the day before.
“Have you got it?”

Gaius looks round everyone, his hesitancy causing Arthur’s heart to plummet. The old man sighs heavily. “I need to speak to all of you.” He gestures them over to the sofa at the end of the room, and they all settle there as requested.

The old man sighs again, making eye contact with each of them, as if he wants to apologize for what he’s going to say. “I’ve done what I could in the time available. I worked all through last night, and I managed to make some minor improvements to the substance I spoke to you about yesterday.”

Everybody’s eyes are glued to Gaius, each of them holding their breath in anticipation. He picks a small case out of his coat pocket and opens it to reveal a syringe with a colourless liquid.

“This is it and it’s as good as it gets. Without your blood sample, Arthur, I wouldn’t even have managed that. It gave me a head start.” Gaius gives Arthur a strained, but benevolent smile.

“But you need to know that this is pretty rough. There’s no doubt it has promise with a lot more input and refining. At the moment…,” Gaius makes a pointed pause, “I can’t guarantee anything. I’ve no way of telling what it’s going to do exactly and how Merlin will be affected by it.”

The silence following Gaius’s proclamation is deafening. Arthur’s suddenly hyperaware of every single sound in the room. The ticking of a clock, the beeping of the machines that keep Merlin alive, the quiet squeak of Gaius’s shoes on the floor, the torn sob Hunith can’t suppress, the scratching of Morgana’s fingernails against the leather sofa and Gwen’s silent gasp as she puts her hand over her mouth.

“So we’re basically going to use Merlin as a guinea-pig,” Arthur whispers.

“Yes,” Gaius says sadly with a shake of his head.

Hunith lifts her weary face to her old friend. “If this gives him even a ten percent chance I know what I’d say.” The rest nod in agreement.

“I wish Merlin could decide for himself.” Arthur throws an uneasy glance in the direction of the bed.

“I think we all do, but if he remains unconscious we’ve no choice but to make the decision for him.” Morgana gets up and puts her hand on Arthur’s arm. “What do you think he’d do?”

“What?” Merlin’s cranky voice makes them all jump, and a moment later they’re all surrounding him.

“Looks like a bloody death bed,” Merlin swears, checking the tearful faces around him. “Want to sit up.” Arthur immediately complies and slides his arms round Merlin’s bony back to lift him into a sitting position. It’s not an easy task without ripping any of the tubes loose.


A small grin appears on Merlin’s face as if he’s just heard something funny. “Bit of an irony that a chemist should become the testing ground for his own research.” A cough is tearing through his lungs and renders him unable to speak for an instant. When he recovers, he grins again. “Just like Iron Man,” he chuckles. “Hope it has similar results.”

“Merlin,” Arthur says, exasperated at his nonchalant attitude. “Do you understand the implications?”
“Come here,” Merlin says and Arthur leans forward as much as possible so their faces are virtually touching. When Merlin pulls him even closer to place a gentle kiss on his mouth Arthur gasps at the sweetness of it. A second later his insides freeze when he realizes the faintness of the tingle between them. In fact, it’s hardly there. His desperation rockets sky-high.

“It’s between a certain or a possible death. What would you pick?” Merlin rasps with effort.

The blunt, but honest question cuts straight through Arthur’s heart. He hasn’t noticed how much his hands tremble and his body’s shaking. “I’m scared,” he whispers as he presses his cheek firmly against Merlin’s. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“I promised you could show me what agreeable means, didn’t I?” Merlin says with the attempt at a wink as he pulls back.

“You did. I’m holding you to that.” Arthur says, breathing in Merlin’s scent, committing it to memory.

“Merlin,” Hunith says and gives her son an encouraging smile. “We’ll get through this. We will.” Arthur looks at her with the deepest respect. He has no idea how she does it. To stand as tall and strong when her son’s dying right before her eyes, and in the same way her husband did. It has to hurt like hell to watch Merlin. *Must be a family trait to be strong in the face of adversity.*

Hunith kisses Merlin and Morgana gently strokes his shoulder, while Gwen sterilizes his arm in preparation for the injection.

“Ready?” she asks, sharing a glance with Merlin. He then takes a very deliberate look at the people he loves, and Arthur cringes.

“You are not saying good-bye,” he says accusingly, drawing Merlin’s eyes to his, and a tidal wave of love almost drowns him. They both know the odds, but it’s this or nothing else.

“Hold me, please,” Merlin says. So Arthur slips onto the bed to Merlin’s side and positions himself slightly in front of him, so he can embrace Merlin more easily.

“I’m here,” Arthur mumbles against Merlin’s mouth before their lips touch. It’s the gentlest of kisses, a confirmation of their love and a sign of their mutual trust.

“Merlin?” Gwen asks, waiting for his go-ahead.

“Do it.” Merlin says quietly, pressing his forehead to Arthur’s.

Silence spreads in the room one more time, and Arthur wonders fleetingly whether the clock striking full hours just when Gwen pushes the needle of the syringe in Merlin’s vein has any significance. He watches breathlessly as the liquid disappears in Merlin’s body. Gwen pulls the syringe out and cleans the wound before she puts a plaster on it.

The tension in the room is tangible. The fear, the hope, the desperation, the love, all creating a heady mix of intense anticipation.

A deafening roar splits the thick atmosphere as Merlin’s body arches up in pain. His limbs start shaking uncontrollably while the rest of him convulses. *This is what he did when he was injected with the Serum. This is going wrong. It’s going wrong.* Arthur’s knows he’s near losing it, but he has sworn to hold on, to be there for Merlin, and he makes himself bear it.

Merlin’s face has turned ashen and his eyes are dark and unseeing with pain. His temperature’s rising
rapidly as the drug is tearing through his body.


Arthur instinctively understands Merlin wants to say something and he cups the back of his head to help him lift it. Merlin’s eyes go soft and warm for a second, his lips forming three words Arthur recognizes without needing to hear them.

“Merlin,” he whispers, but just then the body in his arms goes limp.
The powers within

It is dark and totally silent. The connection to the outside world’s been brutally severed with one single snip. The last thing Merlin hears is Arthur screaming his name out in terror. His mind and his conscience have left reality. His eyes can’t see, his ears can’t hear. He is floating in a dimension between life and death as the battle inside his body’s coming to a head.

The Serum strangles his magic with an iron fist, not giving an inch. The intense pressure keeps bearing down on it mercilessly, preventing its natural flow and the need to express itself. It’s been going on for hours, for days, for too long. Merlin’s body can’t take any more. The heat is ravaging it, runs ransack now, mangling whatever is left of him.

It’s a fight he can’t win.

Without warning, the darkness around him rips apart and a blinding light emanates from the tear. A light, full of promise and hope. A light leading to a realm where anguish and sorrow don’t exist. Merlin’s drawn to it like a magnet and he stumbles forward, one step, then another one. The flames consuming him soon won’t hurt him any longer. There’s solace in the thought.

He’s so close to it, so close. Calm descends upon him, and peace. Something all-encompassing is waiting for him there. Something ready to anoint his wrecked body with soothing balm. Something offering to wrap his soul in tranquil serenity. One more step.

An unexpected ripple of gold surges through him out of nowhere. It’s magic. Merlin revels in the feel of it. It’s not his own, he’d know. It reaches out to him, holding him back, willing him to stop. Stay! The strength of it makes him pause and wait.

Just then another force starts unfolding inside him. The colourless liquid spreads steadily through his veins until it encases each droplet of Serum. It starts hacking away at the blue poison as soon as they come into contact, its aim to penetrate the unyielding wall formed around Merlin’s magic. The liquid pulls and pushes, it turns and twists, infiltrating the intricate pattern of the formula, but there’s no budging it.

Another tide of magic washes over Merlin, this time combining forces with the liquid, adding to it, changing it, refining it. It takes a moment or two. Then, unexpectedly, the Serum gives way a little. The liquid takes advantage at once, attacking it tenaciously, bombarding it from all sides, until, with a sudden crack, the Serum succumbs to the tenacious invasion.

It implodes unceremoniously without further ado, its chemical properties breaking down bit by bit, crumbling under the onslaught of the opposing powers. A third rush of magic ultimately sounds its death knell. The formula falls apart like a house of cards, splitting into its many components, in the end dissolving into sheer nothingness.

And Merlin’s magic soars.

“He’s been out for three days. Is there nothing we can do to wake him up?” The anxious words are faint, spoken in the far distance, but they’re the first thing to cut through the thick haze, clogging
Merlin’s brain.

“I can’t risk that,” someone says. Gaius? It sounds like his old friend. Merlin’s mind is clearing slowly as he gradually slips back into the present. “He will take as long as his body needs to repair itself.”

“You’re sure that’s actually happening?” That’s Arthur. He sounds so tired and so worried. Merlin’s heart takes a leap when a hand slips into his, squeezing it lightly. The tingle that follows is so intense, so powerful, it startles him into full consciousness.

In an instant he realizes a few things simultaneously.

1. He’s not dead.
2. The machines that kept him alive not long ago have disappeared, so have all the needles and tubes that had been attached to him in one way or another.
3. He doesn’t feel any pain.

And then, finally, the most momentous perception of all: His magic. It’s back. He can sense it humming happily inside him. It’s as if somebody had sewn on a missing limb. Merlin groans, unaware the noise escaping his mouth doesn’t quite translate the delirious joy he actually feels.

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“Merlin, my dear boy,” Gaius says, sounding alarmed.

“Merlin!” Arthur shouts at the same time, no doubt alarmed by the sudden flare of the tingle.

Merlin pops his eyes open to find Gaius and Arthur staring back at him, distress etched all over their faces.

Arthur sits down at his side, clearly unable speak, but the sheen on his eyes says it all. Merlin squeezes Arthur’s hand and sends him a lop-sided smile. “Still here.”

This time Arthur groans out of plain exasperation, and as he bends forward to fold Merlin into his arms, the trembling of his hands gives away how much this means to him. When Arthur pulls back to scan Merlin’s face, he finds his voice again.

“How’re you feeling?” he asks hoarsely.

“As if a tank had run me down.” Merlin stretches his arms and legs, taking stock of his physical state. His whole body’s aching, but not in a bad way. Yes, his voice is still a bit throaty and all his muscles are sore … everywhere, but apart from that, he feels fine. It’s actually ridiculous, considering what he’s gone through, and he says as much.

“So the Serum, it’s gone?” Arthur asks, looking for reassurance.

Merlin nods and turns his face to Gaius. “It worked. You are a genius.”

“That stuff was only a trial version. I wouldn’t have thought it was that potent.” Gaius raises his right eye-brow in bewilderment.

“It wasn’t.” Merlin says, his comment earning a baffled look from his mentor. “It wouldn’t have worked if you hadn’t kick-started it with magic.”

“What do you mean?” Gaius clearly has no idea what Merlin’s talking about.

“You used some magic after the injection to enhance the liquid, to make it work properly, didn’t
you?” Merlin can’t hide his puzzlement at Gaius’s reaction.

Gaius shakes his head, a huge question mark hanging above him. “I did no such thing, but …” His eyes flit to Arthur, who’s gaping at both of them. “Arthur kind of …”

“What?” Merlin’s at a loss about what Gaius is trying to say, but Arthur jumps in to explain.

“I kind of … freaked when you went unconscious. One of those intense emotions, you know, one of those causing my magic to do strange things.” The blush on Arthur’s face intensifies with each word. When he continues, his voice drops low. His body language, his eyes, his facial expression all indicate he’s not exactly comfortable speaking about this.

“It was a strong reaction, indeed,” Gaius confirms with a small smile.

When Merlin looks at Arthur questioningly, he sighs and quietly adds. “I held you and I might have screamed your name, and my magic just erupted…” He stops in mid-sentence, a sheepish grin playing around his lips.

“We had to get the caretaker and two of his men put all the furniture back in its place afterwards,” Gaius adds, teasing Arthur good-naturedly.

Merlin chuckles. “That bad?”


“Sorry,” Merlin says and runs his fingers soothingly through Arthur’s unkempt hair and over his scruffy chin.

“You promised not to die on me again, remember?”

“I didn’t die. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“It sure looked like it then.” The memory causes Arthur to shudder, and he unconsciously tightens his embrace.

For a moment Merlin’s not sure whether to go into this any further. Hasn’t Arthur worried enough to burden him with the further knowledge how close it had been? But I want him to understand fully what he’s done for me. I want him to see what amazing things magic can conjure up.

“I was almost there,” Merlin says softly, trying to break the news to Arthur as gently as possible.

Arthur closes his eyes and takes a couple of deep breaths. “Almost? So you did nearly die?” he pushes out between his teeth, his face turning ashen again.

Merlin bites his bottom lip. This has hit Arthur hard, and even though Merlin’s next to him now – alive and fine, he’s gone through the same trauma as someone who’s lost a loved one for real and he’ll need time to work his way through it.

“You called me back. Your magic stopped me,” Merlin says with a lump in his throat, his voice conveying the significance and enormity of Arthur’s action.

“Me?” Arthur swallows hard, disbelief evident in his eyes. He obviously hasn’t got the slightest clue what he did.

“Yes, you.” Merlin starts to massage calming circles on Arthur’s back, and the blond instinctively leans into his touch. “Your blood and your magic saved me, Arthur.” Merlin grabs Arthur’s
shoulders, his thumbs caressing his collarbones. “I wouldn’t be here without you.”

“Fuck, Merlin.” Arthur’s too distraught to censure his words. Not that they need any more words.

Merlin leans into Arthur to brush his lips chastely. It’s a comforting kiss, slow and deliberate, with Merlin pressing his thumb lovingly against the corner of Arthur’s mouth, while Arthur holds him close at the nape of his neck, his index finger playing absent-mindedly with the dark locks covering it. But then all the pent-up emotions of recent weeks, the fear, the desperation and the anguish, take a hold of both of them and the kiss deepens, becoming more urgent and fierce.

To be here with Arthur, is a gift, almost a miracle, and gratitude and love swells in Merlin’s heart for the man in his arms and everything he’s done for him. “Thank you,” he mumbles against Arthur’s lips, before he hungrily dives back into his mouth. Merlin doesn’t notice a tear loosening and trickling down between their cheeks until Arthur pulls slightly away and wipes it off with his fingertips.

