He Who Breaks My heart.......... 
by Penfold66

Summary

After the discovery of a vault beneath Camelot, Merlin begins to feel strange and act out of character.....

Series Two, Episode One “The Curse of Cornelius Segan”
Merlin stood totally paralysed as the trail of blue smoke made it's way towards him. He was unsure whether his inability to move was caused by this unknown strong magic, or by his own crippling fear. It homed in on Merlin and snaked it's way into his trouser leg. He felt as it moved up his body. Cold, cold as the grave. His senses screamed at him to move, to try to flee, to repel it with his own magic, but he could not. As it crawled up his spine he felt all the hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end and as it wrapped around his face and invaded his body through his mouth and nostrils he fought the urge to vomit, feeling utterly violated. Suddenly his breath was stopped in his throat. He no longer had any control of his own body. His mind screamed in panic but he could do nothing to fight it. His last semi-coherent thought was that he would certainly die from this. Utterly helpless and hopeless he fell forward, the sound of his terrified rabbit-fast heart beating loudly in his ears as his sight dimmed and he passed from consciousness.

He started awake to the sound of a thumping that kept time with the too-rapid beating of his own heart and to a loud angry shout from Prince Arthur. He sat up in bed and gasped and blinked about him in blind panic not knowing where he was. He was just beginning to make out the shapes and shadows of the Prince's antechamber in the moonlight from the window when Arthur bellowed again, demanding his presence. He jumped up, hurriedly scrubbing the unexplained dampness from his eyes and tried to chase the memory of the dream that had put them there. All he could remember for sure as he struggled to pull on his trousers and boots was a suffocating fear and sense of helplessness - any other details evaporated from memory the third time that Arthur bellowed his name, this time in extreme irritation.

'Damn that prat' thought Merlin darkly as he stumbled through into his master's chambers, 'he won't even leave me alone to sleep in peace!'

"Are you deaf?" was the charming welcome that greeted him. The Prince stood before him, sleepy eyed and topless with sleep-muzzed hair. Despite his irritation Merlin couldn't help admiring the view, the moon casting soft shadows across perfect biceps. As he looked on, he became aware of the thumping and banging through the walls which sounded like it was shaking the very foundations of the castle.

"I wish" replied Merlin, wondering if the noise from below the castle caused him to have such a vivid and frightening dream.

"I want you to go down there and tell them to stop" said Arthur, already turning around and crawling his way beneath blankets and snuggling into bed.

"But they're working under the King's orders" argued Merlin. He very much did not want to trapse all the way into the bowels of the Castle on this chilly evening on a fool's errand which would no doubt result in him spending time in the stocks again once Uther got wind that he had made the diggers stop their work...no matter that it was at the Crown Prince's behest. Merlin wondered if the King somehow sensed his magical abilities, because he seemed to intensely dislike Merlin despite having been the one to appoint himm to the Royal Household!

"Yeah, and you're working under mine" retorted Arthur dismisively, already crawling his way beneath blankets and snuggling into bed.

Merlin watched him dissapear into the bedding and suddenly had a rather naughty idea that might just prevent his pointless errand. He kicked off his boots and shucked off his trousers at top speed
and crawled in after the Prince before the blankets had settled around him. "Merlin!" exclaimed the Prince indignanty, spinning around to face the bed-intruder, "what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Merlin straddled his master and pinned him to the bed with the weight of his body and just the tiniest bit of magic. He leaned in and murmered right next to Arthur's ear, "Well Sire, I thought that if you can't sleep then I could perhaps tire you out or at least take your mind off the noise". As he said this he nuzzled the space behind Arthur's ear and rolled his hips suggestively, eliciting a surprised gasp from the Prince.

"What the...." stuttered Arthur, fighting without success to throw Merlin off, "MERLIN! GET OFF ME!"

Merlin didn't budge. Instead he pressed his shoulders and chest into Arthur's, weighing him down even more, and pulled Arthur's arms up above his head. Arthur had no idea how he was suddenly unable to fight off this weedy lanky manservant of his. He figured that it must be due to extreme fatigue - this was the third night that his sleep had been disturbed by the excavations.

"Sire" purred Merlin into the Prince's ear, "Do you really want to contradict the King's orders?" He bit - quite roughly - the tender flesh beneath Arthur's ear causing him to gasp in surprise. "And with all this noise going on, well, you can be as loud as you like....."

"Merlin...." said Arthur in a warning tone, "move off of me now or so help me I'll....."

Merlin suddenly came to his senses and jumped up from the bed, taking the blanket with him to cover himself up until he had put his trousers back on. What the HELL had posessed him to be so shameless?? He wasn't sure if he was more alarmed at this totally out-of-character behaviour or the fact that a now blanketless and exceedingly irate Prince was charging at him like a raging bull. He threw the blanket in Arthur's general direction and rapidly ran from the room, grabbing his boots on the way and pulling the door hard behind him, keeping it closed with a little magic just in case Arthur decided to chase him along the corridors and decapitate him for being so cheeky. Once out of harm's reach, Merlin slowed to a walking pace and shook his head in disbelief at his brazeness before descending the staircase to fulfill his Master's command.

Arthur meanwhile, had fought his way through the blanket Merlin had thrown at him, hammered the door in frustration when it would not open and shouted obscenities for a few minutes after Merlin's departure before grumpily gathering up his bedding and crawling back into the haven of his bed. Sleep was not forthcoming however, even when the banging miraculously stopped a few minutes later. He wasn't sure if his sudden insomnia was caused by his extreme irritation at Merlin, or the fact that he'd found the boy's unexpected onslaught worryingly arousing.
Discoveries

Chapter Summary

What does Merlin find beneath the castle???

Chapter Notes

So I had enough positive feedback on 'Banging in the Night' to continue the story....the work has been re-titled "He who Breaks My Heart....."

.....enjoy!

The banging got louder and louder as Merlin descended into the vaults below the castle and he wondered how his order from Arthur would even be heard above the noise of the incessant hammering. Just as he got to the lighted area of the vault and considered asking around for the foreman there was an uproarious shout and the hammering suddenly ceased. A stream of terrified men dashed out of the tunnel in front of him. He tried in vain to stop somebody to speak to, but the men barged past him in unseeing panic. Puzzled, alarmed but nevertheless curious, he took a lighted torch from the wall bracket and went into the space that the men had all fled from.

'Perhaps', thought he, 'they have accidentally broken into the wall of the cavern of the Great Dragon and it has tried to kill one of them'. Curiousity and his previous dealings with the dragon banished any fear he may have had and he headed forward.

The sight that greeted him when he entered the cavern took his breath away. Jewels and gold in quantities that eclipsed even the treasures of Camelot were piled willy-nilly all around the walls. In the middle was a tomb carved with the likeness of it's inhabitant. Merlin had a wierd feeling that the face of the statue was somehow familiar and puzzled about where he may have seen it. He moved in for a closer look and the light of his torch suddenly illuminated a huge statue of a raven that towered above the tomb. Something inexplicable drew him to the raven's eyes and disregarding all else he walked toward it, mezmerised. His attention was only distracted from the hypnotic eyes of the bird by a blue, ethereal shimmer that he caught from the corner of his eye. He looked down to see a massive heart-shaped gem set into the tomb in the place of the heart of it's inhabitant. He was drawn to it not so much by it's size and obvious value as a gem, but by the light it exhuded and the melodius humming it gave off. He felt he'd never heard a tune so pleasant. He plucked it from it's place and bought it close to his face, studying the light within and utterly enraptured by the humming. The longer he held on to it, the brighter it seemed to shine and the hum grew stronger and resonated inside his head. All of a sudden, it was no longer pleasant and he tried to throw the thing from him, but found he could not move his arms at all. He closed his eyes against the light but the hum was now so loud that he felt it that his very bones resonated with the sound of it. He tried again to move but realised with horror that he had no control over his movement and could no longer even breathe. In the last few seconds before he blacked out he recalled with horror the nightmare that had woken him earlier, before Arthur had sent him on this errand.
Merlin awoke some time later - he had no idea how long - laying on the floor of the tomb. He had completely forgotten about the gem (which had fallen from his hand as he blacked out and rolled beneath a pile of gold). Only with a good deal of frowning and thinking did he remember coming down into this vault in the first place. He slowly sat up, still feeling a wee bit dizzy. He held a hand up to his head to try to stop the dizzy feeling and reached behind himself for something to steady him as he attempted to stand. He thought that the thing he chose to lean on was on a rock and was more than a little startled when it shifted under his weight and fell sideways. He pulled his arm back from it in alarm as it moved and kneeling, spun round to look at it. It was - or had been - a man on his knees before the tomb. Now it had fallen over sideways its eyes unseeing cast upward, his skin was blackened and his stare was one filled with terror and pain. For now, Merlin's curiosity was forgotten and on wobbly legs he dashed from the vault toward Gaius's rooms - perhaps the physician could do something for this poor petrified soul.
Strange Emotions

Chapter Summary

Merlin returns to the tomb and feels odd.

When he returned with Gaius the man had not moved and the physician quickly ascertained that he was, in fact, as dead as a doornail. It was Merlin that lingered over the body as Gaius looked around in grim wonder at the vault and its contents. "How do you think he died?" asked Merlin both appalled and fascinated by the blackening skin and the fixed, terrified stare.

"Not sure" replied his mentor, somewhat distractedly. Merlin shuddered and moved away from the body. He didn't envy whoever's job it was to take this poor fellow back to his family for burial...he looked appalling. Gaius began to explore the chamber, moving closer to the tomb itself so that he could study the likeness carved thereupon. Inexplicably, even before he had done it, Merlin knew that when the old man stepped on a certain stone, that a poisoned dart would be released from the mouth of one of the raven statues. His magic was already working before Gaius had tripped the trap and he summoned a golden plate into mid-air to shield Gaius from the impact of the bolt. For a few moments both men stood in shock - Gaius at his near-death experience, and Merlin at the sudden realisation that somehow he knew the secrets of this tomb's design. Both were shaken from their respective states of amazement as they heard the approach of footsteps. Merlin's distraction caused the plate-shield to drop noisily to the floor and roll toward the entrance. Without a thought he chased after it and almost butted King Uther in the groin as he caught up with it.

"Idiot" mumbled Uther as he passed the boy. Merlin had no love for the King, but in that split second felt an overwhelming sense of anger. He stood upright and moved toward a pile of treasure where he somehow knew he would find a bejewelled dagger. His hands closed around it and a blackness in his heart was compelling him to walk over and drive it into the King's stomach. He was just about to take his first step when Arthur nudged into him as he passed by on his way into the chamber. His compunction to harm the King suddenly vanished when he heard Arthur's voice sarcastically ask, "Were you born clumsy or do you work at it??"

Merlin's inexplicable rage had not entirely evaporated and he snarked back at Arthur, "It's just one of my many gifts" in a deeply sarcastic manner. The Prince gave him a warning glare. He himself rather enjoyed the irreverent banter that he had with his manservant, but Uther did not take kindly to servants who did not show due respect to the nobility. Luckily, the King did not seem to have heard Merlin anyhow. He was busy inspecting the treasures with a look of unadulterated greed on his face.

"Well this is quite a find" said Uther as he wandered around picking things up, "you see Gaius, I was right - there is treasure to be found under Camelot. Which of my predecessors to I have to thank for all this?"

"I'd have to look into it Sire" replied Gaius, still sounding rather distracted to Merlin.

For some unknown reason Merlin felt angry and a little violated every time Uther picked up and stroked a piece of treasure and assumed ownership of the hoard. The boy had absolutely no idea where these emotions were coming from and he had to clench his hands to prevent himself from diving at the King and wrestling plates and jewels from his hands. His willpower was slipping
away just as Uther's attention switched to the body on the floor.

"How did he die?" asked the King, looking down into the dead eyes.

"He seems to have unwittingly triggered a trap here" explained Gaius.

Arthur finally spoke, reminding Merlin of his presence and bringing him back to himself; "To deter grave robbers", he elaborated.

"Well there's plenty in here people would want to steal" stated the King (and Merlin couldn't help thinking 'yeah, including YOU! This isn't even yours!'). "Have them secure the tomb" ordered Uther, turning to his son, "guarding it is your responsibility Arthur".

"Yes father", replied the Prince without any enthusiasm. In contrast to his father, Arthur seemed uneasy in the tomb and although he stared around in wonder he did not pick anything up and looked a little unhappy when Uther entrusted him with the task of guarding the hoard.

Soon after, the King and the Prince left the chambers, Arthur stopping briefly at the entrance to give orders to the guards posted there. Before he left he called back over his shoulder for Merlin to join him.

"I'll be up soon" replied Merlin, "I just need to help Gaius get the body moved".

"Of course" conceded Arthur, "but don't take long, there's a lot to prepare for tomorrow's hunting trip".

Merlin nodded and Arthur left. Gaius went soon after, carrying a small trinket box with him.

"Wait, where are you taking that?" demanded Merlin, looking at the box in his mentor's hands.

Gaius looked up questioningly at Merlin's rather accusatory tone. "It contains the seal of the tombs inhabitant" explained Gaius, "I am taking it to Geoffrey to check against all our known sidgals".

"Oh, er, of course" replied Merlin a little shakily, wondering what had come over him to make him address is mentor in such a tone. "I'll come up with you to find a stretcher to get this poor fellow moved".

The old man shuffled out and Merlin followed soon after. He stopped briefly just as he left the vault and a shiver ran through him. He looked back into it and frowned. Perhaps it was the fetid air inside the tomb but Merlin certainly had felt very strange in there and was glad to be out. He took a deep breath, shook his shoulders and hurried after Gaius.
Merlin could not remember ever having a night so disturbed by bad dreams as the one he'd just had. The nightmare that had woken him the previous night in Arthur's antechamber paled in comparison to the visions he'd seen this past night. He didn't understand it. He'd always enjoyed a good deep undisturbed sleep...so much so that he had more than once been late to attend to his master because he had failed to wake up in time. But suddenly these last two nights he was awoken by dreams that left him shaking and sweating.

Tonight he had dreamt of a different, darker Camelot where he met and had dealings with witches, satyrs, trolls and strange inhuman creatures that seemed to be only half alive; the likes of which he'd never even imagined. He dreamt that he'd been involved in blood magic rituals. Twice he had pulled himself from sleep to escape a nightmare vision where he was the one brandishing a stone knife and cutting the throat of a screaming newborn baby whilst reciting words in a language he did not recognise. In another dream he was soaring high above the forests and the castle. This had actually been a pleasant dream - until he had suddenly plunged earthward at top speed and alighted upon a newborn lamb, tearing at it's flesh with long talons and pecking out it's eyes with a sharp cruel beak before it had even fully left it's mother's body. It seemed that each time he drifted off back to sleep, another nightmarish vision would assail his senses until he finally gave up trying and instead sat shivering on his cot clasping his arms around his knees and watching the stars outside his window, willing the morning to come. It was only as the first glimmer of dawn lit the eastern horizon that he fell into a deep exhausted and thankfully dreamless sleep.

....which was why he was hideously late in his preparations for the morning's hunt. Gaius had found him still snoring a good two hours later than he'd intended to be up and about. He'd dashed from their chambers with no breakfast inside him and hurredly saddled the Prince's stallion and thrown supplies into the saddlebags. He just about made it into the courtyard with the horse as Arthur arrived and thought that he had gotten away with it, only to suddenly realise that he'd quite forgotten to pack any quivers for the crossbows or the Prince's hunting spear. Breaking with protocol entirely, he threw the horse's reins over to Arthur with a quick, "back in a minute, Sire" and belted along to the armoury to collect the forgotten weaponry. As he ran back down the steps Arthur spurred him along with an impatient "Hurry up Merlin". It was just then that he realised he'd forgotten the mounting stool from the stables. Not wanting to vex Arthur any more than he already had, he knelt down on hands and knees at the side of the horse to allow the impatient prat to mount the horse.

'This is ridiculous' he thought as the Prince stepped onto his back, 'If he didn't wear his breeches so tight, he'd be able to mount up without using a bloody stool'. Having thought that however, he did concede that he liked what the tighter breeches did for his master's figure so he didn't verbalise his complaint, even when His Royal Tight-Trousers kicked him in the kidney as he sprang up into the saddle.

He was just clambering back up onto his feet when there was a thump and a flurry of hooves as the horse galloped off. He didn't quite understand what had happend until he saw Arthur laying on the
cobbles beside him looking more than a little shocked and extremely irritated.

"Merlin!" he bellowed as he stood up, brushing the dust from his hunting coat.

"I don't understand" stammered the manservant, still not entirely sure how Arthur had ended up in the dirt.

"Well that's a surprise" fired back the Prince indignantly.

"I did that girth up myself", said Merlin, thinking aloud more than anything...he was sure he'd tacked the horse up properly, wasn't he?

"Well I think that might have been the problem" cut in the Prince, sounding more and more irate and accusatory. Merlin's mood suddenly switched from one of bamboozlement to one of irritation.

"It wasn't my fault" he fired back, his blood rising. He was all set to begin a tirade of abuse against Arthur when a small voice cut in.

"Do you want me to fit the girth for you properly Sire?", said the stranger. He was a weedy looking fellow with bulging eyes and a scrappy beard and hair that looked like it could use a good wash. Merlin took an instant dislike to him.

"Thank You" said the Prince to the new arrival, all indignation gone from his voice.

"It's an honour to be of service to the Prince" said the fellow. Merlin glared at him in disbelief, 'What an arse-licker!' he thought darkly.

"'An honour'" parroted the Prince turning his attention back to his manservant, "did you hear that Merlin?"