“If it wasn’t for me you’d have never got into that mess,” he says with a self-deprecating grimace.

“If it wasn’t for you, I would have never found what we have,” Merlin says and, when Arthur wants to reply, stops him by putting his index finger over his mouth. “If it wasn’t for you, we’d have never come as close to an antidote for the Serum.”

Instead of saying anything else, Merlin crushes their lips together again, putting all his feelings into that one kiss, happily losing himself in Arthur. They both forget everything around them, until a noisy thump startles them into looking up. The bedside table has moved right across the opposite wall where it apparently hit the sofa coming from the other direction.

“Seems your magic likes me,” Merlin laughs.

“Not only my magic,” Arthur says quietly, smiling against Merlin’s cheek.

“Still need to tame it,” Merlin grins, “It’s a bit temperamental at the moment.”

“Just a bit.” Arthur’s eyes are beaming at him. “You know, I still haven’t got quite used to the idea.”

“It’ll take time.”

“Will you teach me?”

“I’ll do what I can,” Merlin says, mischief twinkling in his eye. “On one condition,” and when Arthur looks at him in anticipation, he continues. ”You have to explain your definition of agreeable to me.”

“I sure will,” Arthur mumbles as he buries his face in Merlin’s hair.

A discreet cough makes them turn round to find Gaius at the door. Not that they heard him leaving, but he must have at one point because he has brought Hunith and Morgana with him.

Needless to say Merlin’s showered with affection from all sides, Hunith holding his left hand, and Morgana his right. Arthur chivalrously gives up his place at Merlin’s side to allow the ladies a private chat with him. In the midst of it all Merlin’s stomach suddenly rumbles so loud, it can’t be missed. Hunith and Morgana stop prattling and chuckle, their relief evident at such a wonderfully normal reaction.

“I’m starving,” Merlin says, and looking down on his body, he consciously notices how skinny he is
for the first time. If he’s honest with himself, he does look painfully thin. He raises an eye-brow, aware Arthur’s been watching his inspection from across the room.

“You need feeding up,” Arthur says, and Merlin rolls his eyes and gestures towards Hunith. “You sound like her.”

“He’s right though, and you better listen to him,” Hunith says resolutely, exchanging a conspiratorial glance with Arthur. “What would you like to eat now?”

Merlin can’t help grinning from ear to ear. This must be one of the best moments of his life. Here he is, alive and healed, surrounded by those he loves most. He gratefully watches their elated faces and their excited chattering, just one thought dampening his joy. Wish this could have happened in time to save dad, Merlin thinks wistfully, even though he knows there was never any chance of that.

He sends a heartfelt message to where ever Balinor may be, before he joins the conversation again, not allowing the fleeting niggle about what Edwin and Alvarr might be up to next, spoil his good mood.

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Uther’s pacing up and down the small room, trying to work off some of the aggression he’s felt since Percival ‘delivered’ him at Ragnor House four days earlier and locked him into this bloody cell.

How could Arthur do that to me? How? Uther’s world has been turned upside down since their conversation at the Lake Cottage, and his feelings sway between fury and worry for Arthur in regular intervals. What irritates him most though is the idleness forced upon him. Something needs to be done before Arthur causes a major catastrophe. In his current state anything could happen, and everything Uther’s built up for so many years might be lost.

There can be no doubt Arthur’s in the grave danger of succumbing to the corrupting influence of magic. Challenging him the way he did, contradicting him, arguing against him, all prove it, not to speak of putting his own father behind bars.

Edwin will know what to do. He always finds some solution or other. If Arthur has to be sent to a closed facility until the magic’s been exorcised out of him, so be it. I will NOT lose my son to that perversion. It is bad enough Uther lost both the women in his life because of it, for one reason or another.

Talking about THAT day with Arthur had been gruelling. Ygraine’s tear-stained face haunts him almost every night, her eyes begging him to change his mind, her lips quivering and her hands shaking with desperation and … fear. He hates the thought she was afraid of him. In the end, she wasn’t afraid enough to keep Arthur’s magic from him. She had broken his heart that day, and he’s never recovered from it, but he hasn’t been able to forgive her wholly, either.

She betrayed me, just like Nimueh. Uther chuckles bitterly. How blind and ignorant he’d been not to notice what the black haired witch was up to! He’d been aware of her affections for a long time, and when Ygraine died, she’d been there for him, supported him and made sure he got through every day.

It had been pleasant to have the attention of a woman, and he appreciated her efforts, but he wasn’t
in love with her. Until suddenly, one day, from one moment to the next he saw her in a different light. More beautiful, more desirable, more … everything. Then, he’d been certain he was in love. God, he’d been deliriously happy when she agreed to be with him.

Not that he ever made it official. He couldn’t allow that so soon after Ygraine’s death. And it definitely wouldn’t have gone done well with PR to have an MU as a girlfriend while he was fighting a public war against magic. Nimueh detested all those ‘little magic users’, fumbling around with easy spells and condemning people like her, who had real powers, dark powers, that could be used to much more effect.

Her own kind had shunned her since childhood, but then she met Edwin, and him, and they swore an oath of allegiance to bring magic to its knees, to make sorcerers tremble before them, to root out the evil it spread. Uther had trusted her oath, he’d respected her intelligence, until one day, three years into their relationship, he noticed Nimueh slipping something into his coffee.

That was another dark day. She confessed on her knees she’d used a potion to make him fall in love with her. He can still hear her assurances of love echoing in his ears. Love. What a fucking nerve. She’d degraded him, just like those MUs in his childhood who’d humiliated him on a daily basis.

Those boys had loved flaunting their powers and taken pleasure out of stalking him and practising their magic on him. He’d been their guinea-pig for every spell going, and he lost count how often he ended up blue and black, hurting everywhere after being thrown against walls, bashed against trees and ….half dead after being force-fed some roughly concocted potion. He’d tried to fight them, tried to report them, but people were helpless against sorcery. That’s when he swore that one day, he would stop that misery, he would stand against the evil spread by magic. And he had. And he was proud of it.

“Yes, I’m proud of it,” Uther mumbles under his breath. He’d stuck to his guns, even when it meant sentencing Nimueh just like any other MU. She’d abused magic and deceived him, and the Serum was what she deserved.

What a shock to his system to see a virtual double of her the other day. But he’d been totally confounded when the woman in question turned up at his prison cell two days earlier.

“You have a visitor,” the guard said.

A visitor? Arthur’s finally had the guts to come and apologize, was Uther’s first reaction. When Morgana entered the cell, his heart contracted for a second. She was so much like her mother. She is also my daughter. There had never been any question about that.

Uther had been surprised when Nimueh announced her pregnancy because they’d never discussed having children, but at the time he’d taken it in his stride out of love and simply set up a house for them. Being seen together publicly with either had never been an option. He’d only met the girl on a few occasions, Nimueh keeping her away from him as much as she could. Probably worried, I would take charge of the child and arrange treatment for her like Arthur, Uther thought grimly.

He’d never particularly cared about his second off-spring, but here she was, and she wasn’t wasting any time on pleasantries, coming straight to the point. “You know who I am.” She wasn’t asking, but stating the fact. So there would have been no point denying it.

“You’re Nimueh’s daughter. You’re the spitting image of her,” he said cagily. What did she want? Why was she here? As long he didn’t know he’d hold his cards close to his chest.

“So I’ve been told,” Morgana said dryly. She tilted her head a bit to study him from the side. “Can
you imagine why I have come?”

“I can’t wait to find out,” Uther said, sarcasm lacing his words.

“Are you my father?” Morgana pushed her chin forward, determined and unafraid. Her eyes were piercing into his, daring him to tell her the truth. Uther had to admit he was impressed. It had to take a lot of courage to come to the most powerful man in Camelot to ask that. In that fashion. His lips were twitching in a smile. *She is my daughter alright. Which also means she’s entitled to ask for DNA testing and could cause quite a scandal with it.*

“I am,” he answered simply. Morgana took a sharp intake of breath, and her face went even whiter than it had been already.

“You killed my mother.” Another statement. That girl was certainly direct.

“I didn’t kill her,” Uther said, meaning it.

Morgana looked confused for a second, but she quickly regained her composure. “Maybe not personally, but I know you caused her death. Why?”

“She deceived me. She used her magic against me. She was sentenced according to the law.” *And this is how it should be.*

Morgana stared at him with wide eyes. “The Serum? You sentenced her to that?” Only the tremble of her upper lip gave away how much it affected her. “What did she do?”

Uther told her in no uncertain words, and that time Morgana couldn’t hide her emotions any longer. She was shocked by his revelation, it was obvious. Whether it was for her mother’s crime or his own actions, he couldn’t tell.

“She died because she wanted you to love her.” Well, that was one way of putting it. Uther might have phrased it a little bit differently. But there was nothing to add to that.

Silence stretched for longer than comfortable, until Morgana spoke up again. “I was told, you wanted me dead, too.”

Uther measured her from top to toe. He wasn’t going to ask her who or what her sources for all this were. She wouldn’t reveal it most likely, anyway. But this was where he had to set the record straight. “When Nimueh disappeared, I looked for you. You are of my blood. I was going to honour my duties as a father.”

“A father?” Morgana spit it out like a bitter pill. “How can you even put the word into your mouth?” She took a step towards him, her breath agitated and strained.

“I had search parties out for days, even weeks, but you’d disappeared from the face of this earth, and eventually I had no choice but to give up.” Truth was he’d actually been quite relieved when the girl couldn’t be found. He’d had enough on his hands with Arthur and his unfortunate gift. Having to keep another magical offspring under control had seemed one burden too many.

“Is that so?” *Cynical, too?* Uther thought, while making the decision to get this over with.

“You can believe me or not, Morgana. None of the past matters now.” Uther shrugged his shoulder. There really wasn’t any use crying over spilled milk. What he was interested in was the future. “What do you want from me now? Money? A position? A car?”
That’s all you think of, isn’t it?” She pulled her shoulders straight and faced him directly. “You’re worried I might go public with this. You think I’ve come for some kind of hush-money.” Even Uther couldn’t fail to hear the contempt in her voice. Bloody cheek really, considering what her mother had done.

“There must be something I can help you with,” Uther started, but Morgana interrupted him quickly, “Against a signature on a no-claims form, I assume.”

“That wouldn’t go amiss,” Uther said coldly. He’d had enough of this futile conversation now, and if he’d been in his office, he would have already thrown her out.

“Let me make this clear for once and for all, Uther.” No doubt, Morgana deliberately called him by his first name. “I don’t want anything from you. Nothing at all. I came here today to see what kind of man you are. I wanted to know if my impression of you was right or wrong.” Morgana paused to throw him a disgusted look.

“I’d rather cut off my arm than take hand-outs from you. You are a cold-hearted, bitter, evil old man, and I thank my lucky stars I wasn’t brought up under your care but by people who truly loved me.” And at that, Morgana turned on her heels and was out of the door before Uther could say another word.

Even thinking about it now, two days later, the whole thing galls Uther. Sorcerers. Witches. They’re all the same. Full of themselves. Arrogant. Ungrateful.

That’s exactly why he has to save Arthur from this fate. He has to get to Edwin somehow. There’s much to be discussed. But first he has to persuade the guy outside to let him go.

So far Montgomery has been unflappable. Offers of money and promotion have been dismissed without any hesitation. But Uther’s sure he’ll be able to ‘encourage’ the young man to open that damn cell door if he finds the right thing to get under his skin. He IS the Governor after all. And as long as he’s in power, he has got the say about who lives and who dies. He has the right to decide the fate of every single citizen in Albion, and Montgomery’s one of them. All he needs to do is tighten the thumb-screws.

Exactly four days after arriving at Ragnor House Uther leaves through a back door in the early hours of the morning, heading straight for Lamia House to a meeting with Edwin.

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Arthur’s sitting on the make-shift bed he’s organized so he can spend the night next to Merlin. His arms are folded behind his head as he stares in the semi-darkness of the room, concentrating on the rise and fall of Merlin’s chest and the regular sound of his breathing.

Sleep has eluded him yet again although he’s been trying to relax, think happy thoughts and even count sheep. Hearing Merlin breathe normally rather than wheeze and rattle is overwhelmingly gratifying, seeing him talk, chatter and laugh a miracle he’d almost stopped believing in.

But the scare of Merlin’s near death and the torment of four endless days of waiting for any improvement have been grinding on his nerves. Even now, though Merlin’s safe and alive before his very eyes, he finds it hard to unwind completely. Maybe, somewhere in the back of his mind, the fear that the Serum might still cause some more trouble, that Merlin might relapse, that this wasn’t the
end, keeps him on edge.

*Stupid idiot*, he curses. *Merlin’s made very clear the Serum’s gone.*

And HE has been the deciding factor for that. It’s hard to digest he could have done a thing so miraculous. With his magic. Arthur closes his eyes and focuses on his inside. Merlin says he can sense his own magic. Arthur is aware of his heartbeat and his stomach gurgling away busily. He feels the tiredness of his limbs and the tension in his back. But is there anything else, something that wasn’t there before?

Not long after Arthur’s mind retreats into his body and he starts to doze, he reaches the twilight zone between sleeping and waking. And there it is. A sensation he’s not consciously registered so far. It feels like a warm buzz right under his heart, swirling and meandering round his body, jumping and diving through his veins, exuding a quiet power ever ready for his use.

*It’s awesome. It makes me feel so alive, so connected with everything around me and … Merlin.* The last finding catches him by surprise, but it’s true nonetheless. If he really pays attention he’s able to sense his magic pulling him towards Merlin, reaching out for him and seeking his presence. Arthur chuckles. *Merlin was spot on when he said my magic likes him.*

“Not many, not in this lifetime or any other, have the bond you two share,” Gaius said to him in a private moment earlier in the evening. “It’s multi-layered in so many ways. The love you share, the magic flowing between you, but most of all your connection forged by destiny, the tingle, as you call it. I’m sure it was the combination of all those wondrous powers that enabled you to tweak the Serum and save Merlin.”