"Allow me the honour of brushing your clothes down" continued the arse-licker, unbelievably bringing a clothes-brush from inside his jacket - who the hell carried clothes brushes around? Merlin wanted to vomit at such subservience.

"'The honour!'" reiterated Arthur in Merlin's general direction.

"Anything else I can do for you Sire?" said the man. Now Merlin really did want to vomit. Preferably on this slimy individual.

"Well, you could give Merlin here a kick up the backside", said Arthur, a huge sneery grin on his face, obviously enjoying Merlin's discomfort. Merlin was in equal measure furious and hurt...how dare the Prince - who KNEW just how devoted he was to him - belittle him in this way in front of a complete stranger.

"I wouldn't wish to deprive you of the pleasure, Sire" said the newcomer quietly - obviously spotting the fury in Merlin's glare.

"Ha! What's your name?" asked Arthur of the stranger.

"Cedrie", replied Arse-licker, "I've come to Camelot in search for work." 'Oh bloody marvellous....' thought Merlin darkly as he heard this.

"Good. You can be a beater on the hunt", said Arthur dismissively as he walked off, "We're short of a man or two".

The man - Cedric - looked crestfallen but quickly said, "You're too kind Sire".
Merlin picked up a beating staff. With Arthur gone his rage flared high and he fought an overwhelming urge to beat out the brains of this interloper. He even visualised the bloody mess he could make all over the brown cobbles. He fought down the urge, but as it was he couldn't resist whacking this Cedric character hard in the stomach with the staff. "Here - you'll need a beater" he said as he did so, rejoicing in the shocked 'ooof' noise the man made. He walked away saying a very insincere, "Oh, sorry!"

++++++++++++

The urge Merlin felt to beat out the brains of Cedric returned again and again during the course of the hunt. The git seemed to be everywhere! Merlin (as ever) shadowed Arthur's every move and tried to stay at his side or just behind him to protect him, but this Cedric joker kept getting between them. At one point, when Cedric let a sapling spring back and whip at Merlin's face - seemingly intentionally - the warlock almost lost it, and despite being in amongst a crowd of Camelot's Knights almost muttered a curse to make a branch fall on the fellow's head. It was probably a good thing that just at that moment a deep rumbling growl was heard from the long grass just in front of them.

Arthur gave his indecipherable (to Merlin at least) hand-signals and various knights moved off in various directions. Merlin took shelter behind a tree, not so much to escape any danger but to be out of sight from everyone else but with a clear view of Arthur should the need arose to use magic (as it seemed to do far too often) to aid his ungrateful Prince. What happened next was all a bit of a blur, but when Arthur was in imminent danger of being gored by the huge angry boar that charged out of the clearing Merlin conjured a fallen spear into the air and sent it flying deep into the jugular of the charging beast. As the creature cried in shock and agony in it's death throes and blood pumped out of it's mortal wound, Merlin felt a rush of bloodlust and glee at it's suffering that were until now completely alien to him. Until now he had flinched and looked away whenever Arthur or the Knights made a kill on a hunt and was teased by them for such 'girly weakness'. He frowned down at the dying creature, part horrified at his sudden bloodlust and part hypnotised by the gory sight in front of him. So absorbed was he that he missed Arthur asking around to find out who had thrown the spear and Cedric claiming to have done so.

He was abruptly shaken from his revelrie when Arthur suddenly stated "You just saved my life!" as he walked toward Cedric. "Honestly Sire, it was nothing" came the reply - Merlin was speechless at the audacity of this fellow but was powerless to contradict him...Arthur would never believe Merlin had thrown the spear since he was so clumsy and of course he couldn't admit to using sorcery. "I shall be forever indebted to you", gushed the Prince in a manner that alarmed Merlin a little, "you must be rewarded"

"I couldn't possibly" said Cedric quietly.

"Come on - what do you wish for?" goaded Arthur, approaching the man and clutching his hands.

'What the hell.....?' thought Merlin incredulously. The Prince had barely acknowledged the time Merlin had saved him from the witch's knife shortly after they first met. OK, he had wrestled the prat to the floor to do so, no doubt injuring his pride but even so.....

"I desire only one thing Sire", conceded Cedric his eyes shifting about in a way that Merlin thought very dodgy indeed.

"Anything" promised Arthur blithely.

'Oh, good grief...' thought Merlin.
"A position in the Royal household" was Cedric's somewhat surprising answer.

Merlin was dumbfounded as his master said, "Consider it done" to Cedric and then to Merlin, "ha ha!"

Cedric came toward Merlin with the beater's stick. "You can have that back now", he said, thumping it into Merlin's stomach. The manservant doubled over in pain and almost missed Cedric's insincere "Oh...sorry!" as he walked off after Arthur.

Merlin was so enraged by what had just occured that he could not talk. What did Arthur mean to do? Replace him with this snivelling little arselicker? After all they had seen together? After Merlin had declared his love for his Prince? After he'd saved the man's life countless times?

He stood and watched as the rest of the hunting party followed Arthur back toward Camelot. He would not join them. He didn't trust himself not to do a mischief to somebody or something. Instead he ran deep into the forest and off any pathways. Tears obscured his vision and he palmed them away impatiently as he ran. Eventually he got to a dark copse. He stopped dead at a great old oak tree and pounded out his hurt and frustration on it before letting out an angry primal cry and letting his magic loose. A shockwave of energy left him as he cried out. When he had spent his anger and cried himself tearless he looked around him to see that in a fifty yard radius, no leaves remained on the trees and the ground was littered with the corpses of small birds and forest animals.

Appalled at what he'd just done, he turned tail and ran top-speed back toward the castle.
Merlin spent a long time pacing backward and forward below the city walls before he felt calm enough to return to the castle. He had burnt out his anger and cried his eyes dry back at the old oak but the devastation he had caused there shocked him to his core. Once he felt totally calm he headed into the stables where he washed his tear and dirt streaked face and brushed forest dirt from his clothes. Despite feeling calm once again, he still didn't feel ready to face Arthur so headed despondently back toward his room. Obviously his attempt to remove all traces of his outburst was unsuccessful since the first thing that his mentor said as he walked through the door was, "What's wrong?"

"I saved Arthur's life, someone else got the credit...just the usual." said Merlin wearily. He really didn't want to dwell on it further. Noticing that Gaius was poring over documents he asked curiously, "What are you doing?"

"I found this inscription on the sceptre", replied Gaius, looking back down at his papers.

Merlin sat beside him and looked over his shoulder at the strange letters. Despite not recognising the individual letters a curious thing happened; when he looked at the entire phrase it formed into an intricate kind of a picture whose meaning was, "He who breaks my heart, completes my work". He assumed that that Gaius could also understand the inscription, so didn't bother to read the words aloud. "What language is that?" he enquired.

"I don't know", came the short reply, "Segan would have known many languages."

"Segan?" asked Merlin, his curiosity piqued. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the name rang a bell. Perhaps it was somebody from one of the history books that Gaius endlessly entreated Merlin to read. (Merlin tried so hard to oblige, but after a long day working for His Royal Pratness he invariably fell asleep over such tomes. More than once he had woken up in the dead of night with his head resting on the open page of a book, a puddle of drool collecting and smudging the illuminated text.)

"It's his tomb." replied Gaius by way of explanation. He seemed a bit reticent to talk of this Segan character, which piqued Merlin's curiosity further.

"Who was he?" he asked.

"Merlin, he was the most powerful sorcerer to have lived!" replied Gaius looking at the boy incredulously for not knowing this.

"Really?"

"You didn't grow up in Camelot but for those of us that did Cornelius Segan was a figure of nightmare" explained his mentor.

Now Merlin really was interested..... "Why?"
"Segan's powers...he could change day into night, turn the tides and legend has it that his spells helped build Camelot itself", continued Gaius.

"What happened?"

"In the end he grew too powerful and the King at that time ordered his execution" Gaius replied. Merlin huffed out a laugh.

"What do you find so amusing about that, my boy?" asked Gaius, looking at Merlin with a frown.

"Oh - I don't know.....I can just can't help thinking that he had actually served this King loyally and well...especially if he helped build this citadel" he looked up and around at the walls of their chambers, "and then the King found someone more useful, or just got bored with him or whatever, and decided to cast him aside without a thought.....but maybe this Segan character didn't take so kindly to being treated like a dog, so decided to use a bit of magic to teach the ungrateful King a lesson. And I can't say that I would blame him!"

"Merlin! Why are you shouting?" admonished Gaius in a shocked voice. "Calm yourself! Where the hell is this coming from?"

Merlin looked down at his hands which were gripped into tight fists on the table in front of him, the knuckles white. "I....err....sorry" stammered Merlin, coming back to himself - not entirely sure where this new burst of anger had come from but nevertheless feeling that Gaius was telling him only one side of the story. He didn't want to push it though, and changed the subject by asking "If he's dead, why are you so worried?"

"Segan couldn't bear that his wealth and power would die with him so he became obsessed with finding a way to defeat death itself" explained Gaius, still looking rather puzzled at Merlin's recent outburst.

Merlin felt a strange chill come over him and the hairs stood up on the nape of his neck. "You think he could have succeeded?" he asked, suddenly a little fearful of the answer.

"Let's hope not, for all our sakes!" replied the old man grimly.

Merlin stood up onto suddenly wobbly legs and headed up into his room. He closed the door behind him and curled up into a ball on his bed, feeling decidedly unsettled. Coming home to Gaius had certainly taken his mind off of the problems he was having with Arthur, but he didn't like this new problem they'd been replaced with one bit! Nevertheless he resolved to find out as much as he could about this Segan fellow.....he couldn't have been as bad as Gaius suggested......could he???
More Dreams and a Longer History Lesson

Chapter Summary

Merlin learns more about the mysterious Cornelius Segan.

As the bell rang for the second change of watch after midnight, Merlin gave up any hope of sleeping. He sighed deeply and wondered how he was going to get through the day ahead after spending yet another night disturbed by visions. "Ah well" he thought to himself as he slipped out of bed and into his trousers and a warm jacket, "At least these were nice dreams". The ones he'd had this night had been for the most part pleasant, although once again very very vivid.

He dreamt of a time long long ago. He saw things that were familiar to him from around Camelot as it was now; the layout of the Lower Town was the same, and streams, lakes and forest glades where Arthur liked to hunt. Although so much was familiar, in these dreams there was no magnificent Castle and the Lower Town was a mere collection of huts at the base of the hill. Instead of the citadel that stood there now, a huge wooden longhouse sat atop the hill above the town and was surrounded by a high fence made up of the trunks of huge trees lashed together. Inside this longhouse was furniture crafted from wood, and large tapestries adorned the walls - some that were familiar to Merlin from the present day Throne Room. In his dreams there was a massive fire burning at one end of the Longhouse, where servants busied themselves preparing food.

He dreamt of long fast gallops astride a massive black battlehorse and felt the sense of being in a body that was heavier, more muscular and much more graceful than the one he inhabited during his waking hours. He dreamt of a companion who was always by his side, a tall slim man with hair the colour of the setting sun and eyes as pale as a winter lake. Aelrid was the man's name and judging by his poise and attire he was a Great Lord, if not a Prince. Merlin dreamt of hunting trips - not with knights, spears and crossbows but just with himself, Aelrid and a hunting bird upon each of their arms. His companion favoured a great Eagle - a regal noble creature that took down rabbits and even small deer. He himself preferred a Raven. Unlike his companion's bird, his bird didn't need to be hooded and jessied between hunts, but instead flew patiently above them as they covered the miles of moorland on horseback, occasionally cawing and circling above their heads. He dreamt of evenings in wooded glades in front of a simple fire with the head of his Lord nestled comfortably in his lap and the day's catch slowly cooking - their hunting birds sitting nearby, both eating their respective share of the day's game.

He dreamt of battles, fighting alongside his companion, both of them clad in boiled leathers and wearing cloaks of heavy fur. Their weapons were longswords whose blows laid waste to their enemies. He felt the bloodlust and the adrenalin of battle, and of being more concerned for the life of the man at his side than he was for his own.

He dreamt of great feasts in the Longhouse, of whole roast boar burning in front of the great open fire, of tangy summer fruits and candied delights. In these dreams he was always seated at the High Table, on the right hand of his companion and was treated as equal to this great man.

Merlin crept from his room and silently made his way along the chilly corridors to the Great Library. He figured that if he could sleep no more, he would at least use the time until dawn
constructively and find out what he could about this Cornelius Segan character that seemed to have
gotten Gaius so worried. Sir Geoffrey was (thankfully) nowhere to be seen at this ungodly hour so
Merlin muttered a quiet spell to unlock the door and then another to create a small orb of yellowish
light in the palm of his hand and made his way into the Histories section of the vault. He started
his search at the very beginning of records of Camelot, and thus did not search for long before he
found what he was looking for. He dragged out a massive illuminated manuscript entitled "Thee
Lyffe and Doings of Aelrid thee Grate". He curled up on the floor in the darkest corner of the
library, underneath a table and summoned a little more light and began to read. The story was a
fascinating one. Aelrid had arrived in Camelot from "thee wild north" and within a few short years
had earned the support and loyalty of the local people for his fairness as an overlord. He promised
protection to his subjects and took only a small portion of their crops or livestock as payment. He
was a fearless fighter when it was needed, and soon cleared the land of bandits and marauding
armies. He built the Longhouse on the hilltop and fortified it, and would bring all the villagers up
into it's protective walls if the threat was great. According to this history, Aelrid was the youngest
son of a "Grate King from Overseas" but it didn't specify from whence.

The story was intriguing and beautifully illuminated with pictures of this Prince/King and his
exploits. Merlin would have loved to pore over it for hours, but hurried through it, hoping to find
mention of Cornelius Segan. He was more than half way through the document when the man was
first mentioned. He had arrived as a prisoner of war after an unsuccessful attack on Camelot's lands
from the Eastern Tribes. He had been a young man when he arrived and because of his youth and
muscular build he had been set to task helping to build the huge wall around the Longhouse. His
magical abilities had come to light one day when he had saved the life of Aelrid. A huge pine
treetrunk had just been hauled upright but before it had been secured to the section of wall already
in place, a rope snapped and it toppled sideways, right over the head of Aelrid who was facing the
opposite direction and talking to the overseer of the works. A shout of alarm went up and Aelrid
turned to see the trunk bearing down upon him so quickly there was no chance of escape. Suddenly
the fall of the wood was arrested in mid-air and the assembled workers turned to see the Prisoner
Segan holding both arms aloft whilst saying strange words in a guttural language with eyes glowing
golden. Aelrid stepped away from the fall-zone of the trunk and Segan slowly and lowered it to the
ground using magic. When Aelrid found out who had saved his life he immediately went over to
the man, hugged him tight, kissed him on both cheeks as an equal and announced to all present that
this stranger from the East was to be his new brother and companion.

Merlin paused briefly in his reading and huffed out a quiet laugh, remembering when he himself
had been appointed to the Pendragon household by Uther after saving Arthur's life. Rather than
kissing his cheeks and hugging him, Arthur had looked like someone had kicked his favourite
puppy! Merlin read on...

The anthology catalogued in detail some of the things that Merlin had seen in his dreams; great
battles, royal banquets and trips into the wilds with hunting birds. It also catalogued a great deal
that Merlin had not dreamt of; alliances with the magical peoples of the eastern lands from whence
Segan had come, bountious crops and many years of peace and plenty. The land prospered so well
that it became rich and content. But one night the great man Cornelius Segan had a vision in a
dream that filled him with foreboding. He had seen their fledgeling Kingdom overrun by enemies
from the South, and the land laid to waste and the population decimated by famine and war. So
disturbing was this vision (which repeated itself for so many nights that Cornelius grew afeared to
sleep) that he was sure that it was a prophecy. Without too much trouble, he convinced Aelrid to
fortify the Lower Town and to replace the Great Longhouse with a strong Citadel. Merlin skimmed
through the long detailed descriptions of the Citadel they built (which was in fact the one that still
stood today) but he did ascertain from his reading that Cornelius had insisted on being the director
of the building and had insured that the structure contained many hidden tunnels, water cisterns
and enough enchantments to insure that it was virtually impregnable to any invasions - especially from the South.

The building work took many years to complete and it seemed to Merlin as he read that during this time the King and his formerly constant companion spent more and more time apart. Aelrid had continued in his Kingly pursuits (for he was indeed thought of as a King by this time) - he rode out on campaigns against bandits and would-be invaders, he negotiated in any disputes within his Kingdom and he established a Court and Council to aid with the running of the increasingly wealthy Camelot. Meanwhile Cornelius was feverishly getting the Citadel planned and then built, constantly worried that he would not manage to complete the task before the invasion that he had foreseen in his vision came from the South.

By and by, the work was complete and the magnificent Castle of Camelot stood atop the hill guarding over a town that had grown in size and prosperity. To celebrate the completion and to honour his friend and the architect of the great achievement, Cornelius Segan (and also to demonstrate his strength to any surrounding Kingdoms that may still have doubted it) Aelrid decided to hold a week long celebration including a tournament, feasting and tours. He invited both commoners and nobility from his own Kingdom and dignatories from all the regions that Camelot had dealings with. The tournament was a huge success. Fighting men from across the lands proved to be no match for the newly appointed Knights of Camelot, the feasts were numerous and lavish and all who toured the new Citadel were amazed by it's size and beauty. Aelrid constantly praised his companion Cornelius and Cornelius basked in the attention and swelled with love for the man who had raised him from a mere slave to one of the mightiest men in the land.

Merlin paused from his reading briefly to rub his tired eyes. He sighed deeply and smiled wistfully. How wonderful it must have been to live in this Kingdom where commoners were promoted to be equals with nobility on their merit, and where there was respect rather than fear for those with magical abilities. He glanced up at the window and was alarmed to see that the eastern sky was already quite light and the birds had begun their dawn chorus. He had become so involved in the story that he hadn't noticed the passing of time. He quickly turned over the page wondering what would happen next in the tale of Aelrid and Cornelius.

The next page was headed by an illustration of a tall comely woman with blonde hair to her waist, sparkling blue eyes and full wide lips. Her clothing was rich and her bearing was regal. Merlin spent a few moments enraptured by the image before he heard footsteps passing outside the library which may have been the first of the Castle staff going about their business. Reluctantly he closed the large book and quietly replaced it on the shelf. He would have to return again the next night to find out how the story ended. He extinguished the orb of yellow light he'd created to read by and slowly walked to the exit, listening out for passing patrols before heading back out into the corridors. Once outside he re-locked the library door with a spell before straightening out his slightly crumpled clothes, running a hand through his mop of unkempt black hair and then walking in the direction of the kitchens.

His dreams and this story of the unlikely friendship between slave and King in ancient days had raised his spirits and made him think wistfully about his own relationship with Arthur. As he headed down to gather food for his Prince, Merlin resolved to be a more dilligent manservant and perhaps he'd be rewarded by praise and recognition of his Master, just as Cornelius Segan had been. This thought put a spring in his step and renewed hope in his heart...he would start as he meant to go on by serving a nourishing breakfast, on time and with a smile.
Hope and Hopelessness

Chapter Summary

Merlin resolves to be a better manservant but his plans go awry.

Merlin let himself into the Prince's chambers quietly. It was still very early - at least an hour earlier than he usually arrived with Arthur's breakfast - and he planned to have the food laid out on the table and a fire burning in the grate before gently waking his Master. He thrilled a little at the prospect of watching Arthur sleeping for a few moments before rousing him - he looked so angelic in repose.

All of Merlin's plans were shattered when he heard the Prince ask in a very awake voice, "Is that lunch?" and turned around to find Arthur already up and seated at his table and surrounded by what looked like the week's supply of breakfast food for an entire battalion of Knights. Right at Arthur's side and fawning over him in a sickening fashion was that bloody weasel Cedric. He was even cutting the food up for Arthur. Merlin half expected him to start spoon-feeding the heir to the throne!

"No, it's breakfast" said Merlin in dismay and not a little confusion...he knew Cedric had been granted a place in the Royal Household but nobody (specifically Arthur) had even hinted that he would be usurping Merlin's role as manservant. It was as if Merlin hadn't even spoken. The Prince ignored him and complimented the new fellow with a hearty, "This is lovely Cedric!"

'It tastes lovely now' thought Merlin, 'but you'll be struggling to get into your armour and complaining of stomach cramps half way through training if you keep this up!' He said nothing to Arthur, not wanting to be disrespectful in front of this outsider, but he glared at Cedric who winked back at him with a smug look on his face.

Although he was tempted to cast a spell that would instantly turn all the food putrid and another to turn Cedric into the weasel that he resembled so closely, Merlin remembered his resolution to be a good manservant and with as much patience as he could muster asked, "Is there anything else? That you need doing, Sire?"

Arthur didn't even look up at him or have the decency to empty his mouth before saying, "No I think Cedric's got it all covered". Merlin thought darkly that maybe he should turn Cedric into a weasel and Arthur into a pig. His musings were interrupted when Cedric suddenly announced, "Oh! I regret Sire, there is one thing I failed to do...er, muck out your horses". As he said this, he slyly glanced up at Merlin and smirked.

Finally the Prince graced Merlin with a look, but only to give him the brief command; "Off you go". Dismayed, Merlin just stood there speechless looking at Arthur and wondering how he had so easily cast his faithful servant aside so heartlessly for this....this piece of.....

"I'll get the door for you" said Cedric, cutting into his thoughts and running to his side. He opened the door and all but pushed Merlin out of the chambers.

Merlin flung one final glance back at Arthur, his eyes pleading and brimming with tears and full of hurt and confusion. Arthur didn't even look up from his plate of fruit.

He blinked back tears of anger as he stomped off down the hallways and angrily palmed away the
ones that escaped nevertheless and ran down his face as he walked across the courtyard toward the stable block.

It took a good few minutes to calm himself once inside. He stood breathing deeply with hands clenched at his side and it took all his concentration to keep a lid on his magic which wanted to escape and rage around him as it had done in the forest. He was still shaken by that experience and certainly didn't want a repeat performance here within the Castle's walls! Geva, the Prince's stallion gave out a low nervous wicker and stamped around his stall in consteration, sensing Merlin's mood. Merlin snapped out of his rage and went over to gentle the horse. Stroking it's fine nose and patting it's withers calmed him down. He took a deep breath and resolved that despite Arthur's thoughtlessness this morning, he would continue in his mission to be the perfect manservant. He gathered together the neccessary equipment and began to muck out the horse's stalls. It wasn't such an unpleasant job really; he loved the proximity of the horses and the musky organic smell of the hay. As he worked on he thought back on the story of Aelrid and Cornelius that he'd read last night and wondered what the conclusion might be. He wondered if it was wise to spend another sleepness night in the library since he'd not really rested properly for three whole nights. As he had this last thought he was suddenly overcome with tiredness and without being able to stop himself he pitched forward into the hay, fast asleep.

The dream was strange and vivid. In it saw the woman from the last page of the book that he had read the night before in the library. She was dressed in a long elegant scarlet ballgown, a ruby brooch glistening at her throat. She was laughing and spinning around in a solitary dance with her head flung back and he waist length blonde hair spread out around her like a halo. She was stunning. Merlin and his dream-companion King stood and watched her, entranced. Suddenly she span toward them both and spun around them so quickly in her frenzied dance that Merlin could not keep her in his line of sight. Before he really knew what had happened she had grabbed the King and pulled him into the whirling dance. Although the woman in motion had been stunning, his King-companion was simply breathtaking in his dance. His movements reminded Merlin of a horse at full gallop during a jousting match. He watched as the pair spun and spun and spun around him, getting dizzy himself as he turned to keep them in view. He shouted at them, telling them to slow down or stop but realized that they were so absorbed in eachother that they disregarded him entirely. He raised his voice to try and catch their attention but to no avail - they were oblivious to the world around them. Suddenly the dream-Merlin became angry at being ignored and incanted a spell that created a whirlwind. The wind caught the pair up and raised them above the ground, higher and higher. Their smiles turned into grimaces of panic as they rose higher and higher into the air. The woman began to scream and the King was shouting something that Merlin could not hear because the whirlwind was so loud. They were now as high as the highest turret of the castle. Suddenly in his dream Merlin broke the spell and the man and woman let out a blood-chilling scream as they plunged earthward.

Merlin managed to pull himself from the dream before the bodies were dashed on the cobblestones in front of him. He woke up breathing heavily and couldn't quite understand why he was laying on a straw strewn floor with the smell of horse manure in very close proximity. He sat up slowly, holding his head and trying to make some sense of this latest vision. He blinked around the room and almost fell over backwards when he looked up into the statling blue eyes of Prince Arthur hovering over him.

"Sire!" he declared in shock.

"What are you doing?" asked the Prince with what sounded like genuine curiosity.

"Nothing" replied Merlin dumbly - still half occupied with his dream.
"I can see that" said the Prince sarcastically. Merlin came to his senses, realised he was in the stables, on the floor and realised what Arthur must be thinking.

"I wasn't sleeping", he said defensively, "I was....I was just...bending down" In truth he had no idea at all how he had ended up on the floor.

"Looking for something?" asked the Prince.

"Yea-yes" blustered Merlin trying desperately to think of a reason why he should be laying on the floor of the stables.

"Perhaps we're looking for the same thing?" asked Arthur, glancing around him.

"What?" asked Merlin, also glancing around, his senses still befuddled.

"Oh, I don't know...THE HORSES!" shouted the Prince.

"The hor-ses" said Merlin very slowly coming to the realisation that there were, in fact, no horses in the stalls. "....oh!" he exclaimed in genuine alarm.

Suddenly Arthur was properly angry and waving an index finger in Merlin's face. "One mistake I can understand, everyone has a bad day now and then, but this is one thing after another", he bellowed.

Merlin had no response, he simply placed his hands on his head and admitted, "I dunno what happened!"

Arthur mirrored his actions and looked as though he was about to tear his manservant's head off both verbally and literally. Merlin flinched in anticipation...he hated it when Arthur spoke to him like this. It reminded him of how Arthur had been in the very early days, before Merlin had saved his life or proven his worth as a manservant and a friend. Before a word had left Arthur's lips however, there was a quiet voice from beside them.

"Sire, please Sire don't be too hard on him, he's a good servant", said Cedric in a placating tone, "he's just tired"

Merlin would have rather had his ears boxed by an angry Arthur than have this snake-in-the-grass speak in his defence so said belligerently, "I am not!"

"Maybe, maybe if he had the evening off" continued Cedric, as though Merlin hadn't even spoken.

"I don't want the evening off" he snapped, getting angry.

"...a good nights rest" went on Cedric, ignoring Merlin and addressing the Prince.

"I DID NOT FALL ASLEEP!" shouted Merlin, suddenly reminded of himself in the dream he'd just had, being ignored by those around him.

".....I am more than willing to take over his duties tonight" chirped up Cedric.

"Perhaps you're right", conceded Arthur - ignoring Merlin and looking at weasley Cedric.

"No" snapped Merlin.

"Shut up Merlin", snapped Arthur, looking at him briefly with nothing but annoyance on his face. Despite all his resolutions to be a better manservant, Merlin's blood boiled and he could hold his
temper no more. It was as thought Arthur had forgotten all they'd been through together.

"Can't you see what he's trying to do?" he said, moving into Arthur's personal space and his voice going up several decibels, "He's trying to get rid of me and if you weren't such a clot pole you'd see that!".

"A what?" said Arthur quietly, looking both startled and murderous. Merlin stopped dead...he had stepped over a line this time. Oh dear. This would almost certainly mean the stocks.

"Clotpole, he said clotpole" said that shit-stirring Cedric quietly. Merlin glared at him and fought the temptation to lift him up and impale him on the scythe hanging on the back wall of the stable.

There was a silence as Arthur drew himself up to his full height and Merlin braced himself for whatever was coming, desperately fighting down his murderous urges. Suddenly - and surprisingly - Arthur's pose relaxed a little and he said, "Cedric's right, he can look after me tonight and you can go home and think about whether you want to be my servant or not"

Merlin would have been hurt less if Arthur had kicked him all around the courtyard. He was utterly stunned by this command and could only manage to say, "But..."

"Go!" hissed the Prince through gritted teeth. Merlin knew this tone of voice, and knew there was no arguing with Arthur when his temper was this high.

For the second time that morning Merlin looked at Arthur imploringly trying to say with his eyes all that he seemed incapable of saying with words or actions, but Arthur's face was utterly closed to him apart from his eyes which were radiating something akin to hatred. Had they been alone, Merlin would have raged and let the tears flow and pleaded with him but with this Cedric character right at their shoulders this was not an option. For the second time that morning Merlin walked away from Arthur fighting back tears and the urge to tear the world apart with his magic.

Suddenly and alarmingly Merlin felt his Prince and his destiny slipping away from him. Was this how it was going to end?? He stumbled back toward Gaius's chambers hardly able to see as tears obscured his vision and ran down his cheeks unchecked.
By time he got back to the physician's chambers Merlin had cried most of his tears out, but simply did not have the energy to tidy up either his countenance or his appearance before heading indoors. Believeing that he may have lost his position as Arthur's manservant for good left him feeling completely empty inside. Gaius was at work at his desk. Merlin didn't even have it in him to acknowledge the old man but instead headed despondently toward his bedroom door, intent on curling up on his single bed and crying some more. Gaius - of course - did not pick up on the boy's distress and asked, "What's that on your face?"

"Nothing" replied Merlin, turning his face away from his mentor and strolling onward toward his room.

"What's wrong?" persisted Gaius.

"Nothing" repeated the boy flatly, entering his room and closing the door behind him. Once inside, Merlin sat numbly on the edge of the bed. He was aware that he still smelt of the stables and that his face was caked in horse dung so knew he'd regret laying down and transferring it all onto his bedding, but he simply could not find the energy within himself to clean up. He sat there wondering how his world had imploded in on itself within the space of two days. He tried to think about what he would do and where he would go now that Arthur did not want him but his mind whirled and panicked and refused to acknowledge his world without the Prince in it.

He had no idea how long he had been sitting thus when the door opened quietly and Gaius came in. He simply said, "Here" before starting to clean off Merlin's face. The feel of the warm flannel bought the boy back to himself a little. He sighed and took a little comfort in Gaius's ministrations, tilting his head to allow Gaius to wipe off the worst of the mess. By and by he felt himself able to speak in a level voice again.

"I'm not an idiot" he said quietly.

"What happened?" asked Gaius, not stopping what he was doing.

Merlin didn't have the energy to recount the disaster that had been his day thus far, so simply said, "I just want Arthur to trust me and to see me for who I really am."

"One day he will" said his Mentor soothingly.
"When?" pleaded Merlin, feeling his tears trying to escape again, "Everything I do is for him and he just thinks I'm an idiot".

Gaius looked at him with understanding and pity. His wise old eyes could read the heartbreak in Merlin's eyes and his heart went out to the boy. But he didn't contradict what Merlin had just said. Instead he offered, "Not everyone thinks you're an idiot...although looking at you now..."

Merlin huffed out a little laugh. He still felt wretched, but at least he had Gaius to confide in....he wasn't utterly alone.

Gaius finished cleaning his face and sat down on the edge of the bed next to Merlin and looked intently into his eyes. "Now is not the time to be questioning these things Merlin, I believe that you and Arthur are destined for greatness and that your calling is to serve and protect him"

Merlin was glad to hear this from the lips of someone else. He too had been convinced of his calling. Until today. Now he wasn't sure at all. "It's hard" he choked out through gritted teeth, somehow keeping back the tears that threatened to begin flowing again.

"I know it's hard" agreed Gaius, "but Camelot is in grave peril. I've translated the inscription, "He who breaks my heart completes my work"

Merlin was a little thrown by this sudden change in subject and surprised that it had taken his old learned mentor so long to translate something that he himself had understood as soon as he had seen the inscription. "What does it mean?" he asked after a pause.

"You remember the seal that I took from the tomb contained an inscription? Well, it was repeated again over the heart of the statue carved on the tomb itself. It took me a long time to translate and I wondered what these words could possibly mean. (Again Merlin wondered why it had taken so long for the old man to translate the phrase). I returned to the vault to see if there were any more clues and I realised that where the words are carved, there is an indentation that looks like it should contain a gemstone - a big one; the size of my palm." He held up his hand to illustrate. "After a lot of research" he continued, "I believe that this gemstone contained his soul and that somebody has disturbed it and released it"

Merlin felt all the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. "You think he's alive?" he asked incredulously.

"His soul is" replied Gaius, "in order to live, a soul needs a body."

"So if this stone is removed from it's setting then the heart is broken and the soul released?" clarified Merlin feeling more and more uneasy.

"That's right, yes" confirmed the old man.

They sat in silence for a few moments, both lost in thought.

"Perhaps" said Merlin, "perhaps that poor man I found in the tomb took the stone out and released the soul? He did look like he's seen something terrifying before he died."

"Yes, perhaps" replied Gaius non committally, "but Cornelius was a powerful magician and a very clever man. I don't think that he would allow his soul to stay for long inside the body of a man killed by a trap of his own making! No, we need to work on the assumption that the soul is out there somewhere and poses a very real threat to Camelot."

Merlin felt an unbidden shiver run through his body at the prospect of this renegade soul in search
of a home on the loose in the Castle and did not want to talk about it any more. In a surprising
turnaround from the total despondency he had felt before his discussion with Gaius, he found that
he could no longer sit still. His leg jigged around nervously and he suddenly leapt up, threw off
his soiled shirt, used it to wipe the last of the stable mess from his face and headed for the door.
Gaius looked up at him, startled. "Where are you going now?" he asked.

"Something I need to finish" said Merlin cryptically. He paused briefly at the door and looked
down at his mentor with a half smile of gratitude, "Thank you Gaius, for being here" he said before
hurrying from the room.

"You're welcome, my boy" said Gaius to the empty room wondering what trouble his ward was
heading off to now.

Merlin hurried along to the library. Not entirely understanding why, he felt compelled to read the
rest of the account of the life of Aelrid and his friend Cornelius Sagan. Now that Arthur had
dismissed him for the rest of the day, he felt no reason to wait until the dead of night to carry on
reading. This time Sir Geoffrey was indeed in the library sitting at his desk, but it was a very easy
thing for Merlin to cause a large stack of books at the far end of the vault to cascade down from
the top shelf. Geoffrey tutted and hurried off to investigate what had caused this disruption and
Merlin slipped silently through the door and hurried along to the dark old corner of the library
where he had found the old history books. He pulled down the tome he had started the previous
night and huddled in the same place beneath the desk to continue reading.

He soon found the page that he had left off at, illustrated by the picture of the beautiful lady with
the waist length blonde hair. He shuddered at the memory of the nightmare he'd had whilst asleep
on the stable floor, of Aelrid and this woman suspended high in the air by a magic whirlwind. He
shook away the memory and immersed himself in the story once again.

Amongst the many guests that had come to Camelot for the great Tournament was a Princess Ciska
from the Kingdom of Brittany across the Southern Sea. She was tall and comely and her high born
breeding shone through in her regal bearing and impeccable manners. With very little effort on her
part she captured the eye of Aelrid and within the space of the few days of the tournament she had
captured his interest enough for him to invite her back for an informal visit. The Castle staff had
only just finished clearing up from the tourney celebrations when it began preparing itself anew for
Ciska's visit. She arrived with a large retinue of Ladies-in-waiting and Pages who filled up almost
the whole of the East Wing of Camelot's newly completed Citadel.