Arthur could only nod, tongue-tied, trying to internalize the lecture.

“You, Arthur Pendragon, have achieved something truly amazing today. Merlin lives, and the antidote inside him will change the history of Albion forever. If you allow it. The destiny of magic is in your hands, my boy.”

It warmed Arthur’s heart to hear Gaius use the same terms of endearment he always reserved for Merlin. But it was his words that truly got under Arthur’s skin, and they’re still ringing in his ears now. Things will have to change, there’s no doubt about it. It’s going to be a momentous task, and he’ll need Merlin beside him to shape a future where every citizen in Camelot, magic or not, is able to live a life without fear.

But before that can happen, they’ll have to deal with Edwin. They have to stop him in time before he can use the superpower he’s created and bring Camelot to its knees. And with that thought firmly in mind, Arthur drifts off, half an ear and an eye open to watch over Merlin.

It’s the faint sound of a squeaking door wakening him a few hours later, or was it something else? Adrenaline instantly pumps through Arthur’s veins, sharpening his mind and senses. But there’s nothing to hear apart from a far-away car, screeching around a corner, and nothing to see but the first rays of light, tentatively breeching the darkness in the depth of the room.

And yet, Arthur’s sure somebody’s in the room. It can’t be anyone of their entourage because there’s no reason for them to sneak around like that. Whoever it is has certainly not come with the best of intentions. Every fibre in his body’s suddenly on alert, and his ears strain to determine where the intruder is.

Arthur knows he can’t be seen from the door because his bed is on the floor behind Merlin’s, so he’s hidden from immediate view when entering the room. He waits with bated breath for another move,
for a sign of the intruder’s plan. It takes another few seconds before silent footstep tip-toe across the room, approaching him.

Why hasn’t the alarm rung? Surely the guy’s been spotted by the CCTV cameras? And what about Percival who was standing guard outside the suite? Whoever has broken in must be an MU. There’s no other explanation. Nobody else would have got past security like that. Arthur weighs up his options in the fraction of a second. Should he confront the person, even if it’s a person of magic? Would he have any chance? Can he maybe use his mobile to call for help?

The intruder stops next to Merlin’s bed. It’s a guy. Arthur can spot his shoes and legs from his low position. He must be looking at Merlin. What the fuck does he want? Some rustling and a metal click let Arthur’s imagination run wild, and when the man leans forward he’s suddenly way, way too close to Merlin.

What the fuck does he want?

Some rustling and a metal click let Arthur’s imagination run wild, and when the man leans forward he’s suddenly way, way too close to Merlin.

That’s when instinct takes over, and without thinking, Arthur jumps up and gnarls, ”Get your fucking hands off him.”

Alvarr jerks back in shock to start with, but then stops and smirks derisively, evidently unimpressed by the interruption. “Arthur, how nice to meet you again.”

“I’m afraid the pleasure’s one-sided,” Arthur replies dryly.

Alvarr chuckles quietly. ”Now, now. Have we gone into a huff? Still bearing a grudge, are we?”

Arthur knows he’s treading on a fine line. With or without magic he isn’t a match for Alvarr in any way. And they both know it. Even if he’s got the advantage of Alvarr’s ignorance about his magic. All he can do is try to stall the man in the hope that someone, somewhere realises the danger and sends help. “Security will be here any second. You might want to consider leaving,” Arthur tries, outwardly ice-cold and in control.

Alvarr laughs out loud. “It’s a damn shame I have to kill you, Arthur. You really are amusing.” He throws Arthur a threatening look, his eyes glittering in the dark. “But I think I’ll let you watch me, dealing with this fucking little traitor.” At that, he pulls a syringe filled with poisonous blue out of the box he’s deposited on the bed.

Arthur forgets to breathe for a couple of seconds as pure dread settles in his stomach. I have to do something. I can’t let this happen. Who knows what another dose of the Serum would do to Merlin? Antidote or not. Merlin’s barely escaped the clutches of the Serum. Or has he? Arthur does a double-take.

Why hasn’t Merlin moved or shown any signs of life? They haven’t been speaking particularly quietly. Surely the noise would have woken him? Surely he would have reacted in some kind of way? Or has Alvarr immobilised him with some unheard spell? A burst of heat flushes through Arthur and a flare of panic keeps him from thinking straight.

Alvarr seems to catch onto his inner struggle, exploiting his signs of insecurity without batting an eye-lid. “Worried about your boyfriend? He must be more dead than alive by now. I’ll put him out of his misery for you. One little sting he won’t even feel and that’s it.”

“You will do no such thing,” Arthur manages his most arrogant tone, as if HE was in the driving seat. I won’t be intimidated by that bastard. He clenches his jaws in determination.

Alvarr snorts out loud, shaking his head in mirth. “Delusions of grandeur, Arthur, as always.”

“I’m warning you. A step further and I’ll make sure you regret it.” Of course Arthur’s improvising
on the spot. Of course he knows he has no chance. Where are the bloody guards? Has Alvarr taken them all down? And why hasn’t Merlin stirred? A second later Arthur’s memory, momentarily off-line, swings into full working mode and he curses his luck. The doctor on the night shift gave Merlin a light sedative to make sure he slept peacefully through the night. Shit. Double shit.

“I’d love to see you try!” Alvarr says with the air of a man assured of his superiority.

“Would you now?” Arthur’s heart hammers against his ribs, aware Alvarr’s going to call his bluff any time now. Cold sweat’s trickling down his back. He has no bloody idea what to do, and it angers him. Actually he’s getting pissed off more and more by the second.

“This is getting ridiculous. It’s high time to finish this.” Alvarr takes one energetic step towards Merlin, the syringe in his hand, ready to lift Merlin’s arm. “Just watch,” he mumbles in Arthur’s direction with a devious smirk.

That’s when Arthur goes into nuclear melt-down. Merlin will not be violated again. Pure undistilled anger, at Alvarr, at this fucking awful situation, at his apparent helplessness and at every other injustice in this world surges through him, as he lunges forward, an ear-shattering “No!!!” on his lips.
Facets of Magic

Chapter Notes

A word of apology to all readers.
As I mentioned before I know I shouldn't really estimate how many chapters a story will have because it hardly ever works out. I did say a few times that this would be the finale today.
I started writing the last chapter, and it got long, and longer, and finally so long I had to break it into two. I'm still editing the second part, so...basically what I'm saying is, there will be another chapter next Friday before the epilogue.
Hope you don't mind! Thanks.

A noise resembling an explosion rips Merlin out of the deepest sleep. Drowsily he prises his eyes open and does a double take. What he’s facing is the stuff nightmares are made of. It looks like he’s landed in the middle of a battlefield.

All the furniture is strewn around the room haphazardly. The coffee table’s been thrown against the far wall, its glass top shattered into thousand pieces, the bookcases have toppled on the floor, the fall scattering books in all directions, the standing lights have hit the mirror near the entrance and the solid oak sideboard has smashed into the wardrobe, leaving its door hanging off its hinges. In fact, it looks as if a bomb detonated, turning everything up-side-down. The only place remaining untouched is his bed. It’s exactly where it was before.

But it isn’t the war-scene unfolding before Merlin that draws his attention. Two figures emerge from the debris, one he recognizes immediately. He’d have known Arthur’s broad shoulders anywhere. The blond must have been hit by the leather sofa and is now pinned to the floor by its backrest, his left leg crushed under its weight. He’s lying there as helpless as a beetle on its back, unable to move an inch.

Merlin’s brain, sluggish from the sedative, struggles to make sense of what he sees. What on earth has happened? And then the second man comes into view to add to the confusion.

“I’m impressed Arthur,” Alvarr says condescendingly. “That was a rather neat circus trick. And full marks for the surprise effect. You remain entertaining until the end.”

Where the heck did Alvarr come from? How did he get past the CCTV and security guards outside? Is this just a bad dream?

“They will get you, Alvarr. I promise,” Arthur pushes out between clenched teeth, trying to mask his pain, but not quite succeeding.

Alvarr just laughs, brushing dust off his sleeves. “It was fun, Arthur. But now it’s time to stop this farce.” With a grin on his face he lifts his arm, his hand outstretched wide and his eyes are about to turn golden…

What? Adrenaline surges through Merlin and pushes his brain into fifth gear in record time. “I don’t think so,” he says calmly, his eyes flashing golden just a split second before Alvarr’s.
Alvarr who’s been focused on Arthur entirely, has a micro-second to display his shock and surprise at seeing Merlin awake and using magic, before he gets blown off his feet and thrown backward forcefully. His body crashes against the side of the wardrobe, but his head hits the top edge with a nasty scrunching sound. He slides down on one of the open, broken doors and eventually ends up slumped in a heap on the floor.

“Merlin!” Arthur exclaims, surprised and relieved. “That was good timing,” he says, his words ending in a stifled groan.

Without sparing the sorcerer another glance, Merlin swings off the bed and heads for Arthur while having a proper glance around the room. “Did you do all that by yourself?” he asks, suppressing a cheeky smile. When Arthur rolls his eyes, Merlin can’t help but chuckle. “Very impressive. But you should try not to get hit yourself next time.”

Arthur manages a grin, even though it’s clear he’s in extreme discomfort. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Merlin takes one look at the situation and then lifts the sofa with a flicker of gold, shifting it far enough to free Arthur’s leg. Arthur yelps out in pain when the weight lifts off and his limb gets jerked in the process.

“Shit, that looks bad,” Merlin mumbles under his breath, when he spots the awkward angle of the leg.

“Thanks. That makes me feel a lot better,” Arthur pulls a grimace, whether out of pain or to underline his sarcastic comment is up to interpretation. Probably a bit of both.

Merlin runs his hand faintly over the limb to see if there’s anything he can do. “Feels like a pretty nasty break,” he mumbles more to himself than to Arthur who’s wincing at the touch.

“You really need to work on your bedside manners,” Arthur mutters, tongue-in-cheek.

Merlin snorts quietly while his brain works overtime to assess the situation. For a second he wishes Gaius was still there. He has a lot more experience with stuff like that. But their friend had been totally exhausted after working endless hours on the antidote, and they had persuaded him to go home and get a goodnight’s sleep when it became clear that Merlin was definitely on the way to recovery.

“I’d rather have a doctor check this out first,” Merlin says, and adds rather dryly, “At least you had the common sense to get hurt in a hospital.”

Arthur rolls his eyes again, moaning when he stirs inadvertently.

“This should help in the meantime. Ready?” Merlin asks, a quick decision taken.

Arthur nods, his face pale from the effort of keeping himself under control, but trusting Merlin with whatever he’s going to do.

Merlin places his hand on either side of the injury and murmurs a spell in a low voice. His eyes flash golden in the end, and Arthur’s body unwinds and his features relax.

“You ... made the pain go away,” he says, wonderment written all over his face.

“Good. It worked then,” Merlin answers, completely unfazed. “You’re still NOT to move!” he orders, his tone closely resembling a high-ranking officer handing out instructions to his troops.
Merlin clambers to his feet to get help when Arthur’s eyes suddenly widen, focusing firmly on something behind Merlin. Before Merlin can ask him what’s going on, he grabs the front of Merlin’s T-shirt and pulls him to the ground.

A fraction of a second later, a flash of energy zooms close past Merlin, grazing his head just above his ear and searing some of his hair. The sharp pain immobilizes him for a moment, as his mind blurs and everything starts swimming before his eyes.

“You two are rather sweet.” He hears Alvarr sneer, somewhere far too close. “At least you can take comfort from the thought you’re dying together.”

Merlin more senses than sees the bolt of energy heading their way. *No, you’re not,* he thinks, as he rolls round to face Alvarr, simultaneously raising his palms to deflect the spell just in time. It bounces off him, hits the wardrobe full blast and blows it into smithereens, showering them with splinters of wood.

If nothing else, Alvarr is determined. While Merlin and Arthur cover their heads with their arms against the rain of wreckage, the sorcerer strikes again. Aware, he’s facing more than he’s bargained for, he takes cover behind the upside-down sofa, hurling a ball of fire in their direction.

It near-misses Arthur’s chest, zooms past Merlin’s shoulders to blow up the hospital bed behind them. Shards of metal, balls of foam and shreds of linen are sent flying across the room and straight at the men cowering on the floor, with Merlin closer to the explosion. A tube of steel, formerly part of the bed’s headboard, thunders against Merlin’s temple.

For the first time in his life Merlin sees the proverbial stars people talk about. *Feels like my head’s split into two.* Dizziness overpowers him and for a second he blacks out. Actually, he has no idea whether it’s a second or more, but when he opens his eyes again, he’s lying face down, totally stunned, a warm trickle on his cheek hinting at a gashing wound somewhere on his head.

Suddenly Alvarr’s voice is there, right next to them. “Nobody here to help you now, Arthur,” he chuckles tauntingly, assuming Merlin’s out for a count. Hatred saturates his final words. “This goodbye’s been long overdue.”

*It certainly is.* Merlin grits his teeth with determination. There’s no time to waste. He lets his magic flow and gather and bundles it into one big ray of energy. Then he turns round in a swift move, fixes his eyes on Alvarr and lets his magic loose. A blaze of gold hits the sorcerer with full force. For an instant his whole body goes haywire, the fierce power shaking his body like a rag-doll, while it rips through his chest, leaving a fist-sized hole right in the middle. In a last flurry of life, Alvarr stares down at his wound and then at Merlin in bewilderment, before he topples backwards and collapses on the floor without a sound.

For one instant the world stands completely still while eerie silence settles in the room. Finally, Merlin takes a deep intake of breath as he turns to Arthur. “You okay?” he asks, stretching out to grab his arm.

Arthur just stares at Alvarr, at Merlin, at the room around him. It’s a look somewhere between shell-shocked and awestruck.

“Arthur?” Merlin asks again, wondering what’s going on inside Arthur’s head.

But before the blond can answer, the door flies open, and Morgana, Gwen and Hunith, no doubt woken by the racket of the fight, rush into the room, crying out in horror when they see the devastation before them. “Merlin! Arthur!” A second later they’re surrounding the two men, their
faces awash with shock and worry.

“Good God!” Gwen exclaims, giving them both a quick once-over to take stock of their injuries. “You do like keeping the hospital busy, don’t you?” she mutters grimly under her breath, but then springs into action. “I’ll get Tom to help me out here. I’ll be back in a second.”

Hunith simply shakes her head, sinking down next to Merlin to take his hand. She’s too distressed to utter even a syllable. She’s just had me back, and now this. A pang of unjustified guilt runs through him, and he quietly vows to stop putting his mother in situations like this. He squeezes her hand fondly to reassure her. “I’m fine,” he says and smiles at her sheepishly, realizing that the blood dripping off his head wound onto his T-shirt might not be quite consistent with his words.

“What happened?” Morgana asks, unable to take her eyes off Alvarr’s dead body. When Merlin has finished giving them a short run down of events, she nods and says curtly, “Serves him right.”

“Edwin must have sent him.” Merlin almost jumps, when Arthur, who’s been uncharacteristically quiet so far, speaks up behind him.

“Looks like he got impatient when he didn’t hear from me yesterday,” Morgana says as she paces up and down to stop short next to Alvarr. She stares at the body in contemplation, and then randomly bends down to pick something up before she swivels round to finish her thought. “So he sent Alvarr before the four-day-window in which your magic could be taken ended.”

Merlin nods in agreement. “But what is he going to do once he realizes Alvarr’s not coming back?”

“He must know we’re onto him,” Arthur says, his voice a lot steadier. Merlin throws him a quick glance. He looks a bit more composed and the spaced-out look he wore earlier is gone, replaced by grim determination. “And he’s going to make sure he outplays us.”

“The superpower. He’s going to go for it, isn’t he?” Merlin asks, fully aware it’s a rhetorical question.

“If he succeeds, then God help us,” Morgana mumbles.

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“As I expected, multiple fractures of your femur,” Tom Anderson clips the X-ray onto the illuminated board to show Arthur where he’s been injured.

The small emergency room feels almost crowded, although there are only four people in it. Merlin sits at the end of Arthur’s bed while Gwen and Tom study Arthur’s X-ray.

“That’s going to take at least one operation and a lot of patience to heal,” Tom states in a sombre voice.

A wave of desperation crashes over Arthur. If there’s one thing he hasn’t got at the moment, it’s time. This is really the last thing he needs just now. The clock is ticking mercilessly and Edwin could strike any minute. And he will have to face that bastard, and the sooner the better. In fact, it is bloody urgent. How is he going to do that when he’s totally immobile? Arthur grunts miserably, his face undoubtedly mirroring what’s going on inside him.
"I can’t afford the time to have an operation,” he grumbles under his breath.

“I’m afraid you can’t afford NOT to have one,” Tom Anderson says firmly. “Not if you want to get your leg back to normal.”

A polite cough behind them stops their bickering, and they all turn round to face Merlin who’s been keeping himself out of the proceedings so far. “I might be able to help.”

“Could you?” Arthur’s heart starts pounding harder. Merlin performed a bloody miracle earlier, making his pain evaporate in thin air, but he’d been hesitant to fix his leg due to the complexity of the break.

“Now that I’ve seen the injury, I could give it a go,” Merlin’s eyes flit from one to the other.

Tom throws Gwen a questioning look and when she nods, he just shrugs his shoulders and smiles. “Okay, but if you need help, you know where to find me.”

“And that goes for me, too,” Gwen says before heading for the door as well. “I’ll check how Hunith and Morgana are doing.”

“I’m ready,” Arthur says, as soon as they are out of the door, and tries to relax. Out of all the different faces of magic he’s encountered so far, this is the most fascinating, and he can’t help being curious about it. Seeing Morgana’s wound knit together out of its own accord and Merlin’s injuries disappear before his eyes had been truly staggering.

But then again, Merlin had certainly taken his breath away earlier. With the exception of healing Morgana, Arthur had never seen him use his powers. Merlin’s magic had been … Arthur’s not quite sure there’s a word to describe it. Magnificent? Impressive? Formidable? He could go on trying to capture the sense of awe he felt, but it would never be sufficiently explained with one word.

Gaius had hinted Merlin was more powerful than most sorcerers, but seeing it… like that… had left Arthur stunned, and very much in thought.

As is Merlin at the moment, as a matter of fact. He’s rubbing his chin, apparently pondering about something, while he’s checking Arthur over. “You okay?” Arthur asks.

“Healing spells aren’t exactly my forte,” Merlin says, a blush creeping over his cheeks.

“Is that supposed to instil trust in me?” Arthur snorts. But, on noticing that the tips of Merlin’s ears are turning more and more crimson by the second, he adds softly, “Are you serious? After all you did out there today? And you healed Morgana!”

“That was a small cut. Just like mine. No big deal.” Merlin unconsciously touches the side of his head where he was injured during the explosion. The gaping gash has disappeared, leaving only a fine scar bearing testimony of the injury. Merlin takes a deep breath, but his fingers have started thrumming nervously on the edge of the mattress.

Arthur takes the hand closer to him and threads their fingers together. “You know I trust you, don’t you?”

Merlin gives him an affirmative smile and sighs. “I would hate to get this wrong.”

“So would I.” Arthur says with a wry grin. “But Edwin’s out there ready to wreak havoc. We have to get to him before it’s too late. So what is there to think about?”
Merlin nods almost imperceptibly as he visibly calms. “You’re right, and … if you’re prepared to take the risk…”

“Shut up Merlin and do it,” Arthur says deliberately bossily, hoping to squash Merlin’s needless qualms, and, to Arthur’s delight, it seems to work.

“Right. Let’s get on with it, then,” Merlin says resolutely. “It might feel tender and hot when it mends.”

“Okay.” Arthur’s actually not worried at all. It is true that he trusts Merlin totally. I trust him with my life, not to mention that leg, he thinks. And I can’t wait to see how he does this.

Merlin’s gone all silent, focusing inwards for a couple of seconds before entirely zeroing in on Arthur’s leg. He lifts both his hands, one on top of the other, to place them right above the break. Merlin’s head sinks to his chest, whispering words in an incomprehensible language while moving his hands closer and closer to the injury. With his eyes shut and his mind wholly immersed in the spell, he appears trance-like.

Arthur can’t take his eyes off the dark-haired man next to him. He exudes an ever increasing aura of inner strength and calm authority, his magic vibrating in and around him. It’s a breath-taking thing to watch.

Intense heat spreads through Arthur’s leg in an instant, and he can feel the bones pushing and pulling. A sensation close to pins and needles shoots through his limb, followed by a sting of intense heat. In the end, the muscles on his leg contract rapidly first, to then gradually relax until they are completely still. When it all stops, nothing but a dull ache, pulsating inside his muscles, remains, and Arthur lets out a drawn-out moan.

“Done,” Merlin says, as he blinks his eyes open. He takes a small step back from the bed, and, in an ultimately endearing gesture, scratches his chin while biting on his bottom lip looking at the leg in contemplation. How can he possibly doubt his abilities? The dichotomy between the powerful sorcerer and the almost shy man in front of him is not lost on Arthur. It does something to his insides, something warm and wonderful, something he doesn’t want to miss ever again.

“Wanna try and walk?” Merlin asks.

Arthur sits up slowly and gets off the bed, giving a running commentary. “Behaving normally so far.”

“Standing’s okay,” he reports a second later. When he takes a couple of cautious steps, there’s not even a hint of pain. If he hadn’t lived through the last few hours he’d have never believed his leg had been fractured. His heart takes a leap when he looks up to meet Merlin’s eyes.

“Like new,” he says hoarsely, swamped by awe and gratitude.

Merlin’s beaming eyes are a reward in itself. He grins happily, making his dimples dance in merriment. “Great,” he says simply, but he sounds as pleased as punch.

Arthur has to ask. He hasn’t been able to stop thinking about it since he witnessed Merlin blowing a huge hole through Alvarr. “Merlin,” he says, watching him from the side. “I don’t get it.”

Merlin lifts his head and furrows his brows. “What?”

Arthur makes a point of making eye contact. “Your magic. What you did today and just now… it’s …” Arthur’s lost for words again, but then settles on what comes to mind first. “…indescribable.”
Merlin watches Arthur intently, obviously puzzled where this is going.

“With your powers, you could do whatever you like, you could have everything your heart desires, you could be whoever you want to be.” Arthur pauses, scanning Merlin’s questioning face. “And yet, you live a life as normal as anyone else when you could make this world yours and own it, above anyone else.”

“Are you asking me why I haven’t used magic for my own benefits?” Merlin asks quietly, and Arthur nods.

“It would be so easy,” Arthur says, and Merlin chuckles.

“It would. But that doesn’t make it right,” he says earnestly, and his eyes go dark and thoughtful.

“Magic is bound into the fabric of this world. It always has been and always will be, and it’s here for a purpose. You’ve seen the good magic can do, but healing is only one example. It can do so much more, for all of us, if it’s used the way it was intended.”

Merlin sounds almost wistful, and Arthur realises how very close this is to his heart. “Using magic selfishly and to the detriment of others is fundamentally wrong. It’s abusing a gift created for the greater good, and I could never condone that.”

Arthur swallows hard and then more or less hauls Merlin to his chest. His heart is brimming with love and pride, and he puts all of that into one blinding kiss.

“Hey,” Merlin grins against Arthur’s mouth, when they part for air. “And just for the record: I am doing what I like, I have everything my heart desires,” and he gives Arthur a quick peck on his cheek, “and I am who I want to be.”

“You certainly are what I want,” Arthur mumbles, drawing Merlin into another blistering kiss.

A knock at the door interrupts them abruptly, and a moment later, Leon, Gwaine and Percival are inside, all red-faced and out of breath.

Leon’s eyes catch on Arthur’s repaired leg in bewilderment, but he apparently decides what he’s got to say is more urgent at the moment. “I came as soon as they reported that the video link was interrupted. I heard on the way what happened. Alvarr put all the security guards out, and Percival…”

Percival has the grace to blush which looks rather out of place on a guy of his size, but Arthur understands why the incident would have left him embarrassed and reeling.

“The bastard knocked them out so quickly they couldn’t even hit the panic button,” Leon says. “Lucky, you both had more up your sleeve than he expected.”


“Exactly my thought,” Arthur agrees wholeheartedly.

“What was it YOU had up your sleeve, if I may ask?” Gwaine looks at Arthur, an eye-brow raised questioningly. “I know what our Merlin here can do, but you seem to have no special graces to your name.”

They all share a glance. Of course Gwaine wasn’t there when Arthur shared his momentous news at
the Lake Cottage. This simply won’t do. In a few short words and a promise to explain everything in more detail later, Arthur fills Gwaine in.

“Magic? Huh!” he says, trying to sounding underwhelmed, before he checks Arthur suspiciously from the side. “Is that why you always pulled the best-looking guys in the clubs?”

“Playing unfair all along,” Arthur laughs, and they all chuckle when Gwaine shakes his head and mutters a huffy, “Always knew something was off.” Arthur wraps his arm round his friend’s shoulder and squeezes it hard. Gwaine will always be Gwaine. Rough and ready. His best friend. True in his heart.

Gwaine returns the half-hug, and as the laughter subsides, the mood turns sombre again.

“When Edwin finds out Alvarr’s not coming back, he’s going to go for it.” Leon has come to the same conclusion as them.

“And I have found the place where it’s all going to happen,” Gwaine says, sounding rather pleased with himself. “Didn’t need magic for that,” he quips, punching Arthur’s arm affectionately. “My team and I sifted through every bit of information ever involving Edwin, and yesterday we checked out all the places where he’s lived and worked.”

Gwaine pauses dramatically, and Arthur throws him an exasperated glance. ”Yes, would you care to share?”

“There’s a corridor and a huge room hidden right behind Edwin’s office. I’ll eat my hat if this isn’t his hidey-hole.”

“Sounds sensible, even if it’s coming from you,” Arthur says, ignoring Gwaine’s quiet protests at the jibe.

“I agree,” Leon turns round. “Shall we get going, then?”

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Edwin leans back in his big, extremely comfortable leather chair and breathes through deeply. Today is the day. The day he’s been waiting for since Nimueh died. The day when he’ll reap the fruits of his labour. The day when he settles his score with the Pendragons. The day that’s going to change the history of Camelot forever. The day the Elixir is going to make him the most powerful sorcerer the world has ever seen.

Edwin still can’t help snickering when he thinks of Uther’s phone-call earlier. The man’s so pathetic, there are no words. Not only did he inadvertently inform him of Arthur’s and Merlin’s whereabouts, but he nearly begged him for help.

“Arthur’s in danger. He stopped taking the hypospray and magic’s started corrupting his soul. Please, Edwin, You need to help me, and him,” he said, panting as if somebody was throttling his air-supply. Yeah, Uther sounded pretty fucked up and good on him. That alone is cause for some deserved gloating.

Of course he asked Uther to meet him here, at Lamia House, in his special lab. Little does the Governor know what’s hiding behind his inconspicuous office. Edwin’s eyes roam around the long
narrow room, his heart full of undiluted satisfaction and pride. The ceiling-high shelves are filled with crystal flasks, arranged in neat lines and stored safely on a bed of soft foam. Each shimmers in a varying degree of gold, some dull, some bright, some intense and some sparkling, but of all of them luminescent from within, dipping the otherwise dark room into a soft glow.

It’s magic. Magic he’s collected painstakingly over so many years, and isn’t it glorious! Out of this ethereal pool of gold he’s chosen the most potent, combined the best of all, to concoct the Elixir. The very substance that’s going to magnify his own magic in ways never thought possible. Edwin’s heart flutters in a rush of excitement.

He’s elated and roused by the knowledge it’s all going to happen and that nobody, nobody at all, can stop him. Least of all a Pendragon. He’d hoped Arthur would have kicked the bucket by now, so he could have enjoyed Uther’s grief for some time, but the boy had proven tougher than expected. In the end, it won’t matter. Edwin’s going to squash both Pendragons like the vermin they are. He would get up and have a little celebratory dance, if he was that way inclined.