Although undoubtedly beautiful and regal, Ciska turned out to be a most demanding guest. For the
three weeks that she stayed, she insisted on the company of Aelrid for at least half of his day. This
left him little time to attend to matters of Court or any of the other pressing matters of being King.
He barely saw Cornelius, who felt the absence more strongly since now that the Citadel was
completed he found himself with more free time on his hands. Knights, Courtiers and Cornelius
himself tried to gently hint to the King that he should perhaps give his Kingdom a little attention,
but he would have none of it. He was utterly enthralled by Ciska and within very little time found
himself in love with her. By the end of her short visit he had proposed marriage and set off with her
and her retinue back to Brittany in order to ask her father for her hand in marriage.

Aelrid's sudden departure left the Court of Camelot in some consternation. Although
acknowledging that Ciska was indeed a most noble noblewoman the people of Camelot worried
that they knew very little of her background. They were wary that she came from a Kingdom
across the Southern Sea, a place that none of them had ever visted and that nobody seemed to
know anything about. Cornelius trusted his old friend's judgement and did all he could to calm the
fears of the Court, reminding them that he himself had been taken in and trusted by Aelrid even though he had come from a distant and unknown tribe. His words seemed to calm the anxious townsfolk and life in the Citadel went on as normal as they awaited the return of their King. Aelrid returned alone after a week with the news that the wedding would be held at Beltane - less than two months away. Once again preparations began, but this time the entire Kingdom seemed to be involved. The best of the previous year's harvest was purchased from the farmers, the fattest of the spring lambs were selected and slaughtered and the woodland thereabouts was alive with the calls of hunting parties and the baying of dogs as they hunted game for the forthcoming feast. Performers feverishly practised their acts, squires feverishly polished the armour of their Knights and the womenfolk diligently sewed day and night to prepare dresses and tapestries.

Soon enough Beltane came. The wedding of Aelrid and Ciska was magnificent and was spoken of with fondness for many years by those who were present. Aelrid declared an extra two day public holiday after the feast day itself, and distributed ale and cakes to every citizen within his Kingdom. Cornelius served as Best Man for his old friend and bought him to the Priest for the hand-fasting ceremony. Despite their previous doubts, the people of Camelot celebrated along with the King and welcomed Ciska into their Kingdom and their hearts.

By and by life returned to normal - or at least a new kind of normality now that the King was married. Ciska had bought a large retinue with her before the wedding and once again they took up most of the East Wing of the Citadel, keeping the staff busy. All (including Aelrid) had assumed that the retinue would return to Brittany once the celebrations had finished but one month after the wedding they were still very much in residence. The Quartermaster came one day to ask Aelrid how much longer they would be staying, since supplies were running rather low in the Castle's stores. Aelrid in turn asked his Queen. Ciska's reaction surprised and alarmed him. She flew into a rage, screamed, cried and shouted. She accused him of taking her away from her beautiful home and from everything that she held dear. She said that she could not believe that he wanted to deprive her of this 'small reminder of home' and that perhaps she should go back to her father's house. Aelrid was appalled. He had asked the question in all innocence and was mortified that he had caused his beloved wife such pain. He blanched at the prospect of her leaving him and hurriedly agreed to her retinue staying for as long as she liked...forever if it was what she desired.

It was their first proper argument and set the precedent for their married life. In very little time, Queen Ciska had turned the life of the Citadel on its head. Her frequent rages meant that all but the hardiest of the Citadel staff were willing to serve her. Aelrid was so in terror of her leaving him and returning to Brittany that he conceded to her every wish. When his Court raised objections to her unreasonable demands that put a strain upon the household, Aelrid himself flew into a rage and reminded them all that he was in fact the ruler and that his wishes - and those of his Queen - should be obeyed without question.

Cornelius was as concerned as the rest of the Court with these worrying developments but trusted his old friend would eventually see sense and come round. He was still Aelrid's dearest friend and confidante and was one of the few people that was aware of how very afraid the King was at the prospect of his beloved wife leaving him. Cornelius acted as the voice of reason and would bring the concerns of the Court to the ears of the King in such a way as to prevent him becoming angry. This role was not an easy one but Cornelius managed it well and for a time a fine balance was maintained between the demands of the Queen and the demands of the Kingdom. After a while however, Ciska began to notice that not all of her demands were met as she would wish because Cornelius would convince the King otherwise. At first she turned on the charm and played up to Cornelius, trying to win him round to her wishes through flirtation and flattery. He was too wise however, and distrustful of her motives. He harboured a deep love and unerring loyalty for Aelrid and found it distasteful in the extreme that Ciska was turning her womanly wiles in his direction. He very swiftly made it clear that her charms were lost on him.
Ciska was furious. She had always been given whatever she demanded and even as a small child men had fallen over themselves to gain her favour and attention. She simply did not understand Cornelius's reaction. She concluded that Cornelius had 'unnatural tendencies', preferring the company of menfolk to that of women - it was impossible that he could not be seduced by her! Once she had decided this was the case, she made subtle hints to her courtiers and thus started rumours circulating amongst her retinue. Naturally these rumours spread to the Camelot staff and onward to the people of the Kingdom. As these things are wont to do, the rumours spread rapidly and the stories associated with them grew and became more credible with each retelling. Soon, it was 'common knowledge' that Cornelius had a predilection for young squires and had taken them to his chambers to warm his bed on more than one occasion. When Ciska was satisfied that the rumour was spread far enough, she spoke with Aelrid.

The King - naturally - had not heard these rumours and found them preposterous. Ciska was persistent and convinced him to seek confirmation from his advisors. In a very uncomfortable meeting (that Ciska made sure excluded Cornelius) it became apparent that what she had told him was seemingly true. Aelrid was shocked, but more than that he was deeply hurt. He considered Cornelius his closest friend and did not understand why in all the years of his association the man had never revealed this secret to him. He was anxious to play the whole scandal down. He did not want to lose his most trusted advisor and dearest friend over something so trite. He told Ciska as much, insisting that whatever Cornelius did in his private life had no bearing on his role as the King's Right Hand Man. Ciska would not accept this. First she tried to reason that such 'perversions' left Cornelius open to blackmail. Aelrid laughed this off, saying that there was no place for blackmail if the King was already aware of and accepted what Cornelius was. Ciska was not so easily beaten. She told him that if he openly accepted Cornelius and his 'deviant ways', it would only be a matter of time before people began to suspect Aelrid himself of harbouring such tendencies. He was, after all, extremely close to Cornelius and they had often travelled together unaccompanied in the early years of the Kingdom. Aelrid became serious and thoughtful as she spoke, and she used her trump card. She said that if he himself was suspected of such deviance, then he would be considered weak in the eyes of surrounding Kingdoms and those who wished harm to Camelot. Before he had time to process what she had said, Ciska added that she herself would begin to doubt his manliness if he did not deal accordingly with Cornelius. The fear of appearing weak, and greater than that the fear of losing his beloved wife made Aelrid resolute.

He summoned Cornelius to a private council of his closest advisors. He told his old friend about the rumours. Cornelius was naturally outraged, denying it all. Aelrid quizzed him about allegations of trysts with young Squires which the man simply laughed off. The King questioned him further, asking him why he had never married, or indeed had any serious dealings with the Ladies of the Kingdom. At this question Cornelius became very serious and quiet and after a while admitted that he harboured love for nobody but his King. Only a day before, this statement would have made Aelrid's heart swell with joy but now it simply caused his heart to sink. Ciska had been right. His oldest friend apparently harboured unnatural feelings for him. In a fit of panic Aelrid decided to send Cornelius away. Cornelius was at first astounded and disbelieving. He tried to reason with the man he had devoted his life to, but Aelrid was unmoved. Soon his disbelief grew into anger and he reminded Aelrid that he had saved his life numerous times and helped him build the Kingdom and the Citadel. Aelrid was insistent that he must go and Cornelius finally became furious. He stormed from the Council chamber treatening retribution and curses on Camelot and it's people.

Aelrid had no choice. The treasonous words of Cornelius had been heard not only by the Private Council members, but by the Knights on guard outside of the room. He had no option but to arrest and imprison the man that had been his closest confidante. As the guards seized Sagan, the very walls of the Citadel began to shake as his magic flared along with his rage. Aelrid swiftly understood what was happening and had the man shackled in Cold Iron that would prevent him
from using his magic. He was taken to the dungeons, and condemned to death the following morning.

Aelrid was heartbroken but unable to change the fate of Cornelius without undermining his own Kingship. He visited his old friend in the cells in the dark hour before dawn. The man was holding a large quartz gemstone in the shape of a heart. It was equisitelly made and in the shape of a heart. Aelrid recognised it at once. It was the first gift he had given the man when they had returned victorious from their first Campaign. Without preamble Cornelius said, "I carry this with me at all times to remind me of my loyalty and devotion to you. I ask only that you allow me to take it with me to the executioner's block. Broken hearted, Aelrid agreed and told him that despite being unable to save him from the impending execution he promised him that he would receive a full state burial and internment, in recognition of his service to the Kingdom.

The following morning as the sun came up over the Citadel he had helped build, the Cold Iron shackles were removed from Cornelius Sagan and he was beheaded. As his body was laid out for burial, the gemstone was found in his pocket wrapped in a scroll that bore the words "He who breaks my heart completes my work" written in his native tongue. It glowed with a mysterious blue light that enraptured all that looked upon it. Aelrid decreed that it should be set into his friend's tomb and surrounded by this strange poetic description. As was the custom, Cornelius's assembled wealth was sealed into the burial chamber with him. Aelrid mourned his loss for the rest of his days.

Merlin stopped reading when he realised that water was dripping onto the old manuscript and blurring the words. He suddenly became aware of himself again and realised that he was weeping uncontollably. He closed the book up and sobbed some more, taking a good while before he regained his equalibrium again. He sighed deeply and quietly returned the book to its place on the shelf. So deep in thought was he at what he had just read that he completely forgot to distract Sir Geoffrey and simply left the library in a daze unheeding the protests of the irate librarian behind him.
Arthur looked around at the disarray in the vault of Cornelius Sagan. It was obvious that somebody had been inside and raided a good number of the treasures. Merlin and Gaius also surveyed the mess wondering if some new and dangerous enchantment had been unwittingly unleashed by the thief.

Merlin was not at all comfortable to be back in this vault. He'd had an almost overwhelming sense of unease since first he'd set foot in this place. On top of that it was the day after his argument with Arthur and he was still furious at his master and unsure of what his future in Camelot held. Subconsciously he was pleased that Arthur had summoned him upon discovering the burglary of the tomb - perhaps the arrogant prat DID need him around after all - but he was nevertheless uncomfortable around the Prince, not knowing whether Arthur intended to sack him or not. Arthur was behaving strangely; he had sent a Page to call Merlin and Gaius down to the tomb, but since they had arrived he had not addressed them directly and having ordered the warning bell to be sounded he headed back up to Uther without another word to either Gaius or his manservant.

When Arthur departed and was no longer distracting by his very presence, Merlin felt even more uncomfortable in the vault. His skin prickled and the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He was reluctant to even move away from the entrance. "I don't understand how they got in" he said to Gaius, "the gate's not even damaged".

Gaius looked up at him and the undamaged gate and replied, "They must have used a key".

"Arthur's got the only key" countered Merlin.

"Where does he keep it?" asked Gaius.

"On his belt with the others" said Merlin, looking about him at the spilled jewels and treasures. He had a sudden unbidden feeling of anger at the unknown thief, much like the feeling he'd had when Uther had greedily handled the jewels just after their initial discovery.

"Does he ever take it off?" Gaius asked, recalling Merlin's attention.

"Only when he's asleep", the boy informed him, "He keeps it with the others next to his bed".

"Who had access to his chambers last night?"
"Just me....and - Cedric!". As he said the last word, Merlin bolted from the vault and barrelled up the stairs and along corridors until he arrived back in Arthur's chambers. He'd intended to simply confront that thieving weasel Cedric and to tell him once and for all to leave Arthur alone and to leave Camelot.

He was surprised to find Arthur already returned from his audience with the King. He changed his plan accordingly. Without preamble or apology for not knocking on the door he marched up to Arthur's desk and stated, "Cedric is possessed by an evil spirit."

"What?" came the rather flat reply.

"He tried to steal the jewel but it wasn't a jewel it was the soul of an ancient sorcerer Cornelius Segar...." blurted out Merlin, knowing that he wasn't explaining himself so well but struck with a feeling of panic for the safety of his prat of a master. Arthur blinked uncomprehendingly up at him and after a few moments asked, "Merlin, have you been on the cider??"

"Please! Listen to me!" shouted Merlin in desperation, "Camelot is in mortal danger. Segan is using Cedric's body to take revenge!"

Arthur's incomprehension shifted into annoyance at the tone in which his manservant was addressing him. "This nonsense is not helping you keep your job.." he stated (he thought) quite reasonably.

"YOU ARE NOT LISTENING TO ME!" bellowed Merlin mere inches from his face.

Despite having the overwhelming urge to slap the semi hysterical youth, Arthur showed Princely restraint and in as level a voice as he could manage said, "If you're going to shout anyway...Cedric!"

Cedric came running to attend to the bidding of his new master.

"Will you escort Merlin from the Palace?" ordered Arthur, not looking at Merlin again.

Cedric nodded and walked over to Merlin, avoiding eye contact with his him but reaching out to take hold of his arm.

Arthur had expected a tirade of abuse from the boy, but did not for a moment expect what happened next.

Merlin - his usually placid, awkward, clumsy, gangly manservant - spun around on his heels and dived onto Cedric before the shorter man had had a chance to take hold of him. Cedric lost his balance and went sprawling onto the flagstones, stunned by the sudden attack. Merlin didn't leave it there, but instead attempted to throttle the life out of Cedric. Cedric fought back as best he could, hitting Merlin in the face with the palm of his hand and then rolling over and over, trying to dislodge the enraged fellow.

For his part, as soon as Cedric had touched his arm, something alien to his personality had possessed Merlin. A red mist seemed to settle before his eyes and the rational part of his brain seemed to no longer have control over his body. His body began working on instinct and did all
that it could to destroy the threat to Arthur...he found himself sitting astride Cedric and seriously trying to throttle the life out of the man. As much as the smaller man fought and tried to get away from him, Merlin was singlemindedly set on bringing about his death. He was aware of knocking the Prince down at one point in his need to get hold of Cedric and to kill him but it seemed unimportant. He only came back to his senses when Arthur suddenly bellowed very loudly, "Merlin!". The manservant paused for a millisecond before renewing his assault on Cedric but despite his singleminded determination Arthur's superior physical strength finally got the better of him and he found himself in an armlock that he could not escape from despite his boiling rage. Only the tiny sliver of reason left to him prevented him from casting a spell to cause Arthur to release him.

"You've gone too far this time Merlin" growled Arthur, hustling him roughly from the room and along the hallways of the Castle, "You can spend a few days cooling off in the cells!"

Once he was flung into a dungeon, the physical pain of landing awkwardly on the rough hewn stone floor bought Merlin totally back to himself. He was no longer homicidal but he was still in a foul temper. Frustrated that he was not being listened to he jumped straight back up and ran to the cell door, hammering and letting loose a tirade of abuse against the Prince, Cedric and the world in general.

Nobody came.

The light began to fade in the tiny window way above him as the evening drew in. No guards came to feed him or to light the torches on the wall and after a few hours he gave up shouting and hammering and instead sat in the corner of the cell trembling with an equal mixture of anger, frustration and cold. He rocked back and forth on his haunches wondering how long he would be left here in the dark and the cold like a dog.

The longer he sat the blacker his thoughts became.

He had attacked Cedric for the good of the Kingdom and for the safety of his Prince...how could the clotpole not understand that? How could Arthur so easily disregard him in favour of this Cedric character after all they had been through together? How could his Prince doubt his loyalty? How could Arthur not see that Cedric was nothing but a chancer and a thief?

Time passed and Merlin calmed a little and thought about the times that he and Arthur had lain together. The time it had happened in Ealdor on the eve of the battle with Kanen, Merlin had felt complete for the first time in his life. It certainly hadn't been planned but when it did happen it had been wonderful. And Arthur had pleaded with him to return to Camelot, telling him that life without him was "dull and unthinkable". It had been the first time that Merlin had felt the undeniable connection between himself and the Prince that the Great Dragon kept talking about. True, he had loved Arthur before they had come together like that, but since that time he had been deeply and irrevocably In Love with his master and he had truly thought that on some level the Prince felt the same.

Now? Now he just felt cheap and used. He'd given himself heart and soul and body and magic to Arthur and in return the Prince was happy to cast him aside without a second thought. The more he reflected the angrier he became. Arthur, he decided, was just like Uther. He used his subjects for his own ends, he looked down on the servants as something sub-human, he was cruel, vindictive and certainly not worth the loyalty and tears that Merlin had wasted on him.

Suddenly the story of Cornelius Sagan that he'd just finished reading came to mind and like a
lightning bolt Merlin realised that he and Sagan were in fact very similar. He frowned and resolved that he would not suffer a similar fate. He would no longer waste his time, energy, love or magic on someone that was so obviously not worth it! He was almost overwhelmed by the clenching of his heart when he made this realisation...it was as though a cold hand had gripped it. He shook off the feeling and stood up straight. He impatiently brushed away the useless tears that had been falling down his cheeks.

He seemed to have done nothing but cry since becoming Arthur's manservant, he decided. Not any more. He would not be Arthur's whipping boy any longer.