It’s almost nine o’clock. Hopefully Alvarr will be back soon. He’d sent him after Morgana, the sweet girl, to help her out in case she hadn’t been able to execute their plan. Her task hadn’t been easy, and although she’d been more than willing to do as he’d asked, she might have been side-lined by circumstances out of her control.

Alvarr has always been reliable and innovative, and Edwin’s confident that the man will be able to pull this off, too. The time slot for harvesting Merlin’s magic had been on the verge of ending when Alvarr set out to the hospital in the early hours of the morning. He really should have called by now.

“Edwin!” Uther’s voice and heavy footsteps alert Edwin of his arrival. *It is time! Time for the show to begin.*

“Edwin?” Uther’s obviously found the door to his private refuge, wondering where he is and what this is about. *You’ll find out soon enough!* And then the Governor’s imposing figure appears in the door.

Uther scuttles into the room, and, too absorbed in his inner turmoil, makes a bee-line for Edwin without looking left or right. “This is a nightmare,” Uther rasps. “Arthur’s going to slip through my fingers if we don’t do something quickly.”

“I’m sure there’s a way to settle this for once and all,” Edwin says, unable to suppress a satisfied grin at the ambiguous comment. Uther can’t appreciate it yet, but he will soon.

“Is there no way to drive the magic out of Arthur completely?” Uther asks, staring at him with pleading eyes.

Edwin chuckles. “You never liked magic very much, did you Uther?”

Uther does a double-take, a hint of surprise in his words. “You know how I feel about that, and you’ve always agreed with me.”

“I have,” Edwin agrees, but something in his voice must have startled Uther. His brow furrowed, his dark eyes bore into Edwin. *Good. Let him discover the truth slowly.* “Up to now,” Edwin adds, indulging in rolling the words off his tongue.

“What?” Uther’s bewildered, the poor man. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Have a look round, Uther, and tell me what you see.”
Uther takes in his surroundings for the first time, his eyes widening visibly at the sight of Edwin’s rare collection. Still confounded, he turns back to Edwin. “What is this?”

Edwin chuckles derisively. “Do I really have to spell it out to you?”


“Lost for words, are we?” Edwin asks. “Well, I’m happy to help you out. This …” and he points at the shelves around them, ”is the work of a life-time.”

“It’s magic,” Uther half shouts it, and Edwin rewards him with a big smile.

“Very good. So you do recognize the power you’ve been fighting all your life when you see it.”

“Stop that Edwin! If this is some kind of sick joke, it’s gone far enough. And it comes at a moment when we haven’t got time for such stupid games.”

“You think this is a stupid game.” Edwin clicks his tongue in disapproval, waiting patiently for Uther to catch on how bloody serious this is.

“Of course it is. Now stop that and let’s talk about Arthur. You can tell me about this later!”

“There won’t be any later,” Edwin retorts cruelly.

“For fuck’s sake, Edwin. I’ve got enough on my mind as it is. Stop that now and let’s get on with what we need to do.” Uther’s getting impatient and annoyed now. He seems to have grown in stature, his eyes blazing and his hands clenched in fists. If Edwin had been any other man, he might have been intimidated.

“Right,” Edwin’s had his share of playing cat-and-mouse. It is time to get down to business. “Stop blabbering now, and listen to what I’ve got to say.”

“Blabbering? Who the fuck do you think you are speaking to me like that?” Got him. He’s ready.

“I am your downfall, your destiny,” Edwin says full of pride.

“Are you drunk?” Uther checks him with suspicion from the side.

“Drunk?” Edwin laughs out loud. “Drunk on the idea that by tomorrow the Pendragon government won’t exist anymore. Drunk by the joy of a new era of glory unfolding soon. If you mean that, you ignorant idiot, then I say yes, I am drunk.”

Edwin watches as comprehension dawns on Uther’s face, and it turns into shock, then into disbelief. “You…mean it.” Uther whispers, his jaws dropping and his head shaking slightly.

“T ook you long enough,” Edwin says, his tone as patronizing as it gets.

“You want to take Camelot from me?” Uther rasps, clearly out of his depth.

“I’ve earned it after all I suffered and all the work I’ve done.”

Sudden understanding hits Uther. His breath quickens and he needs to steady himself holding onto the sideboard. “It was you? The person behind all the slander, and the campaign of magic crime. It was all you?”
“And proud of it,” Edwin says. “You have no idea how much it cost me all, particularly leaking news to the press.”

“You did that, too.” Uther whispers, not needing any further explanation. “All those years … You deceived me, you lied to me, you stabbed me in the back, while I …,” he looks at Edwin, a blank look on his face, “…trusted you.”

“Like SHE trusted you, and YOU betrayed her,” Edwin goes for the fatal blow with glee.

Uther blinks a couple of times, lost in the sudden change of topic. “Who the hell …?”

“You don’t even know, do you?” Edwin says, hate raging inside him. “You never gave a toss then, and you certainly don’t now.”

“What are you talking about?” Uther stares at Edwin as if he sees him for the first time.

Edwin takes a deep breath and a step forward to bring him face to face with Uther. “Nimueh.” Uther just gapes at him in complete lack of understanding.

“You killed her.” *God, saying it still hurts.*

“She used magic on me!”

“She loved you with every fibre of her being. She’d have done anything for you! And you humiliated her, dragged her in front of a court you’d paid off to get her sentence through quickly.”

“She made a fool of me!”

“SHE LOVED YOU!” Edwin’s anger spills over for an instant to quickly abate again. “She should have been mine.”

“You loved her?” The total surprise in Uther’s voice kindles the flame of hatred even further.

“As if I couldn’t love her! As if I wasn’t worthy of her! You conceited bastard.”

Uther takes a sharp intake of breath. “So all this is about revenge?”

“I swore on her death bed, I would pay you back one day. That day has arrived. You will suffer as she did, you will watch when I destroy the person dearest to you.”

“Arthur,” Uther’s mumbles, ashen-faced, finally grasping the magnitude of what’s going to happen. And isn’t that gratifying! “No, you can’t!” A malicious grin spreads on Edwin’s lips, ready to show Uther what the future holds.

“Just watch me.” are Edwin’s words, as he turns to head to the back of the room.
Endgame

Chapter Notes

So here we are, at the grand finale. Finally! I do admit I'm nervous. The last chapter always does that to me. I hope to meet your expectations! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As the sun’s getting stronger, on this clear and bright day, it reflects the shadows of four people against the walls of the Research Centre. They make their way across the courtyard of Lamia House, before entering the building quietly, one by one. The silence of the corridors, empty of staff on this Saturday morning, envelops them when the heavy door closes behind them.

“The lab’s upstairs,” Arthur whispers, pointing to the staircase, his heart hammering against his chest. This is where it ends. He is only too aware that this is going to be a defining moment in history. Whatever’s going to happen here today will decide the future of Camelot, of Albion, of all of them. No pressure then.

Arthur, Merlin, Morgana and Percival are climbing the stairs with caution, alert for any sign of danger. He knows Leon and Gwaine would have rather been with him just now. But organizing some back-up was equally important, and they’d both understood the importance of that.

When the group gets to Edwin’s office, they immediately spot the open door in the back wall.

“It was hidden behind the bookshelf,” Merlin says, stating the obvious.

“How stereotype is that?” Percival grins. “The man’s got no imagination.”

“Hope not,” Arthur says, as he squints his eyes to check out the dark corridor in front of them.

“I’ll go first,” Percival says in a voice not expecting any objections. Arthur nods and they simply follow him quietly. It’s a long, hardly lit, narrow corridor, with no other door than the one at the end that’s slightly ajar.

“I hear voices,” Morgana whispers, and they all stop to listen.

“That’s Edwin, I’m sure,” Merlin says quietly.

“And Father!” Arthur’s stomach churns. He should have known that this was where Uther would come. Leon had informed him on the way that Uther had managed to get out of Ragnor House by threatening to destroy Montgomery’s family if the young man didn’t let him go. What else could he have done?

Edwin and Uther’s conversation becomes more audible with every step closer towards the room ahead of them. They all can make out clearly now what the two men are talking about.

Arthur’s throat goes tight when Uther’s finally faced with the naked truth. It was Edwin who’d been sabotaging the government all along. Edwin, who had turned the public against him with malicious
slander. Edwin who’d been betraying him all those years. The man Uther had trusted implicitly, even more than his own son, the man he’d called his closest friend was the mastermind behind it all. Arthur presses his lips together in bitter frustration. A huge, fat ‘told you so’ is on the tip of his tongue for an instant. But Arthur can’t take any pleasure out of the fact he was right, when sadness about Uther’s refusal to believe him weighs down his heart.

And then, a revelation Arthur didn’t expect in the least. So this is all about Nimueh? Morgana’s mother. Taken aback, Arthur shoots a quick glance round to check how Merlin’s sister is taking the news, but her features are calm and controlled. She knows. This isn’t news to her. Why the heck is he feeling so unpleasantly apprehensive all of a sudden?

“Just watch me!” They hear Edwin say, and for some reason, it seems the perfect cue.

“Let’s go!” Arthur waves his hand for the group to follow him, and a second later they barge into the room.

“Arthur!” Uther’s head snaps round to him, unadulterated fear in his eyes. “Edwin, he …” Arthur gives his father an acknowledging nod. Who was right and who was wrong isn’t relevant just now.

“Magic,” Merlin mumbles, his eyes scanning the walls incredulously. “He stole magic from MUs for years.” And the prison provided a steady supply of victims, no doubt. Arthur can’t bear to think of all the innocent souls who died purely for Edwin’s ambitions.

Edwin uses the short moment they need to orientate themselves to his advantage. “Hider eft funde!” he shouts, his arms outstretched in their direction. The door behind the small group bangs shut, while, at the same time, a near invisible barrier of energy rises in front of them, separating Edwin from the rest of them.

“He’s trapped us,” Percival says, utter contempt in his voice.

“Well spotted, Percival. You do your reputation justice.” Edwin chuckles sarcastically from beyond the magical shield. His eyes run over the group that so rudely interrupted his proceedings. If he’s puzzled to see Merlin alive, he certainly doesn’t show it. A flicker of interest crosses his face when his eyes find Morgana, but that’s about it.

“Ah, the more, the merrier,” Edwin says, as he walks into the middle of the room. “Maybe I’ll even let one or two of you live, to tell the tale of the beginning of this new era.”

Arthur throws Merlin a nervous look. How on earth are they going to stop Edwin when they aren’t even able get to him? “Anything you can do?” Arthur whispers to Merlin, painfully aware their time to act is running out.

But Arthur needn’t have asked. Merlin’s eyes have already turned golden, and just as he finishes his question, a bolt of light hits the shield in front of them. To Arthur’s dismay, the energy’s absorbed by it like water in a sponge.

“The shield’s soaked up my magic and used it to increase its intensity,” Merlin says, irked and frustrated at the same time.

“Don’t waste your time!” Of course it hasn’t escaped Edwin what they’re trying to do. “It’ll take you hours to work that one out. Even you, Merlin.” He throws a gleeful look at the young sorcerer. “Just sit back and enjoy the show.”

They can do nothing but look on as Edwin closes his eyes to mutter a lengthy spell, his hand rising from the ground to the ceiling, again and again, until out of nowhere a three-meter-tall vitreous case
materializes in the middle of the room.

“It’s crystal,” Merlin says, holding his breath, and on Arthur’s questioning look adds, “Crystal and magic bear an ancient affinity. It enhances magic and clarifies it.”

Arthur grits his teeth, his stomach knotting and his heart sinking. Something has to happen to stop Edwin! Now! More out of frustration than common sense he bangs his fists against the magical shield, unprepared for the violent force that catapults him to the ground.

“Ah, the impatience of youth,” Edwin comments sideways, his lips already moving with another soundless spell.

Arthur gasps when a crystal flask appears inside the case, sitting on a delicate pedestal. The light emanating from it is so bright, so intense he has to squeeze his eyes half-shut. Arthur feels his magic respond, and as he senses the enormity of the power held within the luminous vapour, he starts to accept the inevitability of what’s going to happen.

“The Elixir,” Edwin says, as if in a trance, and opens the glass case with a smooth stroke of his fingers. He steps into it, and, once inside, lifts the flask up in the air. “Bebiede be arisan ealdu!” he chants, when he removes the seal from the flask. In seconds the glass box fills with the golden light, escaping from its vessel, twirling and turning, swirling and swaying.

“Ahhh,” Edwin opens his arms wide, ready for the final step. “Onluc serin!” he whispers reverently, as he succumbs to the power around him. It circles him as a whole, creating a cyclone of magic around him, flickering, glistening, flowing like life itself. Edwin groans softly as his body starts to absorb the potent magic. And as it enters him through every pore and every fibre of his being he himself becomes the vessel for the absolute power within it.

Then, suddenly, it’s all over. They all stare at Edwin in stunned silence. It’s too late.

The sense of foreboding in the room is tangible. Edwin takes a deep breath as he steps out of the glass case, his eyes locking on Arthur. With a self-assured move Edwin wipes away the magic shield with a swipe of his hand and walks up to him.

Damn. He must so confident in his own power, he doesn’t think the extra protection’s necessary any longer. There’s no other way out of this than death. At least no way Arthur can see. Dread is almost suffocating him. Edwin’s decidedly holding the whip hand.

A small vicious smile is playing around the sorcerer’s lips. “Arthur,” he says, a quiet threat rippling in his tone. “Time to play.” His ice-cold voice sends a chill through Arthur’s bones.

“Edwin!” Uther shouts. “You’ve watched him grow up!” Edwin just laughs, revelling in Uther’s desperate panic.

“You really think the citizens of Camelot are going to accept you as their leader?” Arthur tries to stay calm, his mind grabbing for possible ways to deter Edwin in some way or another. It doesn’t work.

“All they need to do is fear me,” Edwin states, animosity darkening his eyes. And as soon as he’s spoken, an invisible hand grabs Arthur and forces him onto his knees, his hands bound to his back and his head pulled back. Arthur has never felt more exposed, more vulnerable.