In the darkness he strode to the cell door and cast a spell to blast it open. There was nobody about so he took no care to be quiet. Once out of the cell he summoned a small flame in the palm of his hand to light his way out of that wretched place. He had planned to head over to the stables, saddle up his favourite mare and ride off toward Ealdor before anyone noticed he had gone. Once out of the dungeons however, he felt himself drawn further underground. Not to the cave of the Great Dragon, but to the vault of Cornelius Sagan.

It was almost laughably easy to get rid of the guards from the vault entrance by causing a small rockfall further along the tunnel that they all went off to investigate. Once they'd gone Merlin quietly let himself into the vault with a muttered spell to open the iron gate at it's entrance.

He wasn't entirely sure what had made him come here. He moved deeper in and stood beside the tomb. His fingers caressed the inscription thereon and he contemplated it's true meaning...he wasn't so sure anymore that Gaius's understanding of the meaning was the correct one. Maybe Cornelius's enigmatic words simply meant that by breaking his heart, his old friend Aelrid had made Cornelius realise that no man - and certainly no King - was worthy of his loyalty and his only loyalty was to his fellow magic users.

In that moment Merlin came to the shattering conclusion that he must forever leave this magic-hating Kingdom behind and seek his fortune amongst those of his own kind in a more tolerant land. To hell with the 'Destiny' that the Dragon spoke of. To hell with Arthur.

He strode back toward the entrance to the vault and put out his hand to open the gate when he heard the guards returning. Instinctively he flung himself flat on the ground beside the tomb to avoid being caught. Despite his new resolve he saw no need to fight them and thus raise the alarm that he had escaped - it would be easy and much more sensible to create another diversion when the shift changed and new guards came on watch within the half-hour.

As he lay prostrate on the ground next to the tomb, his eyes were drawn to something large and clear that was laying half buried beneath a pile of gold coins. He slowly reached out his hand and gently teased it from it's hiding place with the tips of his fingers. Once it was within reach he closed it into his palm and pulled it towards his face to get a better look. It felt warm and almost pulsed in his hand and hummed quietly in a way that was disturbingly familiar.

In the fraction of a second after he opened his hand to see the huge heart shaped gem he almost yelped in sudden remembrance of the first time he had held it. Before he had a chance to utter a sound however, he felt the cold clenching hand around his heart squeeze tighter and all feelings of love, compassion and loyalty went far far away. Instead the only emotions he felt were anger, hatred and the desire for revenge against this Kingdom that so despised magic.
Reflections of a Prince

Chapter Summary

Arthur contemplates some important changes.

After he returned from throwing Merlin into the dungeons Arthur had been in such a temper that he had tersely dismissed Cedric who had blanched and virtually run away.

The Prince then proceeded to throw clothes, goblets, vambraces - pretty much anything he could reach - around his rooms. This hadn't vented his anger sufficiently so he had gone down to the training field, grabbing a longsword from the armoury en route. Once there he had attacked one of the practice dummies so vociferously that by the time he had come to his senses it lay on the ground before him, a pile of splinters and shredded fabric.

Now he was half way through a pitcher of wine sitting alone in his chambers and was still in a foul mood.

'Confound him!' he cursed darkly as he downed his eigth goblet full of wine, thinking about Merlin and of all that had happened in the last few days. The boy was simply HOPELESS as his manservant. It was blatantly obvious that he had never taken seriously the training he had been given about how to behave around nobility. As much as Arthur secretly enjoyed their irreverent banter when they were alone together, he could not tolerate the way Merlin spoke to him when they were in noble company. The boy was shameless - he would not think twice about disrespecting Arthur in front of the Court or even in front of Uther! Arthur wasn't sure if this showed great bravery or great stupidity. On the evidence of his servant's behaviour over the previous few days he was more inclined to conclude that the latter was the case.

It was no wonder that he was so well acquainted with the stocks in the lower town.

Arthur wondered lazily if the boy had been forced to leave his home village because of this absence of a brain-to-mouth filter. Merlin had always been cheeky but in the last couple of days he had been downright belligerent. Arthur was still aghast at the nerve of his servant when the boy had jumped into his bed and attempted to seduce him rather than to carry out his order to tell the diggers beneath the castle to stop work. And he was aghast at himself because he had almost....almost succumbed! If Merlin had not come to his senses and jumped up suddenly, Arthur wasn't entirely sure he would have resisted for very much longer. He had been appalled by how easy it was for the boy to sway his judgement. He had resolved then to treat Merlin more as a servant than he had previously done...the boy was obviously getting ideas way above his station if he thought that he could seduce the Prince and thus influence his decision making.

But, of course, Idiot Merlin had not taken the hints at all. Arthur had tried his very best to keep aloof from the boy and not to engage in banter whilst they were in company. That fellow Cedric had conveniently appeared just at the right time and Arthur was using him to teach Merlin a lesson - that, whatever he might think, he wasn't indespensable. Anyone with a modicum of sense would have taken the hint and started to behave in a manner more in accordance with his station. But no, not Merlin. Of course. Instead he had become even more belligerent than before and had even had the audacity to call the Crown Prince of Camelot names in front of strangers.
"What was it again?" thought Arthur aloud, frowning. "Oh yes, 'Clotpole'". That in itself would have been ample reason for Arthur to dismiss him from service - indeed from the Kingdom! But he had been patient and understanding and had instead sent the boy off home to calm down and to think seriously about his conduct. The Prince reasoned that maybe he had been overworking his manservant lately and that perhaps the boy was overtired and thus a little hysterical.

And then the brawl with Cedric had happened. It would have been bad enough for Merlin if it had happened in the kitchens or even the courtyard of the Castle, but the fact that it had taken place in the Prince's own chambers was simply unforgiveable. If word got back to Uther that this had happened, and that Arthur himself had been knocked down in the brawl, it was likely that the boy would be flogged. Arthur shuddered as an unbidden image of Merlin's back streaked with bloodied welts came into his head.

Arthur felt that he had no choice but to fire Merlin as his manservant and to replace him with someone who knew their proper place and their job. He resolved that he would go down to the dungeons in another hour or so when he himself had calmed down sufficiently and to inform Merlin of his decision.

Having resolved to do this, he poured himself a ninth goblet of wine and sat back in his chair, letting out a big sigh feeling very much that the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

Untrainable, irreverant and irritating as the boy was, he would miss having Merlin around. They'd had some interesting times together, no doubt. They had battled bandits and fought wild beasts and magical creatures. More than once his manservant had been willing to die in his place. Despite his father's council, Arthur had felt compelled to risk his own life to save Merlin's and he had downright defied Uther's orders by riding into Cenred's Kingdom and into Ealdor. When all these things had happened, Arthur had felt good and just and worthy of his title of Prince ....but now as he thought back he concluded that since Merlin had been in his service he had begun to question his father's authority and wisdom. This was not a good thing, he decided. If he was seen to contradict the King then the Kingdom would be seen as weak. 'Yes' he concluded. 'it would be for the best if I get rid of the boy sooner rather than later.'

He wondered to himself how this scrawny, funny-looking peasant had come to mean so much to him. He'd had dalliances of a sexual nature in the past of course, but never before with someone not of the nobility and certainly not with a man. Their couplings had been good, though. They had just seemed to have happened - as some kind of natural extension of their mutual respect for eachother, or something. Before their first time, Arthur couldn't consciously remember being aware of even being attracted to the gangly youth but after that he found himself more and more appreciating Merlin's finer qualities - the eyes that were open windows to his soul, the outrageously sensual lips, long nimble fingers and a grin that could light up the darkest winter's day.

If he was utterly honest with himself, he felt like a part of him was missing when Merlin wasn't around. He realised as he downed the last of the wine in his goblet that he was possibly on the verge of falling in love with his damned manservant. This, he concluded, was a very very very bad thing.....and possibly the most important reason to get rid of the boy right now. His father and his Kingdom expected him to marry and produce heirs. How could he do that if he was mooning over his manservant?

He sat in expectation of supper that Cedric should be bringing to him within the next half hour. Now that his anger was beginning to dissipate he was beginning to feel quite peckish.

Time passed and his supper was not forthcoming. He looked out of the window from where he was seated and frowned a little when he saw that the sky was completely dark. He huffed and poured a tenth goblet of wine. If Cedric had not bought his food by time he had finished it then he would
head down to the kitchens himself. He figured that Cedric had a good reason to be late - perhaps cook was roasting something special which was taking a little longer than normal? No doubt his food would be worth the wait.

He woke with a start a good while later when the candle on his table sputtered and fizzed as it burnt itself out. He blinked blearily into the darkness. His mouth was dry and sour tasting and his head was thumping. He was very much regretting having drunk almost a whole pitcher of wine to himself. As he staggered over to his nightstand and lit the candle upon it he reflected that Merlin would never have let him drink so much had he been here.

Then he remembered just why he had gotten so drunk in the first place. He drank half a jug of water to dispel the sour taste from his mouth and tipped the rest over his head in an attempt to banish the headache. This was partly successful. His hunger had been replaced with a nausea on account of the amount of alcohol he’d consumed, which was just as well since there would be no supper tonight.

Judging by the stars outside of his window, it was well past midnight. Where the hell had Cedric gone?

Arthur huffed annoyance and shucked off his clothes. As well as the headache and nausea his muscles ached from his rather energetic workout on the training dummy. He badly wanted a bath but there would be no chance of summoning any servants at this hour to bring up the hot water. He sighed and crawled into bed. His talk with Merlin would have to wait until morning. He felt much too weary for that particular conversation right now.

Just before falling back to sleep he realised that in his extreme annoyance at his soon-to-be ex-manservant he had failed to notify the Watch that he had placed Merlin into the dungeons. Since there were no other prisoners at present, this meant that there would be no guards on duty, and thus nobody would know to bring food or water to the sole inmate.

'Ah well' thought Arthur as he succumbed to sleep, 'it's only one night. The lack of supper won't do him any harm and there's not much mischief he can get up to locked safely in the cells. Who knows...perhaps the solitude might even help him see sense!'

On that thought he fell fast asleep.
Merlin changes his mind about leaving Camelot immediately...

only a short chapter this time......didn't want to keep the readers waiting too long! Shall endeavour to post the next installment very soon!

Merlin laid patiently on the floor of the tomb staring into the gem in his hand. He was in an almost hypnotic state. His face was blank and his eyes were hooded. The inner light that usually animated his features was almost totally absent. He thought very little, listening instead to the slow beat of his heart and marking time until the new Watch of guards came along to relieve their companions. When they arrived, the soldiers exchanged a few words with each other and then the old Watch went off shift. With a quietly muttered spell, Merlin caused phantom hands to compress the throats of the three new men on guard. He listened with no emotion as they wheezed and coughed and tried to cry out. Only when the last of them fell heavy and silent to the floor did he stand up from his hiding place and let himself out of the vault. He didn't even glimpse down at the fallen men as he stepped over them on his way up to ground level.

He remembered a vague plan to take a horse and head off into the night, away from this cursed place. As he passed the cave that held the Great Dragon he heard the beast calling him. It had tried speaking to him on several occasions since he had vowed never to visit it again. He could not forgive it for failing to tell him that the price for saving Arthur's life after the bite of the Questing beast would be the life of his mother's rather than his own. He had pretty much succeeded in ignoring the Dragon's attempts to call him and tuned out whenever it spoke his name inside his head. This time it's summons caught his attention, however. In the past, whenever he had heard it's voice in his head, it had been in a commanding, somewhat arrogant tone. Now the creature sounded almost anxious.

"Merlin?" asked the dragon, "Merlin. Where are you, Warlock? Did you leave Camelot? I cannot feel your presence anymore".

Merlin stopped, blinked once and then disregarded the voice and headed above ground. He strode with intent across the courtyard heading for the stable block. At this hour there was nobody around so he walked straight across the centre of the square. About halfway across, a cloud parted above him and a bright full moon suddenly illuminated everything around him in stark ghostly shades of black and white. He stopped and took a moment to look up and around at the towers that lined the courtyard - if he left Camelot now, this would be the last he ever saw of the Citadel. He studied the numerous gargoyles that decorated the upper levels of all the towers. He couldn't remember ever paying them any attention before but now he looked at them in the moonlight he could see how well carved and fantastical they were. A very small part of him wondered at the mind that could imagine such hideous creatures.
Suddenly an idea came to him. His eyes narrowed and a thin cruel smile played on his lips as he looked about him, deciding which of the creatures would be most terrifying when he bought it to life. He decided that before he left Camelot forever, he would have a little fun. His eyes lighted upon a gigantic winged beast that looked like a cross between a human and the Afanc. It had long slim limbs with cruel claws on both hands and feet. Its face was distorted by a snarl of rage that revealed a mouth full of long pointed teeth. Its small eyes and prominent forehead completed the nightmare vision.

Merlin spread out both hands and spoke words in a language that he had no memory of ever having learned. As he finished casting the spell, a breeze seemed to blow across the courtyard and a swirl of mist rose and passed across the gargoyle. It shivered and creaked and slowly turned its head from side to side looking around, blinking lazily. It spread out its wings and stood slowly up onto its hind legs. Within moments it had leapt from its perch and swooped down into the square, landing heavily a few feet in front of Merlin. It snarled and circled him, studying him intently. Merlin stared at the creature in return and let out a bark of delighted laughter before casting his eyes upward again. The next gargoyle that caught his eye was even more hideous in form than the first. Its head was fashioned on that of the bare fleshless skull of a large bird of prey with a long curved cruel beak. It was carved in a squatting position, enormous wings folded behind itself. The chest bore the carving of a pair of saggy leathery human breasts and the legs bore scales and ended in cruel clawed talons. Merlin summoned it to life. As it swooped down from the rooftop it let out an ear splitting scream. It circled above his head and its enormous wings clipped stonework, sending splinters of rock raining down into the square. Merlin roared with delight.

He looked around again, straining his eyes to make out the forms of the gargoyles at the very top of the highest towers. The moon suddenly shone upon one and he smiled broadly as he called it into being. With its scaly body, long serpentine tail ending in a cruel double spike, large leathery wings and long noble horned head it was undoubtedly a dragon. 'Oh....perfect!' exclaimed Merlin as the creature swooped down to stand in front of him. He would never release the Great Dragon after what it had done, but this would do just as well for what he had in mind.

Merlin summoned the three animated gargoyles to stand before him. The clawed and betoothed beast towered over him, snarling and drooling saliva. The Harpy-like bird creature screeched and beat its enormous wings. The dragon paced and slithered in silence and shot out long arcs of flame into the cold night air.

Merlin let out a deep, low laugh, his eyes twinkling with malice. He drew himself up to his full height and spoke. "Go" he commanded in a voice loud enough to be heard above the screeches of the Harpy, "Go now and show this pathetic King and arrogant Prince just how powerless they really are against magic and against me".

On his command all three apparitions leapt into the night sky and flew away in opposite directions to wreak havoc upon the unsuspecting citizens of Camelot.
Chapter 12 - Chaos Unleashed

Chapter Summary

The creatures summoned into existence by Merlin wreak havoc in Camelot.

Arthur woke with a start as the top half of his bedroom window shattered inwards, glass shards clattering onto the stone floor. Moments later a blood curdling screech echoed around the towers of the Citadel. Despite his pounding head he immediately leapt up, pulling a broadsword out from beneath his bed in one fluid movement. Disregarding the shards of glass littering the floor he ran to the window and looked out to see what was causing such a commotion. He flung the window wide and leaned out, looking around. Only his lightning quick reflexes saved him as the beast immediately wheeled back around and dove down towards his exposed head, it's long talons extended ready to catch him. The Prince flung himself flush against the stone wall of his room, sword held on guard in both hands.

"What the hell....?" he grated out through clenched teeth, and then in a louder voice he called out, "Merlin!"

It took him a few seconds to remember that the boy was not in the antechamber, but in the dungeon. For the briefest of moments he felt something akin to panic as he realised that his manservant would not be by his side to face this new adversary, whatever it may be. He very quickly reined in this feeling, took a deep breath and spun around to face the window again - this time with the broadsword poised ready to strike.

Whatever had smashed his window and screeched was, for the moment at least, nowhere to be seen. Arthur had no time to feel any relief, however. As he looked down into the square and beyond out into the Lower Town he realised that Camelot was in utter chaos. Small fires blazed in multiple locations, people screamed in terror or in agony, groups were running around as if fleeing from a threat. Arthur squinted his eyes in an attempt to make out what was happening and what was causing such widespread panic. It didn't take him long to focus on a swooping shape. This wasn't the beast that had dived at him though. This one was much more graceful with a long serpentine tail. It did not scream but instead opened its mouth and breathed a jet of flame into the thatched roof of a house.

Arthur's heart leapt into his throat. Was this the Great Dragon? It didn't seem to be very large from what he could make out, and he knew that the Dragon that his father had captured was securely tethered in a vast cave beneath the Citadel. He had always been taught that the great Dragon was the last of its kind. Perhaps they had been mistaken in this belief. Without further pause he threw on some breeches and boots and ran at full speed toward the Armoury, calling for guards and for Cedric as he went....where the hell was his new manservant anyway?!

Within minutes the Prince had gathered together ten of his best knights and they had armed themselves in chainmail and weapons and were running full speed toward the commotion down in the Lower Town. They rushed through areas that had been devastated. Houses, stables and wooden carts burned furiously around them leaving the air thick with smoke. Here and there lay the charred bodies of farm animals and small children. Others lay around injured and screaming in fear or agony - it seemed that many had been hurt in the crush of people trying to get away from the terror in the sky. The dragon continued to swoop and dive above them, occasionally breathing flames into
Arthur grabbed a passing youth and commanded him to make haste back into the Castle, to alert Gaius of the need for medical aid for those who were injured. He turned his attention back to the dragon. It appeared to be golden in colour, although this could also be the reflection of the light from the flames it created. The Prince called his men into formation and aimed their long pikes at the creature. On Arthur's command the last line of men threw the weapons javelin-like toward the beast as it swooped low. No single point pierced it's hide but the volley of spears caught it's attention. It turned around and dived down toward the knights. The knights who still bore pikes held them steadily aloft and on Arthur's word thrust them upwards with all their might at the breast and underside of the creature as it passed overhead.

No a single point pierced it's flesh. On the contrary, every one of the pikes snapped like so much matchwood.

Arthur barely had time to bark out the order "Retreat!" before the dragon wheeled back around and swooped down at them again. It was only the fact that the men had scattered in all directions that prevented any of them being caught in the burst of flame it let out. It turned it's attention instead to three or four small children who were frozen to the spot in terror in the centre of the market square, staring up at the monster. They held hands and the two youngest wailed. Arthur saw the beast swooping down and started to breathe a jet of flame in their direction.

"NOOOOOOO!" he screamed. He charged out and somehow managed to herd the children behind the wall of a well before spinning round and raising his sword to the Dragon. He put all his weight behind the blow. As the blade impacted with it's target Arthur felt the jolt of the contact all down his arms and through his body. He didn't pierce the skin of the dragon but he did succeed in knocking it off balance. it crashed into a building nearby and landed heavily. Out of the glow of the flames it no longer appeared to be golden but instead a dull beige - much like the walls of the citadel. Within seconds it had shaken itself and flown into the air again. It bore no visible signs of injury but the building that it had hit was totally collapsed. For now, it flew away southward and out of sight. Arthur hurriedly regrouped his knights. He sent orders to bring guards from the castle to help with putting out the many fires that raged all around and threatened to engulf the entire town. The Knights were just preparing to move out in pursuit of the dragon when they were stopped dead in their tracks by an ear piercing scream that filled the air despite the noise and pandemoneum already going on around them. Arthur recognised it as the cry of the harpy like creature that had woken him.

He and the Knights could do nothing but watch in horror as it swooped down and caught up the smallest of the children that Arthur had just saved from the dragon - a boy no older than three years. The creature caught him up in it's cruel talons and flew to a nearby rooftop. The child's terrified screams were lost in the nightmareish screech of the harpy. Arthur shouted 'ON ME!' and charged toward the beast with sword aloft, his Knights in formation behind him. Before they were halfway across the square the cruel beak had torn the stomach of the child open. His terrified cries stopped suddenly as the heart was ripped from his chest. With that the harpy took off from it's roost, carelessly dropping the corpse before flying off into the darkness to wreak more havoc.

Despite being battle hardened, Arthur (and several of his Knights) could not help bending over and vomiting at the appalling sight of the violated corpse.

When he had recovered his composure Arthur regrouped his Knights and headed back toward the Citadel. He would need to return with an entire battalion if they were to have any hope of victory. Whatever this new evil was that was attacking Camelot, it was beyond anything that he had ever seen or heard of...
Chapter Summary

Merlin watches the chaos that he has unleashed on the Kingdom.

After he bought the gargoyles to life, Merlin had hurried up to the top of the highest tower. He knew of this place because of Arthur. The Prince would often come up here to think through problems and to escape the demands of his status. He knew it was somewhere that he was unlikely to be bothered by members of the Court. Merlin came up here this night however, because it’s other advantage was that it gave a magnificent view across the whole town and surrounding countryside.

Despite the fact that it was night time, there was much to see. The full moon had broken free of the clouds and illuminated the woodland outside the City walls in a strange black and white glow. The town itself was glowing golden on account of all the fires that raged around and about. Screams and shouts could be heard as people suffered at the hands of the gargoyles or fled in terror. Merlin watched it all with detachment. He gave a satisfied self-congratulatory half-smile as he saw the havoc wreaked by the beasts that he had summoned into existence with his magic. He lazily wondered why he had been so scared of Uther and his ban on magic all this time. He should have done something like this as soon as he’d arrived in Camelot. As he watched he saw a group of red shapes hurrying to and fro down in the lower town. Unmistakeably Knights of Camelot, and almost certainly being led by the Prat Prince himself. 'How arrogant' thought Merlin as he watched them scurry about (looking for all the world like ladybirds from this height), 'Do they think they have ANY hope against my creatures of magic?'.

Curiosity got the better of him and he decided to head down into the Lower Town to see how the Knights would try to defeat the gargoyles. He hurried down the stairs and straight across the Courtyard before breaking into a jog through the main thoroughfare that led into the lower town. Nobody paid him any heed as he approached the market square. Fires raged all around and people battled to put them out. Bodies of man and beast were strewn about but Merlin ignored them unless they lay in his path, in which case he simply stepped over them. His sharp eyes scanned the streets and alleyways until he spotted a flash of red cloak. Keeping to the shadows he hurried after it.

A mop of golden hair and a familiar commanding voice caught his attention. He laid himself flat against the wall of an alley deep in shadow and watched as the Prince and his men tried in vain to pierce the hide of the dragon. Of course they would never succeed since the creature was made of stone. As the dragon gracefully arched and swooped and dove to attack again, Merlin could not help but congratulate himself on such a creation. It had taken some powerful magic to animate rock in such an impressive manner!

His attention was called back to Arthur as the Prince bellowed, "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" and flung himself between the diving dragon and some small children. Merlin could not help but be impressed by the bravery and skill of his former master as Arthur somehow managed to hit the dragon broadside with his sword and send it crashing into a house that all but collapsed under the impact. Despite his multiple faults, pondered Merlin, there was no denying that such a feat demanded immense strength and no small measure of bravery. Merlin was curious to know what the dragon would do next. He wasn't commanding the individual actions of the gargoyles once he had ordered them to wreak havoc on Camelot. He wondered now if this beast that he had brought
forth from inanimate stone would show rage at the man that had thwarted it's attack. It did not. Instead it flew off into the night, no doubt to spread destruction elsewhere. Merlin watched with some amusement as Arthur regrouped his Knights and barked orders. They intended to pursue the dragon! How arrogant the Prince was, thinking that he had any chance of killing it!

Like everyone else still milling about in the market square, Merlin flinched when he heard the screech of the Harpy gargoyle - it really was a blood curdling noise. A small self-satisfied smile played on his lips as he watched this creation wheel and dive above the market square. He wondered if the Knights would be foolhardy enough to take it on with just swords. The smile dissolved and was replaced by a wide-eyed, open mouthed look of horror as within seconds the creature scooped up the smallest child in it's cruel talons. Before Merlin had even the chance to raise his arm to cast a spell, the creature had ripped the very heart from the broken body with it's cruel beak before discarding it and flying off.

The cold hand that had been clenching at Merlin's heart suddenly relinquished it's hold. He turned away from the horrific scene before his eyes, falling to his knees and covering his mouth, breathing deeply to prevent himself being sick. What had he been thinking? What had he unleashed? The thought of innocent children being hurt had not occured to him in his rage. He shakily got to his feet and followed the retreating Knights back toward the Citadel. He would have to bring to an end the chaos he had unleashed. However angry he was with Arthur, there was no reason that the innocent citizens of Camelot had to suffer.

He was about a hundred yards behind the Knights as they approached the drawbridge when the third of the gargoyles that he had bought to life landed heavily in front of Arthur and his men. From this distance, Merlin could just make out the slight stumble that the Prince made being suddenly confronted by yet another impossible creature. In an instant however, he had rallied himself and called his knights into formation. The creature approached them, towering above them at twice their height. It swiped its long cruelly clawed arm and effortlessly slashed open the chests of the knights at the edge of the formation before they had even attempted to advance. 'Enough' thought Merlin. 'Enough bloodshed. This is wrong.' He shakily raised a hand and summoned his magic then commanded the creature to return to inanimate rock.

Nothing happened. The beast continued to advance on Arthur and the Knights. They bravely (or stupidly?) continued to counter attack. Merlin raised both hands, closed his eyes to channel his magic again and incanted the spell in a louder voice. The beast continued with it's deadly attack. Arthur continued to try to repel it, swinging his broadsword and leaping athletically around it, attempting to find somewhere that he could somehow pierce it's hide and bring it down.

Merlin could only watch - hands clenched over his mouth to prevent himself from crying out in horror - as the huge snarling monster caught Arthur across the chest with it's claws. Despite being some distance away Merlin heart the screech of metal as the claws tore through Arthur's armour as though it was paper. The Prince was flung sideways like a ragdoll by the impact and fell heavily to the floor. Blood oozed from the wound in his chest. His face was grey. He didn't move.

The beast advanced, snarling. Everyone (including Merlin) gasped as they thought it would crush his inanimate form beneath it's huge clawed feet. It looked askance at him, seemed satisfied he was in fact dead and flew up and away back into the night.

Merlin sunk back against a wall, his legs giving way and a silent scream on his lips. What the hell had he done?
Reconciliation

Chapter Summary

Merlin finds his way back to his master's side.

Merlin sat against the wall, hyperventilating, his vision was blurred by tears. He was very close to blind panic. He had summoned these nightmarish creatures into being in a fit of anger against his master without stopping to think through the consequence of his action may be. But now he had seen. Civilians including a small innocent terrified child had needlessly died, and now Prince Arthur; the man he had sworn to protect, the man who was his destiny and the man who (he now realised) was his reason for living may well be laying dead right before his eyes at the gate to Camelot.

He was so very sorry.

He was also very scared.

He had channelled the whole of his magical powers into trying to stop the creature at the drawbridge but he had failed. Although it was he that had unleashed the gargoyles he had no power at all over them now. He had watched the Knights try in vain to bring the creatures down. These things he had summoned into existence were indestructable. He was the one responsible for commanding them to wreak havoc on Camelot. Would they continue to follow this command until nothing of the Kingdom remained?

Suddenly one of the Knights shouted out, "Arthur! He's still alive! Someone call Gaius! NOW!"

There was a bustle of activity as Arthur was carefully moved onto a wooden board and hurried across the drawbridge and into the Citadel. Despite the danger of detection, Merlin hurried about fifty paces behind them. He expected them to bear the Prince up to his chambers, or to Gaius's rooms to tend to his wounds, but instead the stretcher bearers were ushered toward the Council Chamber. Merlin followed close behind. Now that he was inside the Castle walls he stayed to the shadows.

One of the Knights flung open the heavy ornate doors to the Council Chamber and the sight that greeted Merlin made him gasp aloud. Barely a patch of floor space in the vast room was visible. Everywhere lay the injured from the attack of the gargoyles. In the far corner, behind an ancient tapestry screen lay a jumble of bodies of those that had succumbed to their injuries. Pools of blood coloured the floors, leaking from untended wounds. People moaned in agony and terror. The stench of blood, burning flesh and human suffering made Merlin feel like being sick again. In his role as Gaius's assistant he had seen many gory sights but this surpassed them all. In the midst of the chaos he saw Gwen and Morgana tending to the injured as best they could, their clothes and forearm stained red with blood. Gaius was closer to the door, looking drawn and old and trying desperately to decide who was most in need of his attention amongst all this sea of suffering.

When Arthur was carried in by the Knights and laid out on the floor, both Gaius and Gwen let out a cry of dismay. Morgana gasped and paled, but quickly rallied her senses and rushed over to help unbuckle and remove his gorget and hauberk and to cut away the padded jerkin underneath. By time she had done this and exposed his chest, Gaius had made his way over. The wound was long and jagged running from the Prince's left clavicle across his ribcage to just below the right nipple.
Blood oozed from the wound so that his whole chest was a mess of blood and matted hair. Gaius called for some water and hurriedly cleaned away as much of the blood as he could before inspecting the wound.

"Thank all the gods he was wearing his gorget", he said to Morgana quietly. "If this cut were any deeper it would have pierced both lungs". He instructed Morgana to press heavily on either side of the wound and hold it together as he stitched the ragged skin back together. There was no time to administer any tonic to lessen the pain, and as Gaius began to sew the skin back together Arthur regained consciousness and cried out in pain, his eyes flying open and looking wildly about him. It was all Merlin could do not to rush to his side to hold his hand and offer some comfort. But as far as Arthur knew, he was still locked away in the dungeons.

As Gaius stitched the long jagged wound, Arthur stared wildly around him, teeth clenched and breathing rapidly. White foam flecked his lips. He flailed his arms around looking for something to hold on to. In the end he grabbed one of Gwen's forearms with both of his hands and gripped so tightly that she could not help her own cry of pain. Arthur relinquished his vice like grip and swung his wild eyes round to look at Gaius.

"I shall soon be done, Sire" said the physician in a harried voice as he sewed the last of the stitches close to Arthur's nipple, "Please try not to move".

Arthur cast his eyes around again, now focusing on nothing. He clenched his teeth against the pain of the Morgana's pressure on his injured chest and the repeated piercing by Gaius's needle. Despite his resolve he could suffer the pain no more. "MERLIN!!" he suddenly called out, casting his gaze around, not really focusing on anything. "Need Merlin.....here......hurts. Not sure I can take more....".

Merlin could stay away no longer. He rushed from his hiding place and to his master's side. He took hold of both of the Prince's wrists to stop him flailing around in his agony. Arthur stilled and looked up at him, eyes slowly coming into focus. When he recognised his manservant he calmed a little and held onto the boy's forearm with a vice like grip. He tried to pull himself up a little to speak but his wound prevented him and he laid heavily back down on his stretcher.

"Merlin" said the Prince quietly through dry cracked lips, his eyelids drooping, "Merlin...need you here.......can't do this alone.....we have to...."

With that he passed out.

"Arthur!" called Merlin his voice tinged with panic. "Gaius? Is he dying?"

The physician was leaning over the Prince, tying off the last of the stitches and checking his pulse. He pulled back Arthur's eyelids to check his pupils. "Merlin! There you are my boy!" he said glimpsing up at his ward briefly. "Where the devil have you been all this time? No, no - he is not dying but he has had a great shock and has lost much blood. Can you administer some salve and bandage his wound then take him up to his chambers and make him comfortable there?"

"Y-yes, of course" stuttered Merlin as he looked worriedly down at Arthur's face and brushed the sweaty dirt streaked hair back from his master's forehead. "R-right away...."

He quickly collected some salve and bandages and some more clean water. Gently he bathed away as much as the clotted blood as he could from the wound before covering it in the potent smelling salve. In order to apply the bandage affectively he had to lift Arthur's shoulder off the stretcher. He did so as carefully as he could, terrified of tearing open the fresh stitches. Despite his care the movement pulled at the wound and the Prince awoke again with a shout of pain.
"Shhhhhhhhhhh, s'Alright Arthur" said Merlin as the Prince thrashed about with his free arm. Merlin grabbed him by the wrist again to still him, "M'here. I just need to get a bandage on you and find something to take away some of the pain then we'll get you up to the chambers."

As he spoke Arthur stilled and tilted his head back to look up through unfocused eyes at the boy standing behind him, supporting the weight of his torso. He breathed heavily, still trying to deal with the pain of his wound and spoke in clipped sentences as if he were short of breath. "Merlin?" he said "Merlin! Where have you been? Magical creatures in Lower Town. Tried to kill them. Swords useless......Need to call garrison...."

"Try not to talk, Sire" Merlin said soothingly. He let go of Arthur's wrist and began to apply the bandage as gently as he could. The pain was excrutiating despite Merlin's careful treatment and the Prince thrashed around again looking for something to hold on to. In the end he hooked his hand behind him and around the back of Merlin's neck. The hold felt incredibly intimate and the awkward angle made Merlin's job harder, but it at least kept the edges of Arthur's wound pressed together so that they did not bleed as Merlin bandaged him.

Once he had finished, Merlin cupped the back of his master's neck and gently laid him down again. "You're going to be fine" he whispered, face hovering inches above Arthur's own, his breath ghosting against the other's cheek. He gently unhooked the Prince's hand from his neck and laid it across the newly bandaged chest. Arthur closed his eyes and his breathing slowed a little. Merlin called a couple of Squires to help him bear the stretcher up to The Prince's chambers.

As they prepared themselves to leave the Hall, King Uther arrived and rushed over, carelessly bargeing past Merlin in his hurry to get to his son. Despite the rage that flared within him at this, Merlin clenched his teeth and said nothing. Although he moved aside for the King he defiantly held Arthur's hand in his own and soothed him by stroking a thumb across his pulse point.

"My boy" said Uther in a voice tinged with panic, bending down over the prostrate Prince. "How is he?" he asked Gaius who was tending another wounded man nearby.

Arthur opened his eyes and looked up at the King, "Father", He said and attempted a smile but it did not look right on a face still so distorted in pain. "We tried to kill the beasts. Impossible. Spears no good. Swords no good. Need to call out the garrison. Maybe bring out the catapults. Must evacuate lower town."

"What sorcery is this?" asked Uther, looking up at Gaius as though he might have some solution. "Are you fit to lead the troops, Arthur?"

"He will live" said Gaius curtly, "But he has lost a lot of blood and must rest. Merlin is taking him up to his chambers now."

Uther looked between the physician and Merlin who defiantly stared back, not relinquishing his hold on the Prince's hand. Arthur's eyes had closed again.

"Very well" said Uther after a pause. "Boy" he said, finally acknowledging and addressing Merlin. "Make sure he is well tended."