“No!” Percival shouts, and throws himself at Edwin. No doubt, he’s hoping to try to tackle the old sorcerer to the floor and cause some kind of damage, but Edwin stops him with the bat of an eyelid in midstride and pins him to the spot, leaving him totally immobilised.
Merlin uses the distraction to hurl a ball of fire at the sorcerer, but Edwin deflects it easily with the flick of his wrist, sending it against the wall from where it ricochets back into the room and detonates with a deafening blast on the floor, sparks flying everywhere. “Child’s play!” Edwin taunts, laughing at their hopeless efforts to get to him.

“Forþ fleoge!” Merlin shouts back, undeterred, creating a whirlwind of immense intensity. It whizzes towards Edwin, wraps itself around his body and holds him tight, and for a split-second Arthur thinks Merlin’s succeeded in detaining the man.

“Amateurs!” Edwin cries out in delight as he frees himself with the blink of an eye and a subtle move of his hand. Then he bundles the twirling energy and hurls it back at Merlin with a snarl.

The sound of Merlin screaming when he gets hit full blast turns Arthur’s insides into stone. Not Merlin! No! Desperately Arthur tries to wriggle out of the invisible grip holding him down, fighting it with all his strength, pushing and pulling, but to no avail. He can only watch as Merlin gives his all to escape the whirlwind trying to encase him.

Merlin attacks with every spell in the books, attempting to block, explode, tear and even douse the whirlwind in water. The fight doesn’t last long. A tiny nod from Edwin signifies the end of the struggle. Merlin gets sucked into the middle of the storm, the circling air taking him as its paralyzed prisoner.

This is the end. Arthur can’t bear seeing Merlin caught in his lofty prison, crying out in horror and despair. He knows he’s losing his fight against a power too strong even for him.

Edwin smirks, the malicious glint in his eyes a tell-tale sign that he isn’t nearly finished. His attention returns to Uther and Arthur, the latter still on the floor, shackled by invisible hands. They all know what’s going to happen next. Uther’s wringing his hands nervously and takes a step towards Edwin.

“Let him go, Edwin. I beg you. Just take your revenge on me. It’s me you’re seeking to punish.” Uther shouts, his voice shaking with horrified trepidation.

Edwin simply laughs at him. “You are so right. But killing Arthur will punish you more than anything I could do to you. Isn’t that right?”

Arthur hears his father groan in anguish next to him. He twists his head just enough so he can face Uther. He offered his life for mine. He would die for me. Arthur swallows hard. For an instant he’s more shocked by Uther’s action than by Edwin’s.

“I will grant your wish though. Once I’m finished with him,” Edwin says with glee. “But look on the bright side – at least one of your children will survive this momentous day.”

What? Arthur does a mental double-take. Has Edwin gone completely insane? I’m an only child. What the fuck is he talking about? His complete bewilderment must have shown on his face because Edwin chuckles quietly. “He never told you, did he?”

Arthur throws a sideways glance at his father. What other secrets has Uther been keeping from him?

“Morgana is your half-sister,” Edwin states simply.

What? Arthur’s mind goes into overload for a couple of seconds. Morgana, my sister? Morgana? Then, the photo at the Lake Cottage suddenly makes so much more sense. Edwin, Uther and Nimueh together. Arthur had always been pretty sure his father had an affair with the woman. He’d never been aware they’d had a child. But then, he’d hardly been home, once he’d started boarding school, and Uther had obviously kept her existence secret. He was good at things like that.
Funny to find a sister when you’re just about to die. Despite their desperate situation Arthur can’t help noting the irony of the situation. Morgana, his sister! It’s an odd thought, but … where is she anyway? The last time he saw her was when they entered this room, but while Merlin and Percival had both thrown themselves at Edwin, trying to put the man out of action, she had done … nothing. Arthur swallows hard, unwanted uneasiness settling in his guts like a lump of lead.

“Morgana, come and join me. Come to your rightful place.” Edwin’s eyes glow with satisfaction as he stretches out his arm and proffers his hand in invitation.

Arthur’s eyes widen, unwilling to believe his ears. A second later his suspicion is confirmed when the raven-haired woman appears out of the dark from behind him, her prettiest smile gracing her face. She accepts Edwin’s outstretched hand and moves graciously to his side. They share an understanding glance and Edwin’s hand folds over hers, a symbol of their unity.

Oh my God, she deceived us all! Arthur stares at Morgana in disgust. She’s been playing them all along. Must have, because just now she’s sliding into Edwin’s embrace, as if she’d known him all her life. Fuck, he’d just started to trust her, even like her. What stupid fools they’d been! And Merlin! What must he feel just now? He had offered her love and forgiveness, only to be repaid with treachery. Arthur lets out an earth-shattering scream inside his head, the enormity of the betrayal crushing on his shoulders.

“I couldn’t be any happier,” Morgana says, smiling benignly.

Edwin nods at her with beaming eyes, before he returns his attention to Arthur. “It is time to finish this.” Morgana sends the sorcerer another sweet smile while she stands back to watch.

Edwin moves as close to Arthur as he can, his eyes piercing into his soul, and when they narrow, so does Arthur’s throat. The blond is gasping for air, and chokes violently when he’s trying to take a breath. Can’t breathe! Need air! Merlin! Arthur almost blacks out, before Edwin releases his grip.

“Let him go!” Uther shouts at the top of his voice, somewhere next to Arthur.

“That’s how it feels to watch a loved one die;” Edwin says cruelly, and then he does it again and again, letting less and less air flow through Arthur’s lungs each time, effectively squeezing the breath of life out of him little by little.

Arthur’s slowly drifting into unconsciousness. Images of Merlin, close to him, kissing him, whispering into his ear flash past him, filling his heart with parting sorrow. We would have been great, is his last coherent thought. But just before the world goes completely dark around him, an outcry and the noise of scuffling stop the torture, as Edwin’s attention is diverted for a moment.

Arthur watches on through blurry eyes as Uther tries to tackle Edwin. He must know it’s futile, but driven by anger, hate and fear, logic is apparently the last thing on his mind. With a hiss Edwin snaps his fingers and sends Uther smashing into the wall like a little insect.

“Say goodbye,” Edwin whispers, satisfaction gleaming on his face, as he turns back to Arthur. Brows furrowed and eyes glowing gold, he hurtes a fiery arrow zooming towards Arthur’s heart. Arthur prepares himself for the hit. This is the end. Strange, how calm he feels.

But the arrow never reaches him. Uther charges out of nowhere, throwing himself in front of his son in a huge lunge. The arrow slices straight through his chest, and he crashes on the floor next to Arthur with a gurgle. “Father!” Arthur cries out, but before he can think or act or do anything else, a horrible, screeching roar fills the room.
Arthur’s head snaps round. It’s Edwin.

Morgana’s standing straight behind him, a syringe, filled with blue, in each hand. She’s pushed the needles into Edwin’s body brutally, and now squeezes the plunger down on each of them without any mercy. Edwin turns and twists to stop her, his face contorted with shock and pain. He even throws a spell towards her way, but it’s too late.

“Morgana…” He stares at her with wide eyes, shaking his head in disbelief. “Why…?” Edwin’s eyes are drawn to his body which has started to shake and twitch and quiver. “The Serum!” Edwin has just enough time to realize what’s happening to him, before the force of two titans inside him clash. The Serum, designed to increase in its effect the more magic it encounters, immediately reacts to the immense power of Edwin’s Elixir. The effect is horrendous.

Edwin’s body convulses violently, magic seeping out of his skin and his nose and his eyes like an overflowing gutter after a heavy rain. He lets out a harrowing scream, as the icy blue and the gold attack each other with fierce intensity. The fire inside him rages like an inferno, devastating the human shell that holds it. Edwin burns from his core, the fire searing through his body, turning his insides black and life into death on its way. And then, as the heat consumes him, his skin turns ashen. The fight lasts only seconds before the two powers annihilate each other, and Edwin’s body with it. A final burst of energy and then he’s gone, nothing left but a pile of bones and dirt.

And as his power dies with him, Merlin’s released from the whirlwind that’s kept him hostage, Percival’s limbs are able to move again, and Arthur’s invisible shackles vanish.

Arthur’s immediately next to Uther, kneeling next to him on the floor. He lifts his father’s head just before Uther’s eyes break. “Father,” Arthur holds Uther, quiet sobs erupting from the depth of his chest. “My … son,” are Uther’s last words, and then the light of life leaves his body.

Released from his prison, Merlin’s tumbles to the floor, breathless and lightheaded. He went for broke using his magic earlier, and has to bear the consequences now. His body, still skinny and weak after his ordeal, is trembling like a leaf. But he doesn’t care. All he can think of is Arthur. He died many a death having to watch Edwin coming so close to taking Arthur’s life. And I couldn’t have done anything about it. That’s the worst part.

He stumbles across the room, dizzy and nauseous, but not giving a care. He has to get to Arthur. Merlin’s heart contracts when their eyes meet and genuine grief stares back at him. “Arthur,” Merlin mumbles throatily and puts his hand gently on Arthur’s arm.

The blond covers it readily with his own, and the warm comfort of the tingle spreads immediately inside him, quieting his mind. Arthur’s shoulders are tense and tight, and his body’s shaking as he lets go of his grief. “He died for me,” he croaks in a small voice, a single tear rolling down his cheek. “He did love me.”

“He did in his own way,” Merlin says, running his hand soothingly through Arthur’s hair, as he leans in to offer his quiet support. He still cares for him, despite everything. He really is a great man.

“Hey,” Merlin sits down next to Arthur and wraps his arm round the other man’s shoulders, holding him still and tight. “I got you.”
“Yeah.” Arthur expels an epic sigh and sags against Merlin. There’s no more need for them to say anything, their connection alive and bright.

A moment later, all hell breaks loose. Leon, Gwaine and a bunch of policemen burst into the room, armed to the teeth and ready for what might come. Leon takes a look round to assess the situation. “Secure the crime scene,” he orders his men, when he sees there’s no immediate danger.

He joins Merlin and Arthur, throwing a tentative glance at Uther’s body. “I’m sorry,” he says and squeezes his friend’s shoulder in compassion. “Let us take care of him now, okay?”

Merlin gives Arthur’s hand a little tug, and pulls him gently away from Uther’s body, as a policewoman covers his earthly remains with a plastic blanket.

Suddenly Arthur looks up, as if he’s just remembered something forgotten. “Where is Morgana?” he asks, his brows furrowing, as he turns round to search for the young woman. God, where is she? The last time Merlin saw her was when she dived out of Edwin’s way to save herself from his wrath.

They find her, pale and shaken, leaning on one of the shelves in the shadows of the room, still staring at what’s left of Edwin. “Morgana,” Merlin says softly, so not to startle her. “It’s okay.”

Tears glisten in her wide eyes. “He was going to kill you all,” she stammers and sinks into Merlin’s arms. “He had no conscience at all.”

“He didn’t,” Merlin agrees calmly, stroking her hair as he used to when she cried as a child. “He abused magic in every possible way.”

Morgana cries silent tears into Merlin’s chest, and he holds her, like a brother would. “You saved not only us, but Camelot and the whole of Albion,” Merlin says, and she nods, her face buried in his torn jacket, holding onto him as for dear life. “What you did was very brave.”

“So you’re pleased with me?” Morgana asks hoarsely.

“I’m the proudest brother on the planet.” Merlin smiles into her hair.

A small cough next to them, makes them break apart. “That’s not quite true,” Arthur says and places a small kiss on her cheek. “I think that would be me.”

Morgana looks at Arthur, clearly overwhelmed by his words, and then her tears begin to fall again. “Thank you,” she whispers through her sobs, and now it’s Arthur’s turn to fold her into his arms.

Suddenly Arthur startles and draws out of the hug.

“Arthur?” Morgana asks, alarmed at his abrupt retreat.

“I am sorry,” he pushes out, a blush creeping over his cheeks. What is that for? Merlin thinks, and judging by her look, Morgana has no inkling either. “I thought...when you took Edwin’s hand...” Arthur bites his bottom lip in embarrassment.

“You thought I’d switched sides again,” Morgana says, her voice nothing but forgiving. “I meant it to look real. I needed him to believe me, so I could get close enough to inject him.”

“You certainly fooled me,” Arthur mumbles, a tiny smile playing around his lips.

Another heartfelt sob escapes Morgana’s throat. “I tried to inject him sooner, but he threw the arrow before I could get anywhere near him, and if it hadn’t been for Uther...”
“You risked everything for us,” Arthur says as he wipes a tear off her face. “And I can’t thank you enough.”

Morgana swallows hard, and she sounds almost a bit coy when she answers. “It’s what you do for people you care about.”

“And the Serum?” Merlin asks, although he knows there’s only one answer.

“I brought the syringe from the Lake Cottage with me, and then earlier this morning I saw the one Alvarr had dropped.” Morgana explains, a tremble running through her body. “I thought they might come in handy.”

“Certainly did,” Merlin agrees with a tiny chuckle. She really has come round big-time. She never does things half-way.

“I think it’s time to go and leave everything to the police. Leon can get our statements later,” Arthur suggests, and both, Merlin and Morgana, nod.

Morgana walks out of the door ahead of them, when Merlin pauses to look back at the scene of devastation they’re leaving behind. He pulls Arthur close into a soft hug and brushes his lips gently, relishing in the familiar buzz inside him. It’s like a confirmation they’re both alive and well, and that the bond between them is strong and steady and lasting.

“This is the end,” he says quietly, warm relief spreading through his body. It is all over now and, despite the damning odds, they have come through.

Arthur turns to meet his eyes. To Merlin’s surprise he finds hope with a glint of excitement in them.

“No Merlin,” Arthur says with an affectionate smile. “This is the beginning.”

Chapter End Notes

So this is the official 'end', but no story is complete without an epilogue. There are a couple of things that need to be sorted before we leave our boys to their HEA! :) I will be posting the definitely final chapter next week!
The setting sun tinged the sky into hues of orange and yellow against a background of grey and blue, and the scent of fresh grass and new life fills the mellow evening air, announcing the arrival of spring and warmer days to come soon. The sense of nature awakening, witnessed in the solemn confines of the graveyard leaves Arthur acutely aware of the dichotomy between life and death, between the beginning and the end, a notion so fitting to his situation. For this, Uther’s grave, is symbolic for the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

He’s been standing here, absorbed in thought and tangling emotions, for the best of fifteen minutes. It’s been two weeks since the nation buried Uther Pendragon in a well-televised state funeral. The news of his heroic death hit the media all too soon after that horrendous day at Lamia House and left Arthur straining under countless interviews, appointments and places to be. In fact, he’s hardly had time to take a breath and stop to think.