Merlin said nothing in reply but gave a curt nod and hurried from the hall with the squires and bearing Arthur on the stretcher. Once they had gotten the Prince to his chambers and settled into his bed, Merlin sent the squires off with thanks. He lit the fire and a candle by the bedside and mixed some laudenum into half a goblet of wine. The drug would ease Arthur's pain and let him rest. The crackle of the fire as it caught flame managed to block out some of the noise of chaos still
going on in the Citadel and lower town. Once he had finished these duties, Merlin sat on the edge of Arthur's bed and with a damp cloth and a bowl of water and began to wipe his master's face clean of the sweat and dirt of the battle.

Arthur opened his eyes and looked blearily up at Merlin, managing to smile a little. Merlin smiled back.

"Drink this" he said, tilting Arthur's head up a little and holding the goblet as the Prince drank. Arthur closed his eyes again once the goblet was empty.

"Hey" said the Prince suddenly opening his eyes again, and started speaking in clipped sentences. "Put you in the dungeons. Who let you out? So sorry. Lost my temper."

"Shhhhhhhhh" soothed Merlin, not answering his question. "Try not to speak, you need to rest."

"No. Merlin" insisted Arthur, "I was beastly. Treated you badly. Was going to send you away. So sorry."

"Shhhhh" repeated Merlin, still stroking back the Prince's hair from his forehead with the dampened cloth. "Rest now. We need you healthy to fix all this. Try to sleep."

"Don't go away" said Arthur, reaching up and catching Merlin by the jaw. "Was wrong. Need you"

"Not going anywhere" said Merlin, gently taking Arthur's hand in his own and laying it onto the Prince's chest. "We'll talk more when you're better. Now sleep"

The laudenum finally took effect and Arthur slipped into a deep sleep. Merlin sat and watched over him, his mind racing. He thanked the gods that he was reconciled with his Prince. He prayed that he could find a way to destroy the gargoyles he had summoned to life before they destroyed Camelot.
Merlin stayed by the bedside stroking Arthur's damp hair back off his forehead until he was certain that the Prince was completely asleep. He checked the bandage on his chest wound and saw no evidence of new bleeding. Arthur's breathing was deep and regular and his complexion was beginning to return to it's usual golden hue. Merlin felt satisfied that his master was out of danger. After a last gentle stroke through Arthur's hair, Merlin quietly left the chambers and hurried back down to the makeshift hospital in the Council Chambers. He had to speak with Gaius as a matter of urgency. Maybe his mentor had some knowledge that may help him destroy the gargoyles.

The scene that greeted him upon entering the hall was even worse than before. The pile of dead bodies behind the tapestry was higher. Morgana, Gwen and Gaius were all drenched in blood on the front of their clothes and were hurrying from patient to patient. They were too busy to pay him any heed as he came back into the room. He hurried over to where they were working.

"Ah Merlin" said Gaius, "Pass me that bandage will you?" Merlin did so. "How is Arthur?" enquired the physician.

"All settled. The wound has stopped bleeding. He's sleeping" said Merlin, his sentences punctuated by the sound of fabric ripping as he tore off more strips of cloth for bandages and passed them to Gaius and Morgana.

"Good" said Gaius, "We really need your help here"

"Gaius" said Merlin, catching hold of his mentor's sleeve and stopping him from moving on to the next patient. Gaius looked down at the hand on his sleeve with some annoyance, then quizzically up at Merlin. "I need to speak to you, I need advice.' Gaius huffed impatiently and yanked his arm free of Merlin's grip and began to move onto the next patient, a young woman with an ugly gash across her scalp. Merlin grabbed onto his wrist and held tighter.

"Gaius." he spoke quietly and hurriedly, "It's about these creatures. I know what they are but I don't know how to destroy them. I need to tell you something. In private"

Gaius gave the boy his full attention and saw the earnest look in his eyes. He took Merlin by the elbow and drew him off behind the tapestry where the pile of bodies lay. It was the only spot in the room that allowed them to speak privately.

"What's all this about, Merlin?" he asked.

"I....I...." Merlin let out a huge sigh and went silent, his eyes downcast.

"Spit it out my boy! I've got a room full of people dying to tend to and there's more arriving every minute!" snapped Gaius.

Merlin let out a whimper and ruffled the hair on the back of his own head anxiously. "Sorry,
sorry." he said, "this is - hard". He took a huge breath and puffed it out. "I know what the creatures are. They are some of the gargoyles from the towers of the citadel, animated and ordered to wreak havoc on the kingdom"

"What?" said the physician, incredulous, "How? How do you know this?"

Merlin grimaced before admitting, "Because it was me that conjured them up." Once the admission was made, he hung his head and looked at the floor.

"WHAT!" shouted Gaius angrily, attracting a puzzled stare from Morgana and Gwen who were working on the other side of the room. "What the hell are you talking about, boy?" he said in a quieter but no less angry voice, "what is this nonsense?"

"I fought with Arthur, he's been a total prat for the whole week. He hired that weasal Cedric to take my place. He was going to send me away from Camelot! I hit Cedric, Arthur put me in the dungeon. I lost my temper. I broke out and summoned these gargoyles to cause chaos and to teach the prat a lesson........" Merlin spoke in a hurry, words merging on his tongue, he didn't look up from the floor once, too ashamed to look into Gaius's face.

"Merlin, no" interrupted Gaius, "No. There is no way that you could have done this thing. What are you saying?"

"But it was ME!" said Merlin, finally looking up, tears falling freely now down his cheeks, "I was so so angry with him, and hurt"

"Nonsense child", said Gaius, "there have been times when he has treated you much worse than this and you have taken it. Why would you get so angry about being put in the dungeons? It's certainly not your first visit.... And when did you learn the spell for animating stone?"

"I don't know!" said Merlin, sounding panicked, "I've been so angry this week. I have fantasised about killing people a lot - even the King!"

"Good Lord - keep your voice down Merlin" said Gaius, shocked. "This isn't like you at all! What has gotten in to you?"

Merlin let out another huge sigh and shifted from foot to foot looking like he wanted to run away. "I......I......think I may have been possessed" he admitted, "I have felt ...not like me....since I first went into that tomb. I was back there this evening and I found this", he pulled the huge heart shaped gem from inside his jacket, "...and then I remembered looking at it before I passed out the first time I went down there. Gaius, I don't know what to do....."

Gaius was speechless. Merlin continued.

"After I found the gem tonight, something inside me just went - cold - it's hard to explain. I went out into the courtyard, and summoned the gargoyles down. I don't even know how I did it. I didn't care about anything but revenge. I even went to the lower town to watch and gloat at all the suffering. I felt nothing - no emotion - until a small child......." Merlin stopped talking and bit the back of his hand to prevent a cry escaping his lips, "...this little boy...he was no more than two years old and the harpy just ripped him open...." He could speak no more after that and merely stood looking at the pile of bodies beside him and sobbing uncontrollably.

Gaius pulled him into a fierce hug, inadvertently smearing his clothes in blood. "Come now" he soothed, "You are not to blame for this."

"But I am!" Merlin almost wailed, "It's like I've killed all these people myself! That poor child....torn open.......and when I thought that Arthur had died....." He sobbed silently again, his whole body shaking with it.
Gaius gripped his elbows and pulled back, looking into his face. "Merlin, calm yourself now. What's done is done, and now we need to stop it"

"I don't know how!" sobbed Merlin, close to hysteria. "I channeled all my power into trying to stop the beast that attacked Arthur and nothing happened. Nothing!"

"Hush now" said Gaius, absently rubbing his hands up and down Merlins upper arms in an attempt to calm him. He was quiet for a few moments then said, "This type of magic is beyond my abilities..."

"Then we're doomed", said Merlin, shaking.

"No, no" said Gaius. He was quiet and thoughtful for what seemed like an age. He looked around him nervously to check that nobody was listening to them before he whispered "There is someone in the castle with knowledge of this dark ancient magic that you have called up. You must go to him."

"What?" said Merlin increulously, "There's another sorcerer in Camelot and you never told me?"

"Not a sorcerer" whispered Gaius. "The great Dragon....I think you two are acquainted.."

Merlin suddenly stilled. Eyes wide as he looked at his mentor. "You knew?" he asked, "why did you never say anything?"

Gaius remained silent.

"I.....I won't go to him" said Merlin stubbornly. "I don't trust him. He only wants what is good for himself"

"There is no choice, Merlin" snapped the physician. "If you don't go to him then we are all doomed. It is the only way."

"B...but" stammered Merlin.

"No buts" interjected Gaius, "You either do this thing - now - or we all die. And if that happens it really WILL be your fault. GO!"

Merlin stood with his shoulders thrown back, took a step backward, palmed the dampness from his eyes and gave Gaius a curt nod before sprinting off in the direction of the Dragon's cavern...
Below the Citadel

Chapter Summary

Merlin hurries down toward the Dragon's Cavern but meets someone else entirely.

Windows shook, some imploding inwards. The sound of stone and roof tiles crashing down into the courtyard punctuated Merlin's dash down toward the vaults beneath the castle. The gargoyles, it would seem, had finished wreaking havoc down in the lower town and now seemed intent on ripping the citadel apart. The sound spurred Merlin to hurry on. He was in a fast jog as he passed by the dungeons and on toward the archway leading down into the dragon's cavern. As he dashed past the opening to Sagan's tomb, something unseen tripped him and he went sprawling. He managed to cushion his fall by flinging his hands out in front of him, but caught his shoulder on a piece of jagged rock sticking out from the roughly hewn wall. He could not help the shout of pain as he rolled over. The shoulder had dislocated and his arm hung at an awkward angle. He grabbed it at the elbow with his good arm and staggered to his feet, turning around to see what had tripped him.

He came face to face with Cedric, a huge heavy looking sack slung over his back and his arms laden with golden treasure. It seemed that Cedric was as startled as himself by their chance meeting because as soon as he registered that he had tripped Merlin up, he dropped all of his burdens in surprise.

Merlin didn't hesitate despite his throbbing arm. He flung himself at Cedric and knocked him over. They both fell to the floor and Merlin quickly sat astride the man beneath him, pinning his shoulders down using his knees. He viciously grabbed a handful of Cedric's hair and smashed his head hard against the hewn stone floor. The struggling man stilled, temporarily stunned by the blow to his head.

Merlin crouched over him, still holding his hair and hissed inches from his face, "You little bastard - I KNEW you were up to no good! Is this the reason you came to Camelot?" This last question his asked after scooping up a pile of heavy coins with his injured hand and viciously letting them drop onto Cedric's face. "There are people dying out there, and all you can think about is getting away with as much treasure as you can carry" he continued through gritted teeth. "You make me sick...". he roughly smacked Cedric's head against the ground again and again, rage bubbling within him and almost impossible for him to master. He didn't intend to kill the man but wanted to render him unconscious so that he could continue with his mission then come back and deal with this lowlife later on.

So intent was he on smashing Cedric's head into the stone and telling him exactly what he thought of him that he did not register as the man slowly drew a dagger from his belt. Cedric could barely move his arms because of the weight of his attacker pressing his shoulders down, but he had just enough movement to draw back the knife and plunge it deep into Merlin's injured arm just above his elbow.

Merlin gave a shocked scream of pain as he rolled off of Cedric and grabbed at his injured arm. The dagger was still imbedded there, and he clenched his teeth as he wrenched it from his flesh and flung it off along the tunnel. Like a flash, Cedric rolled over, wrestled him to the floor and
straddled Merlin just as he himself had just been restrained by pinning the boy's shoulders to the
ground under his knees. Blood from a deep cut on the back of his head resulting from repeated
bashing on the uneven floor ran down his face and dripped onto Merlin's shirt but he paid it no
heed.

The weight of Cedric on his dislocated shoulder was excrutiating and Merlin breathed rapidly
through clenched teeth. He tried to struggle, kicking his legs around in a attempt to fling Cedric
off, but any movement pulled hard on his shoulder and he could not bear it. His eyes flashed
golden and tried to ignore the agony he was in so that he could channel his powers to fling Cedric
from him. He began to incant the spell then ................nothing.

Cedric had taken a large golden candlestick from the pile of fallen treasure and whacked Merlin
viciously on the temple with it, rendering the boy instantly unconscious.

Cedric huffed in relief and sat back on this heels looking at the body below him. Merlin's eyes
were open and staring at nothing. For a moment Cedric thought he may have killed the boy
outright, but he could see Merlin's chest rise and fall.

"You have been a pain in the arse" he said to the prostrate manservant, "Now it's time to get rid of
you once and for all so you don't get any ideas about grassing me up to your idiot of a master".

He looked at the candlestick still grasped in his hand and dropped it in distaste. He didn't have the
stomach for smashing the boy's brains out. His dagger would have been ideal but was too far along
the corridor. He didn't dare climb off of Merlin just in case the boy regained consciousness again.
Instead he undid the belt from his breeches and wrapped it around Merlin's neck, pulling it tighter
and tighter.

Despite being unconscious, Merlin's body reacted to being starved of breath. He weakly gargled and
his throat wheezed as he desperately tried to get enough air into his lungs. Cedric pulled harder,
wrapping his hand around the belt and leaning backward. As he yanked the belt Merlin's neck was
pulled upward and his head fell backward. His lips were turning blue and his tongue lolled
uselessly from between his lips. His lungs made a deathly rattling sound. It was close to the end.

As Cedric looked down upon the dying boy, his grip wavered as he noticed an eerie iridescent blue
mist seeping out of the Merlin's mouth with what must surely be his last breaths. The mist did not
dissipate on the air but instead seemed to solidify and snake it's way into the space between the two
of them. Cedric relinquished his hold on the belt entirely when he realised to his horror that the
mist was heading straight for him. He flung himself off of Merlin and scrabbled back against the
wall in alarm but the mist came toward him nevertheless. He stood up and walked backward. The
mist followed him. He turned to run but it was already upon him, freezing him in place as it seeped
into his mouth, ears and up his nose. With a sharp intake of breath and a silent scream he fell
unconscious and heavy onto Merlin's upper body.

The impact of the fall onto Merlin's dislocated shoulder jolted the boy awake to a shock of pain.
His lungs burned and his throat felt as though he had swallowed broken glass. He wheezed in
lungfuls of air, frantically pulling the belt away from his windpipe. He coughed and sputtered and
rolled over and away from Cedric and vomited before he could even his breathing enough to
attempt sitting up. When he did try to sit up his head spun and throbbed at his temple and he fell
sideways again, wheezing and moaning in pain. His eyes refused to come into focus. The burn of
pain in his shoulder overwhelmed all his senses. Everything hurt and he felt the urge to simply slip
back into unconsciousness again. Just as he was going under again an ear piercing screech filled the
air and jarred him awake again. The screech was followed by the shattering of glass and screams of
terror. The harpy creature had breached the citadel and was wreaking havoc.
Merlin rallied himself again. With a shout of agony he rolled over and pushed himself up off the ground and after giving Cedric a final glance to check he was unconscious, staggered off along the tunnel toward the dragon's cavern.

.......................

Shortly after Merlin's footsteps had faded into the distance Cedric blinked into consciousness. He sat upright, running his hands over his arms and legs to check for injuries. He slowly stood up and shook out his shoulders. He blinked once again and his watery grey eyes filmed over and became completely black. He flexed his fingers experimentally and pointed at a large golden goblet laying on the floor nearby. At a muttered word, the vessel trembled and vibrated then suddenly fractured into small pieces and exploded, shrapnel flying for several feet in each direction. At this Cedric let out a deep humourless laugh and hurried off upward toward the courtyard.....
17 - A Bartgain is Made

Chapter Summary

Merlin makes a deal with the Great Dragon.

Chapter Notes

Apologies to anyone following this story that it has taken so long to post another chapter - work has been frantic! I am on a mission to get it finished as soon as possible...stay posted!

By time he had made it to the top of the rough hewn steps that led down to the Great Dragon's cave, Merlin felt like he was on the verge of collapse. His lungs were still burning from his near-asphyxiation, his head pounded from the blow to his temple and his stabbed, dislocated arm throbbed unbearably with every movement he made. The angle that his arm hung at made it impossible for him to tend to the stab wound which was bleeding profusely. Without thinking about it over much, he gritted his teeth, angled his upper body and ran full speed into the wall of the tunnel, slamming into it with his bad shoulder. The pain of the impact filled his brain with white lights and he collapsed onto the floor and vomited again. Once he was able to breathe evenly, he gingerly tried to move his damaged arm. It still hurt like hell but he had succeeded in knocking the disjointed limb back into place. Quickly he ripped his scarf from around his neck and bound the stab wound on his forearm tightly.

He stood and took a torch from it's holder. A muttered "leogt" caused a flame to jump in to life at it's tip and to illuminate the staircase before him. He breathed in deeply and gathered his thoughts, then hurried purposefully down the steps and into the vast cavern that was the Dragon's prison. Even as he entered, he had no idea what his reception would be like, or indeed what he would say to the creature. They had parted on harsh terms and he had sworn never to return. More than that, he had ignored the creature's repeated pleas to him that he had heard in his mind since that argument. A thought struck him that the dragon was likely to breathe on him and burn him to as cinder before he even spoke to it. He rapidly stopped himself following that line of thought and hurried on before he lost his nerve and resolve.

He walked out onto the ledge and cast his eyes around in the dim light. Even this far below the castle one could feel the effects of the pandemonium going on above ground. Great chunks of rock fell down from the ceiling of the huge cave and Merlin had to jump backward to avoid being knocked from his ledge and into the abyss.

Despite the noise and dust, the dragon was nowhere to be seen. Merlin waited for a moment and the called out uncertainly, "Hello? Hello?"

There was no response.

"Please! I need your help!", he called plaintively into the vast chamber.
Still no response. Merlin's heart sank and he began turning to leave. All at once he heard a familiar 'whoosh' of great wings behind him and turned to see the dragon land gracefully on the rock ledge before him. He flinched a little as it blinked its huge gold eyes at him impassively and said accusingly, "You told me I would not see you again."