Of course the press has been milking the story for what it’s worth. How much more drama could you ask for? The Governor saving his son in a selfless act. Edwin’s betrayal. The averted danger of Camelot falling under control of a megalomaniac with a magical super power. It caused shockwaves of outrage rippling through magical and non-magical communities alike.

And as much as Edwin’s actions were condemned, Arthur’s wit, his bravery and willingness to stand up for what was right were unanimously applauded by everyone. Some papers even hailed him as the ‘Saviour of the Nation’. “A son worthy of his Father!” “Arthur: Defender of the Nation!” “Arthur – Son like Father!” were typical headlines throughout.

Arthur understands the comments were meant complimentary, praising him, but somehow the direct comparison between him and his father hit a sore spot deep inside his soul. Even if it shouldn’t. His mind knows that, but somehow his heart is lagging behind. This is why he’s come here this evening. To take time to digest and ruminate and maybe find closure to wounds still open and to put some of his innermost doubts to rest alongside his father.

Uther Pendragon
Governor of Camelot
Fearless Protector of Albion
Beloved Husband and Father
May God Look Upon You in Mercy

Arthur swallows hard as he stares at the epitaph on the gravestone. It has a nice ring to it. In fact it flatters the man who ruthlessly followed his ideals, no matter how much he hurt those he supposedly loved. This man who called himself his father.

Will Uther find absolution for the crimes he committed in the name of love? Will God look upon him in mercy? Maybe a higher, more benevolent force is able to forgive Uther for his actions. But can
Arthur?

He gave his life for mine! He sacrificed himself so I could live. Surely that has to stand for something? Surely it means there was good in Uther somewhere. There had to be. But could that excuse what he had done?

“Hey,” A soft female voice says suddenly close behind him, and, as he turns, Morgana links her arm into his. His surprise at her appearance must be written all over his face because she smiles. ”Merlin told me where to find you,” she says. “I need to leave for Acetir sooner than I expected, and I wanted to say good-bye.”

Arthur smiles at her warmly. God, I have a sister. He grins inwardly because he’s had the same thought every single time he looked at her for the last couple of weeks. And he does relish the fact. It’s incredible how much they bonded in such a short time.

“When are you leaving?” Arthur asks. Unsurprisingly, Morgana missed quite a bit of her university course over that last few months, and her return is essential if she wants to pass her final exams at the end of the term. It’s just come a lot quicker than she anticipated.

“Just as soon as I’m done here,” she says, as she sends him a pensive look. “Are you alright?”

Arthur’s gaze returns to Uther’s grave, and he shakes his head with a sigh. “He did so many awful things. Horrendous things. And yet he saved me. I just…”

“You don’t know if it is okay to forgive him?” Morgana whispers and Arthur looks at her in surprise at her innate understanding.

“Will it make me a lesser man if I do?” Arthur asks quietly, the question directed more to himself than her. “Doesn’t it mean I’m turning a blind eye on all his crimes?”

Morgana’s eyes light up when she faces him. “Quite the opposite. It shows that you are a far better man than he ever was.”

“Am I really? I am his blood. How do I know?”

Morgana interrupts him with a shake of her head and a smile. “You aren’t serious Arthur, are you? You’re nothing like your father, and never will be. I believe that from the bottom of my heart.”

Arthur puts his arm round her shoulders and pulls her close, his throat too tight to attempt an answer.

“I’m his blood, too, you know,” Morgana continues thoughtfully. “And I should worry more to be like him than you ever need to. Look at me. I was just as obsessed by an idea as he was. Blinded, without really trying to look at the facts,” she says, her voice trembling at the memory. “I’m not sure if I can ever forgive myself for what I did to you and Merlin.”

“I’ve long forgiven you, and so has Merlin,” Arthur says quietly, squeezing her gently.

Morgana lets out a self-deprecating chuckle. “Has it ever occurred to you I did exactly the same as my mother? Using magic to force the man I wanted to love me back? I think with that kind of gene-pool I should be way more worried about my sanity than you!”

“You proved yourself ten times over,” Arthur says kindly. “Without you, none of us would be here. Don’t you ever forget that!”

Morgana goes on the tips of her toes to place a peck on Arthur’s cheek. “Thanks. I’ll try to keep that
in mind.” She turns to gaze at the huge, dark grave stone in front of her, “Isn’t it ironic that all those closest to him had magic?”

It’s true. It’s a mockery of fate that hasn’t been lost on Arthur. Edwin, Ygraine, Nimueh, Morgana and himself, they all have been touched by magic. “He always had double standards when it came to that,” Arthur says, his voice tinged with sadness.

They both fall silent, just standing there, together, arm in arm, each lost in their own thoughts, until Morgana breaks the silence.

“I guess we’ll have to watch each other then,” she says with a small smile.

“Sounds like a good plan.” Arthur grins back at her broadly.

“I trust you, Arthur. I trust you to make this world a better place for all of us.”

The warmth erupting in Arthur’s heart drowns all the bitter doubts that have been niggling him. This coming from Morgana means so much. Morgana, who hated him fervently when they met, who tried to bring him down, even kill him at one point, but who’s giving him her vote of confidence, even her love, at this very moment.

“It’s going to be a hell of a ride,” Arthur says hoarsely. He will have to tear down the prejudices against magic fuelled by the Pendragon Government over so many years. He will have to convince the public that magic isn’t an evil force by default, but can benefit them all in so many ways. He will need to prove that MUs are people just like everyone else, as good, as bad, and as human as the rest of the population. He will have to introduce new laws, legislating the use and abuse of magic, and declare the Serum illegal. It’s a daunting thought.

“Bet, it will be,” Morgana chuckles. “But don’t forget you’re not alone in this.”

Arthur wraps her into his arms and holds her tight for a second. “I won’t.” Arthur has the help and support of so many to make their dream of a new Albion come true. A place, where all its people, no matter of which belief and talent, respect each other and live in peace.

Morgana pulls away after giving Arthur another tight embrace. “I’d better be off before the evening traffic hits the roads.”

“Stay in touch,” Arthur says as he lets her go. “Travel safely.” Morgana sends him a kiss and chuckles when he calls after her.

“Phone when you get there!” She rolls her eyes and shakes her head in apparent exasperation. “Good God! I had to listen to that from Merlin already! I’m not a little girl anymore!”

“Brothers!” she grumbles in mock annoyance, as she walks away to head for her car, leaving Arthur with a beaming smile on his face.

Four weeks later
“Ouch!” The sound of breaking glass and a thump in the kitchen have Merlin look up from the research paper he’s been studying for most of the morning. He chuckles quietly as he listens to a tirade of expletives he wouldn’t care to repeat to anyone.

If Arthur’s outburst is anything to go by, he’s broken yet another few glasses while practising the levitation spell. Of course Arthur could have listened to Merlin’s advice and start out with something less fragile, but no, Arthur’s competitive, proud nature wouldn’t stand for that.

“No point doing this half-ways,” he’d announced before he disappeared in the kitchen, armed with earplugs, his mobile and a box of glasses. Merlin recorded the spell for him so he could listen to it as many times as he liked to get it right. Judging by the swear-words rolling off Arthur’s tongue so freely he hasn’t succeeded yet. If it wasn’t for Ikea he would probably be bankrupt by now.

To add insult to injury, Arthur’s magic still shows an affectionate, if not slightly disturbing affinity to furniture, and it’s happened more than once that chairs, tables and sideboards developed a life of their own when Arthur’s been practising spells.

A minute later the blond slumps on the sofa next to Merlin, wearing a wounded expression on his face. “Need another box of glasses,” he mumbles huffily while rubbing the back of his knees.

“What hit you this time?” Merlin presses his lips together, trying desperately to suppress an amused smile, but he can’t fool Arthur.

“Chair,” Arthur grumbles rather monosyllabically, before he adds with a grim look on his face, “And you’re supposed to support me and not take the mickey!”

Despite his best effort, hilarity’s getting the better of Merlin, and his lips are twitching treacherously. “Not laughing at you,” he chuckles, failing miserably to keep his amusement at bay.

“Yes, you are,” Arthur throws him a quick, supposedly disgruntled glance. “Smiling eyes, laughter lines, lips twitching, dimples going haywire. You ARE laughing, and don’t try to convince me otherwise!”

Merlin takes pity on him and shifts over until his body presses against Arthur’s to place a conciliatory kiss on his chin. “Hey, it’ll be alright. It just takes practice, and patience.”

Arthur’s head sinks back on to the backrest of the sofa as he lets out a heartfelt sigh. “Not good at the patience part.”

“I’ve hardly noticed,” Merlin smiles.

Arthur thumps him playfully on the arm, and Merlin lets out a muffled moan. “It’s alright for you. You just stand there … and do it, while others have to work at it for weeks. S’not fair,” Arthur grumps, but the twinkle in his eyes gives away he doesn’t mean any of it.

Merlin grins, shrugging his shoulder as if apologizing. “Can’t help that.”

Arthur turns his face to Merlin, his eyes unashamedly homing in on his lips. “Still think you should compensate me for that … discrepancy.”

“How would I do that?” Merlin asks, his dimples still dancing in merriment. Arthur’s been using this argument on a regular basis recently to get what he wants. And judging by the fire in his eyes just now, Merlin has a fair idea what that would be. Not that he has any intention to complain.

As expected, Arthur doesn’t waste any more time on words. He simply pushes Merlin back onto the
sofa, so he ends up on his back with Arthur on top of him.

“I see, is it like that?” Merlin pretends to complain as he folds his arms behind Arthur’s neck to pull him even closer. They both know it is all part of their game. Merlin loves the way Arthur’s body melts into his, how their touch takes the tension out of his shoulders, how his scent and his warmth wrap around Merlin’s senses. And then there’s the ever present tingle, running between them like a current of life, delving into a connection between them beyond the purely physical.

“Mmmm,” Arthur hums in content when he finds Merlin’s lips. He brushes over them teasingly until Merlin opens up and lets him plunder his mouth. To Merlin’s chagrin they get interrupted by Arthur’s mobile vibrating in his back pocket. Reluctantly, Arthur pushes away to take the call.

“Aiden!” he calls out when he picks up, and Merlin furrows his brows. Well, Arthur certainly sounds over the moon.

Can’t be ages, Merlin thinks sarcastically, his body unconsciously tensing up. It’s about two months ago since he saw Arthur and Aiden together on TV. That’s not exactly ages, is it? And he’s sure the two have spoken since. It’s not that Merlin’s jealous. No, that’s not it. He knows Arthur is his, just as much as he is Arthur’s. There’s just that minute little detail he’s been wondering about…a few times.

Arthur gets off the sofa and walks towards the window, chatting away to the man who looks so much like Merlin. Trying to take his mind off his errant thoughts, Merlin links his hands behind his head and closes his eyes.

They have spent virtually every weekend at the Lake Cottage for the past six weeks. It’s given them time to relax, to be themselves and get to know each other better. They’ve hardly had any time for that before, and with no more secrets between them they’ve been free to explore each other’s lives down the smallest detail.

It’s also been fun to learn Arthur’s little quirks and traits. A smile spreads on Merlin’s face when he thinks of Arthur’s intense dislike of something as harmless as cucumber, or his preference of getting up early and having a latte in bed. He’s also discovered that Arthur is into reading poetry. Yes, poetry! Merlin’s still working on living that one down. What a contradiction in a man who’s a passionate sports man otherwise!

Now, that there isn’t any trace of Serum left inside Arthur’s body and he’s recovered to full strength, he’s thrown himself into all the sports he’s missed out on for so many years, and he thrives on it. And he’s managed to drag Merlin into the gym with him to do some gentle exercise, slowly building up the bulk he’s lost.

Together with Hunith’s strict feeding regime – that’s what Merlin calls it secretly although he’d never dare to say it to her face – he’s reclaimed most of the weight the Serum ripped off him. He’s got a little bit to go, but he has to admit he feels better than ever before. And, according to Arthur, he looks it, too.

Merlin stretches on the sofa, letting out a sigh. Arthur’s still chatting with Aiden and he’s getting bored hanging around to wait for his return. He sits up and heads for the kitchen to get a drink when Arthur comes up behind him and grabs his wrist.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he mumbles, as he pockets his mobile. “I don’t think I was finished with you.” Then he puts his arms round Merlin’s waist, pulling him close with Merlin’s back to Arthur’s chest. He leans his head on Merlin’s shoulder and lets out a puff of air which hits Merlin’s neck and ear.
This, and being cupped up in Arthur’s solid warmth, sends a shiver down Merlin’s spine. *This will never get old. There’s no other place I’d rather be.* Merlin beams at Arthur as he turns in his arms to face him. When he hears Arthur hitch his breath, he furrows his brows in bewilderment. "What?"

Arthur nuzzling Merlin’s neck isn’t particularly conducive to understanding his answer, but Merlin picks up something that sounds oddly like, “That smile...kill me… shouldn’t be allowed.” And Merlin’s happy leaving it at that.

Then all of a sudden Arthur stops and looks up at him. “Anything wrong?”

Merlin feels his cheeks heat. It’s uncanny how well Arthur reads him these days.

“Right, out with it.” Arthur nudges his arm in encouragement.

“It’s nothing, and it’s certainly none of my business,” Merlin says a tad defensively as embarrassment takes a hold of him. The past is the past, and there’s no point digging it up for something as irrelevant as that.

“Merlin,” Arthur sounds decidedly threatening now, and as his eyes pierce into Merlin’s, the latter gives up with a tiny sigh.

“You really don’t need to answer this. I would have never brought it up, but you’re the one who’s forcing this out of me, and…”

“Stop faffing around, Merlin, and get on with it.”

Merlin presses his lips together, unsure how to approach this without sounding petty or just like a downright idiot. “I just wondered, you know, about you and Aiden. Did you date during the time we were apart? You were on TV together quite a few times.”

Arthur looks at Merlin completely dumbfounded for a second or two, and then lets out a hearty laugh. “I’m glad to see you spent those months wisely and followed my every step in the media.” The comment earns him a punch on his biceps, but Arthur’s still grinning from ear to ear.

“I guess what you really want to know is whether we were sleeping together.”

A flush of heat, no doubt highly visible on his face, rushes through Merlin because Arthur’s looked through him like through thin paper. “Told you it’s not important. We are where we are now, and it has no effect whatsoever on…”

Arthur crashes their mouths together for a full-blown, thorough kiss, totally blanking out anything else Merlin might have wanted to say. When he finally leans back his eyes are soft and so full of love, it takes Merlin’s breath away. “The short answer is – no, we didn’t.”

Arthur cups Merlin’s face and bumps their foreheads together. “The long answer is that I couldn’t think of anyone else but you. I was so miserable, so gutted at what had happened, it took me months to work my way through it.” Arthur places a gentle kiss on Merlin’s lips. “Aiden came to me as a friend, and that’s what he still is. He was good to me without asking anything back.”

Merlin nods, a tiny, pleased smile plastered on his lips. “I’m glad he was there for you when you needed somebody.” He hesitates for a moment trying to find the right words. “In those months, the thought of you hating me nearly killed me. I missed you so bloody much. Then, when I saw the two of you together, I thought…”

“Can’t believe everything you see on TV, Merlin.” Arthur runs his thumb over Merlin’s lips, looking
at him affectionately. "It’s always been you.” And at that, he lowers his head to indulge in another voracious kiss.

"Arthur," Merlin mumbles, and his voice sounds fragile even to him, as desire, fuelled by love, unfurls inside him like a nuclear explosion. His throat tightens with yearning when Arthur’s eyes, dark with love and passion, rake greedily over his figure, his face, his lips, drinking him in like his life depended on it. And then Arthur’s mouth is all over his neck and his chin, kissing every square inch, warm and wet and delicious.

Merlin groans as his body responds to the sweet onslaught with ferocity. Impatiently, he pushes against Arthur until they’re flush and bucks playfully into Arthur’s hips. They both almost topple over and chuckle when they have to come apart to regain their balance.

"Come.” There’s something incredibly hot in the way Arthur takes his hand to lead him to the bedroom, so sure, so earnest, so damn attractive. Merlin loses his T-shirt on the way and tugs at Arthur’s, working it loose, so he can slide his fingers under the material, the need to touch bare skin overwhelming.

Arthur shivers when Merlin pushes him against the bedroom wall with a thump in a sudden move, grabbing his hands to lock them beside their heads. Their mouths crash together, trying to outdo each other, exploring, searching, biting, licking, until they have no choice but come up for some air.

“I want you,” Arthur whispers hoarsely, his cock hot and urgent against Merlin’s belly.

Merlin drags his fingers over the taut muscles of Arthur’s back, slow and sensual, teasing little moans of pleasure out of him before he pulls him onto the bed. By the time Arthur has thrown off the few clothes he’s been wearing, Merlin’s lies spread out over the silky linen of their bed, only his briefs between him and Arthur’s heated glare.

“Let me take care of you,” Arthur whispers throatily and straddles Merlin swiftly, never breaking his intense gaze for one moment. He bends down to run his lips over Merlin’s chest and, when he rubs his scruff, result of forsaking the shaver for two days, against the tender skin under his collarbone, Merlin jumps at the pleasure.

The tingle it causes, combining with the one inside, is delicious and heightened when Arthur places a slow sucking kiss on the spot, finishing with a blow of cool air. Merlin’s whole body reacts like wildfire, writhing under Arthur’s hold, his whole being anticipating the next touch. And Arthur does it again and again, covering every bit of skin he can reach. Merlin’s breathing gets more and more ragged, his breath hitching with every caress.

“Arthur,” he mumbles, his eyes closed in total surrender. When the blond stops and momentarily moves away, Merlin groans, bereft of Arthur’s touch, but before he can complain, Arthur’s fingers hook in his underwear and pull it off very slowly. Merlin lets out a wanton sigh, his straining erection bobbing between them.

Arthur chuckles quietly as he kneels down next to Merlin. But instead of touching where Merlin needs it most, he devotes himself to the exploration of his legs. He skims his fingertips over the delicate skin on his ankles first, slow and sensuous and working his way up, stroking and teasing, his finger rubbing the soft leg hair against his skin. When Arthur reaches the inside of Merlin’s thighs, he peppers small kisses on each of them, stopping short where Merlin’s legs meet the body, barely flicking his tongue across the imaginary line.

Merlin groans breathlessly as goose bumps race up and down his limbs and his body quivers at every stroke and every lick. He aches for Arthur’s touch, aches for him with every fibre of his body. His
hands roam over Arthur’s back and his shoulders, until the desperation to be closer takes over and he pulls the blonde up to him, fusing their bodies together. Arthur moans quietly as Merlin’s mouth attacks him relentlessly, but he gives back as good as he gets, sending tiny sparks of electricity down south.

“Fuck,” Merlin gasps a second later when Arthur starts nipping the outer shell of his ears, first the right and then the left, using his teeth to render Merlin ultimately helpless. “Taking advantage…,” Merlin rasps between rapid pants, his cock twitching at every little nip.

Merlin is on the cusp of losing it totally and in desperate need of skin to skin friction, but Arthur seems determined on ruining him completely. When his teeth graze his nipple, Merlin cries out, his body arching towards his lover. Arthur scrappes his scruff over the erect bud, before his eager tongue lavishes its attention on it. When the cool puff of air hits Merlin’s nipple last, he lets out a sound so embarrassing he blushes from top to toe.

Merlin’s over sensitised skin is all flushed in a heightened state of arousal. “Arthur.” Merlin lets out the stifled moan in an effort to stay sane, his fingers gripping the soft linen underneath as if it would help him to stay grounded. Just one more touch will push him over the edge, he’s sure of it. Arthur’s apparently come to the same conclusion because he pauses to let Merlin’s body cool.

“Please,” Merlin mumbles into the pillow, aware there’s one thing he wants just now, more than anything else. Arthur’s never pushed him into anything in their love making, giving freely what Merlin wanted. He’s never brought this up, whether out of consideration to Merlin’s healing body or for some other reason, Merlin doesn’t know. But now is the moment to settle this.

“Make me yours,” Merlin stammers, searching for Arthur’s eyes. The blond leans back to throw him hesitant glance. He’s leaving the decision to me, the unselfish fool, or…?

“You want to?” Merlin asks shyly, suddenly unsure of Arthur’s reaction.

“Fuck, Merlin. I want you so much it hurts.” Arthur lets himself fall next to him, and Merlin rolls round so they face each other.

“Why did you never …?”

Arthur pushes a lock of hair out of Merlin’s face and pulls him flush to his body. “This is your call, not mine,” he whispers. “I didn’t want to steam-roller you into something you might not want. And your body needed to recover, so…”

Merlin draws tiny circles at the nape of Arthur’s neck, before letting his fingers run through his hair tenderly. Now it is Arthur’s turn to get utterly flustered. “You’re sure you want this?”

“I love you.” The reply comes out as a rumble. “And I want to be yours. In every way.” The desire sparking between them is tangible, and so intense Merlin almost forgets to breathe. He captures Arthur in a blinding kiss, and only lets him go when the need for oxygen takes it toll.

“Love you, too,” Arthur’s voice crackles with emotion, his thumb stroking Merlin’s cheek and jawline. Merlin shudders, his head buried on Arthur’s shoulder, lost in nuzzling his neck and chest.

Before Merlin can even formulate another thought, Arthur flips him over onto his stomach, burying his leaking length underneath him. The pressure against the mattress relieves the ache to some extent, but not for long, as Arthur brushes his fingers along Merlin’s sides, conscientiously exploring each dimple and each plane of muscle along the way. His lips follow closely behind, nipping and licking at his skin, leaving Merlin ravenous for more. His whole body is on fire, tingling, aroused and so
Merlin turns round again to lie on his back when Arthur leans over to the bedside table to fish out a condom and some lube. He holds his breath when he notices Arthur’s hands trembling. A man like Arthur who’s had countless lovers, a man way more skilful than him when it comes to this, is nervous. Nervous for him. Nervous because of him. If Merlin wasn’t head over heels in love already he would be now.

“You’re gorgeous,” Arthur whispers, as his experienced hands lift Merlin’s hips to push a pillow underneath.

“Who’s talking?” Merlin gulps, before he hands himself over to Arthur in body and mind.

He quivers when the chill of the cool lubricant comes in contact with his heated body, but Arthur’s fingers are well versed in this kind of game, and he prepares Merlin painstakingly slow, opening him up gradually, with the utmost of dedication. And Merlin revels in the new sensations Arthur’s teasing out of his body, trembling from the intimacy of the feeling, getting greedy for more with each push. He almost weeps with wanton when Arthur finally lines up and slowly enters into the heat of his body, careful and gentle, and holding back. But Merlin wants more already, wants it all, now.

He pushes against Arthur, urging him on, the move eliciting a stifled moan out of his lover. And Arthur understands. He starts moving inside Merlin, slowly first, then striking a rhythm that builds up a sensation so raw and intense, it rips a tirade of husky moans out of Merlin’s throat.

Arthur bends down to him, pushing harder and deeper while seeking Merlin’s lips for the ultimate connection. A wrestling of lips, a tangle of tongues, the tingle urging through them like a life wire, their magic dancing around each other in rapture, it’s all too much, and they both can’t hold back any longer.

One touch of Arthur’s hand is all Merlin needs to explode with pleasure, his release leaving him breathless and dizzy, rattling him to the very bone of his existence. Arthur cries out Merlin’s name in an agonized groan a second later, quivering uncontrollably as he spills inside their joint bodies. He collapses on Merlin with a shuddering breath, his heavy warmth and the scent of his aroused skin enveloping Merlin completely. Nothing can be better than this. Nothing.

They remain motionless for a while, holding on to each other, mumbling words of endearment, until Arthur slips out of Merlin to head for the bathroom. He returns with a damp, warm cloth and cleans Merlin tenderly before embracing him as if he was the most precious thing on earth.

“Wow,” Merlin mumbles, half-dazed and sated, and unable to utter anything else as his body still revels in the heady heights of the afterglow.

“You’re mine.” Arthur says softly, looking at him helplessly fond while he presses a chaste kiss into the corner of Merlin’s mouth.

“Always,” Merlin whispers drowsily, before he snuggles into Arthur. His Arthur. This is where he’s meant to be, this is where he’s at home and where he wants to stay. Just on the verge of drifting off he hears Arthur chuckle quietly into his ear.

“See, now THAT’s what I call ‘agreeable’.”

Merlin manages to lift an eye-lid, a huge, cheeky grin on his lips. “Still don’t get it. Explain it to me again tomorrow.”

And then he lets out a snort and a sigh of content before he wraps himself tightly into Arthur’s arms.
and dozes off, blissfully at ease with himself and the world.

THE END

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However, before you go, here’s a short update on what happened next:

Arthur was sworn in as Governor two months after Uther’s funeral, his appointment fully supported by the press and the public alike.

His first action in office was to set up a Committee raising awareness for magic and furthering the relationship between MUs and the rest of the population. Documentaries about the Serum, explosive fly on the wall reports about the powers of magic, lectures in schools, the inclusion of healers in hospitals were all part of a campaign to educate the public about the truths of the Serum and magic.

Merlin accepted the offer to head the Committee together with Gwaine, Hunith and Percival’s wife, Karyn. He worked with Arthur on all questions and issues relating to magic as his closest and most trusted advisor.

But, with chemistry remaining one of his greatest passions – besides Arthur, if you asked him - he also returned to the Institute to work there part time together with Gaius.

Arthur and Merlin announced their engagement a year after Uther’s funeral. They bought a house on the outskirts of Camelot not long after, making it their permanent home. They still spend a lot of their free time at the Lake Cottage.

Morgana finished her university degree and readily joined the Committee straight afterwards, working restlessly for the cause of bringing MUs and non-magical folk together. She didn’t date for a whole year, but started seeing a mystery man shortly after Merlin and Arthur’s engagement. Merlin and Arthur have been quizzing her on his identity ever since.

Leon was promoted to Minister of Justice and moved into Arthur’s flat at the Ministry. He eventually became the longest serving Minister in Camelot’s history.

Gwaine loved being involved in the PR work of the Committee, and spent long hours organizing meetings, lectures and TV programmes. He’s been repeatedly seen with Sefa recently, but denies any involvement at the moment.

Percival was offered promotion, but turned it down to remain Arthur’s protector and bodyguard. He and his family moved into a lodge at the edge of Arthur and Merlin’s new estate, looking after the two most powerful men in Albion together with Fiodor who also remained faithfully at Arthur’s side.

Hunith found a new lease of life in her work for the Committee. She particularly excelled in one to one consultations with people in fear of what a world without the Serum might do to them. Her calm assured way, her compassion and the fact she was the mother of a very powerful sorcerer without having magic herself, gave her a credibility hardly matched by anyone else.

Gaius continued working at the Institute for another one and a half years before he finally retired. In
the course of the following year he wrote a paper that became an immediate bestseller all over Albion. His “Understanding the Serum: salvation or condemnation?” became the most read chemical report of all times.

Chapter End Notes

It is always difficult to let a story go, particularly when it has been part of your life for almost a year. But at the same time, I'm so pleased it is finished and we have made it to the end.

Hoping this doesn't sound like a bad acceptance speech at an Oscar ceremony, but I would like to thank my two beta-readers one more time - Thank you, Elena A. and jenniferdeb, for your patience, your invaluable advice and your brilliant editing skills! I was lucky to have you!

And of course, thank you all for reading! Those who were there from the first day, those who joined later and decided to stick with it and those who still might decide to give this a go. Thanks for persevering! It has been enormous fun meeting you and talking to you! I genuinely appreciate all your kind words and your wonderful support throughout!

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