Merlin made no explanation other than to say, "I'm not here for myself, I'm here for Arthur."

In the same impassive tone and paying no heed to the rockfall going on around them the dragon responded, "Arthur's path lies with yours. You have made it clear that you do not walk in step with me."

He lifted his wings as if to take to the air again.

"You can't want Cornelius Segan to win, you're not evil!" pleaded Merlin.

"At least Segan knows where his loyalties lie. You have shown that you do not." responded the dragon, still in that infuriatingly cold impassive tone but at least he stayed on the ledge opposite Merlin. "You swore that you would not see me again. You have ignored me for many months. We are brethren. This behaviour is unforgiveable."

Merlin was becoming more agitated, "So you will let Camelot fall" he said accusingly.

"I did not say that" said the dragon sharply.

Hope flared in Merlin's heart and he couldn't hide it coming through in his voice when he asked, "Then you will help me?"

There was silence for a few moments as the dragon looked deep into Merlin's eyes. The stare was intense, but Merlin did not flinch. "To defeat Segan you will need a spell more powerful than anything you know."

Merlin had no idea where this was going but he was desperate and very aware of how time was ticking on. "Please! I have to try!" he pleaded.

"Very well" responded the dragon, "but you must give me something in return."

The look in the dragon's eyes as he said this put Merlin on his guard, "What?" he asked.

"A promise." was the simple response.

"A promise" parroted Merlin in a flat tone. He had a feeling that this wasn't going to be good.

"...that one day you will free me." continued the dragon, looking deep into Merlin's eyes.

Merlin shuffled uneasily on his feet as he thought through the implications of such an action. "If I release you, what will you do?" he asked eventually.

"That is not your concern" was the dragon's blithe response.

Frustration and anger flared up in the boy and he shouted, "I DON'T TRUST YOU!"

The dragon didn't flinch but coolly stated, "Nevertheless you must promise or Camelot will fall."

Merlin was angry, exasperated and impatient and was on the verge of simply turning about and hurrying away from this untrustworthy beast. It had been a mistake to come here seeking help from the creature whose only concern was for its own wellbeing. Just as he'd decided to go the biggest
rockfall yet reminded him of what was happening above and just how powerless he was to do anything to stop it without help from the creature that stood before him.

Urgently now, he said "I promise! Now please! Give me the spell!"

The dragon looked smug and calmly said, "Very well. Close your eyes and open your mind."

Merlin did as he was told. Somehow he managed to block out all his doubts about this bargain he had struck and to ignore the pain from his many injuries. He simply focused on the warm breath of the dragon. The gust of air was sudden, and the magic it imparted was so strong that Merlin had to fight to stay upright. The feeling of the dragon's magic racing through him was surprisingly akin to his own - a warm tingling sensation that he could feel in every cell of his being - but it was so much more intense that for a few scary moments he thought he might combust from it. His brain was alight with a myriad of colours that he had never before imagined. When the dragon's breath stopped, he had to breathe deeply for a few moments before daring to open his eyes. When he did so he stared about in wonder. The cave was still the same cave, but now the rocks glimmered and shone and he could feel the very of the earth itself pulsing through them. When he turned his gaze upon the dragon he was overwhelmed. It shone an almost unbearably dazzling gold, indeed it looked as though it was aflame. Merlin clasped at his chest and with a great deal of effort, reigned in this new magical sight and feeling so that he would not be overwhelmed by the world around him.

The dragon watched him intently and patiently. When the golden light of knowledge had faded from his eyes the dragon blinked and said, "Few men have been gifted such knowledge - use it wisely."

"I will" replied Merlin, his voice shocked him. It was rich and resonant and otherworldly. He blinked up in wonder at the dragon. He now understood what it had meant all the times that it had staed to him that they were of the same kind. Merln felt that until this point that the magic within him had been contained in a sealed box. It was as if the dragon's breath had opened the box and it's power coursed through his veins.

"You made a promise young warlock, and one day I shall keep you to it." said the creature before taking off into the darkness again.

With a deep breath and new resolve, Merlin turned and hurried back up the steps and toward the battle.
Chapter Summary

Arthur awakes as the Citadel crumbles around him.

Chapter Notes

Getting close to the climax of this tale now. Many thanks to all who have stuck with it thus far....another couple of chapters and it will reach it's conclusion. Whew!

Arthur awoke with a start to a noise that sounded like half of the High Tower was collapsing into the courtyard below his window. He shook his head to banish the drowsyness induced by the drugs Merlin had give him and as quickly as he was able and tried to get up out of his bed. The simple act of sitting up caused him to bellow with pain and fall flat back onto the pillows again. The wound that ran from his shoulder to his chest hurt like hell. He bent his head forward and lifted his fingers to the bandages and was relieved to find that despite the excrutiating pain there was no bleeding. Another crash of masonary into the courtyard below his rooms refocused his attention to the matter in hand. This time, rather than trying to sit up he rolled sideways off the bed pushing himself upright using the uninjured side of his body. He took a few deep breaths and fought the dizziness that threatened to overbalance him. After a few moments he was able to stand upright and staggered toward the window to see what was happening.

The sight that greeted him made his blood run cold. The dragon-like creature swooped in great arcs above him, purposefully smacking it's long tail against the High Tower and causing great chunks to fall off. Somebody had posted a batallion of guards atop the tower with the vain hope of defending it. As great lumps of retaining wall collapsed the poor men had no chance and were swept screaming in terror to the courtyard far below. In the courtyard the men that had fallen were being stamped on and torn to shreds by the huge beast that resembled the Afanc. Thankfully most men had died from the impact, but the unfortunate ones that somehow survived screamed in agony as the cruel claws tore them to shreds. More guards and some of the Knights tried to get through to the dead and dying men but were being driven back at each attempt by the harpy-like creature whose shrill cries could be heard even above the sounds of suffering and destruction. The Knights quickly realised the fruitlessness of thier task and someone called a retreat. The two beasts in the courtyard followed the retreating men and shepherded them into a corner. The Knights fought bravely, diving forward in an attempt to drive back the advanceing monsters but thier efforts were in vain. Each time a brave soul came forward to attack, they were cruelly torn to shreds by sharp long talons and vicious beaks. In no time at all forty men at arms and some civilians were crowded into the small space. It was at this point that the dragon swooped down from it's relentless destruction of the Tower and breathed a long jet of flame into the heart of the crowd.

Arthur covered his face and averted his eyes but his ears could not block out the screams of pure agony as his people were burned alive. He staggered backward and fell into a chair breathing heavily in an attempt to stem the wave of nausea that threatened to engulf him. When he felt a little more on an even keel he scanned his chambers for a sword. Despite the horror going on around
him he experienced a fleeting feeling of gratefulness at having such an unorganised manservant. The sword and shield that he had used for training three days since still sat in the corner of his antechamber rather than back in the armoury where it belonged. He rushed over and reached out for the sword. The pain of trying to pick something up with his right arm sent him reeling. The strain on his fresh wound was too much. He reached out again with his left hand. Without too much pain he was able to wield it. He silently thanked the Master at Arms that had tortured him in his youth by tying his good sword arm behind his back until he was just as skilled a swordsman with his left arm. He looked at the heavy shield and frowned wondering if he could support it's weight with his injured arm. There was no question of taking on these hellish creatures without a shield, especially since he was not wearing armour. Then an idea struck him. He buckled the sword belt onto it's smallest hole and pulled it over his head. He rested one end on the back of his neck and slowly put his right arm into the belt and rested it there using it as a makeshift sling. With the belt taking the weight away from his chest muscles he could at least carry the shield. Without further delay he let himself out of the room and jogged along the corridors down toward the heart of the action.

As he got closer and closer to the noise and stench of the battle his adrenalin kicked in and lessened the pain of his injuries and banished any remaining effects from the sleep draught Merlin had given him. The men-at-arms were in dissaray, having just lost so many of their number to the dragon's flames. Arthur felt a wave of relief as he spied Leon amongst the few remaining Knights. He called out to him as he ran into the group of soldiers.

"My Lord?" said Leon in surprise, "You were gravely injured - should you not be resting?"

"I'm fine" responded Arthur, "The Kingdom is in danger of collapse. I can hardly stay in my bed!"

Leon nodded and said no more on the matter. Instead he gave the Prince hurried summary of what had happened since he had been injured out in the courtyard. The picture was grim. "Everyone within the citadel including the King has been moved below ground" he explained. "The dungeons and vaults are the only places that we have any chance of defending against this attack"

Arthur nodded his head in agreement.

"However" continued the trusty Knight, "The townspeople are undefended. Every battalion that we have sent out to help has been wiped out by the creatures before they have even managed to get to the drawbridge. There have been hundreds of deaths in the Lower Town. If we don't get the remaining townsfolk into the citadel and underground then there will be no Camelot left to defend."

"Then we need to open a route between the Great Hall and the drawbridge with our remaining troops" said Arthur. "Send ten men to the armoury to collect lances and shields and then we shall head outside again". Leon nodded and jogged off to fulfill his orders. Arthur hurried purposefully over to the soldiers milling about inside the Great Hall.

"Soldiers of Camelot" he said in a loud voice, "The mission before us may be the most dangerous that any of us may ever undertake and the chances of coming back from it alive are slim. But in order to save your wives, children and loved ones - indeed in order to save the Kingdom itself - we must insure safe passage for the people that remain in the Lower Town into the citadel."

The soldiers shuffled and murmured and nodded their assent.

"I shall be at the head of the column leading us out into the courtyard with the best of my Knights" continued Arthur. He looked toward the Knights and they all nodded assent. "Any common soldier who embarks upon this mission with us and survives to tell the tale shall immediately be promoted
to the rank of Knight, irrespective of his rank and class"

There was a sharp intake of breath from Knights and soldiers alike.

"If you please, Sire" said one young foot soldier who looked no older than eighteen years, "We will fight for love of you and for love of Camelot. We don't need the promise of rewards."

A surge of warmth engulfed the Prince and he clapped his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Nevertheless my good man, any man brave enough to join us on this mission deserves the title of Knight of the Realm."

The young man looked down and blushed and an unbidden image of Merlin flashed through Arthur's mind. Just at that moment Leon returned with the armour and lances from the armoury. The men collected weapons and formed a line at the huge doors to the Hall. Arthur walked through the ranks to the head of the group.

"ON ME! FOR THE LOVE OF CAMELOT!" he cried as he flung the doors open and headed out into the battle...
The Prince was momentarily blind when the doors to the Great Hall were slammed shut behind he and his men. Visibility was virtually zero outside in the courtyard. The moon was for the moment hiding it's face from the destruction below behind a thick veil of clouds. Any braziers or torches that would have illuminated the scene had been extinquised during the chaos wrought by the three beasts. The only constant source of light was from the pile of bodies so recently consumed by the cruel flames of the dragon. A sickly orange - almost red - glow eminated from that end of the courtyard where the pyre was still cracking, hissing and shifting. Arthur thanked any gods that were listening that the drawbridge which was their destination was at the opposite side of the courtyard so he would not have to lead his men past the hellish vision of the still burning corpses of thier former collegues.

Even the poor light eminating from the pyre was dimmed by the thick black smoke billowing from it. Arthur turned his face away but it stung his eyes and nostrils nevertheless. He had to bite back on the wave of nausea that washed over him as his brain processed the combined smells of burning fabric, singed hair and cooking flesh.

Through gritted teeth he called a loud command of "WITH ME! HURRY!" and jogged over toward the archway of the defending tower above the drawbridge.

By some miracle the creatures seemed for the moment to be occupied elsewhere and thus the entire troop of knights and soldiers made it into the shelter of the archway unmolested. As the last of his men moved in below the arch, the Prince took a few moments to gather his strength and collect his thoughts. He found himself trembling slightly and hoped that it was due to the adrenalin of battle rather than from weakness caused by his injury or - worse still - fear of what they must face. Leon bought his focus back to the matter in hand when he clapped a hand on his shoulder and reported, "Your men are all safely here and await your orders, Sire."

Arthur nodded curtly and said "Good" before peering out toward the drawbridge. It was hard to make anything out through the smoke and darkness. Somehow a torch was still burning at the centre of the archway in which they stood. Arthur took it from it's holder and crept carefully out toward the drawbridge. It had been raised shortly after Arthur had sustained his injury there, and it lay snugly against the wall, somehow having escaped damage. Despite the thickness of the wood used in it's construction Arthur had no trouble hearing the panicked screams and cries from beyond the wall. A sudden burst of orange light illuminated the tower above them and was accompanied by shouts of agony. There was no doubt that the creatures had resumed thier attack on the people outside. Amongst the cries and screams, Arthur could hear shouted pleas from both men and women "Gods help us!" they cried, "We shall all perish!" "Can nobody save us?"

He hurried back toward Leon. "We have to get that drawbridge down and fast" he said decisively.
There's a massacre going on out there! There's no time to use the winch to lower it - just get a couple of our strongest men to hack through the ropes.

"But Sire" said Leon, "when the drawbridge crashes open, won't that draw the attention of the creatures?"

"I thought of that already" replied the Prince."Command those men with shields and pikes to remain hidden in the shadows under the arch for the time being. Me and the strongest of the Knights will lure the creatures through into the courtyard and divert them whilst you bring those from outside across the drawbridge quietly and safely into the Citadel"

"My Lord, what you are planning to do is suicide" protested his bravest Knight. "You've seen what these creatures are capable of - they will rip you to shreds!"

Arthur raised his hand to silence the man, "I'm the best warrior this Kingdom has and my Knights are the best in the land." he countered. "We stand the best chance of keeping them distracted enough to allow you to fulfill your part of this mission"

"But you could die, Arthur!" shouted Leon, so exasperated he forgot to use any formal title for his Prince. "You are the Crown Prince! I beg you - let me go in your stead."

Arthur turned fully to face Leon and clapped his uninjured arm roughly on the man's shoulder and shook him. "Hush Leon" he remonstrated, then in a quieter voice added, "I must do this thing. These are my people. If we do not save them then there will be no Kingdom for me to be Crown Prince of!"

Leon hung his head and nodded. "Very well Sire" he muttered. He looked back up at the Prince and added, "I shall do as you command, but please, please take care!"

Despite everything Arthur smiled at the man and said, "I always do!" then nudged his shoulder and pushed him away saying, "Now go save my subjects!"

Leon briskly walked over to the main body of soldiers and relayed the plan to them. There were muffled protests from the men which Leon quelled immediately in his level authoritative voice. Quickly and with little fuss ten of the Knights came over to stand with Arthur and await his command. The young soldier that had told Arthur that he would fight for no reward made as if to follow the Knights but Leon gently caught his arm and pulled him back into the ranks of those remaining. Arthur smiled over at the fellow and made a pledge to himself that if either of them survived this night then he would personally train him up to the standard required for a Knight.

The Prince had drilled the Knights surrounding him so often that only a few words and gestures were needed to relay his plan to them. They all nodded curtly and got into formation, five on either side of the Prince. As one body they marched to the end of the courtyard furthest away from the Great Hall and drawbridge tower. Once there Arthur nodded a signal over to Leon who was watching him intently. With a silent nod, Leon commanded two men armed with axes to begin hacking away at the ropes that held up the drawbridge. To cover the noise of the axes, Arthur and his Knights began to beat their shields with the hilts of their swords. They beat the rhythm in time and the loud steady sound created resonated off the walls and towers and cut through the axe blows of the soldiers and even through the noises of suffering and terror from beyond the wall. Within a very short space of time the banging had the desired effect. The head of the Harpy suddenly appeared over the top of the Citadel wall and swivelled around until it located the source of the banging. It gave off a hellish shriek and flew directly over the drawbridge tower and toward them. Arthur was proud that not a single one of his Knights faltered in their beating of their shields. It was soon joined by the Afanc-like creature and the Dragon. All three took it in turns to swoop
down and attempt to tear the flesh of the Knights with their cruel talons. With almost superhuman strength and speed, the Knights thwarted each attempt by raising their shields to create a protective roof above themselves yet somehow continued banging a steady rhythm which insensed the creatures even more. The hardest beast to fight was the Dragon who soon tired of trying to hurt them with its claws and instead swooped and breathed long jets of flame amongst them. Thankfully the shields were made of steel so did not ignite, but it took Arthur and his men to the edge of their endurance to keep a grip on them when they became almost too hot to hold.

The attack on them abated when the ropes for the drawbridge had been completely severed and it went crashing down over the moat with an earth-shuddering "BOOM". The creatures paused in their onslaught and started moving as one back toward the source of the noise.

Arthur had foreseen this and led his men in formation in an arc around the creatures and stood before them. The creatures stopped dead and looked a little puzzled, but then began advancing again. Desperate to prevent them thwarting the plan to rescue the townsfolk Arthur let out a bloodcurdling cry and charged at the beasts with his sword raised high. In a beat his fellow Knights mirrored his action and all charged. The creatures took one step backwards before gathering themselves anew and responding to the onslaught. The Afanc almost lazily swiped at the first man to reach him, and disemboweled him. The Harpy jumped forward and caught a man's jaw in its cruel beak. One shake and the man fell dead, his neck broken. One by one them men fell but fought onward despite the almost certain death that awaited them; their deaths would not be in vain if they distracted the creatures long enough to let Leon and his soldiers fulfill their mission. When only four of his men remained, Arthur called on them to pull back but to lead the beasts away from the drawbridge as they went. They did so, goading the beasts to attack and then leaping back out of harms way, only to leap in and provoke again.

When only three men remained Arthur realised that they stood very little chance of survival and it would be moments until the creatures slayed them all. Before dying he had to know if their plan had worked and if their sacrifice will have been worthwhile. He was aware of the Knight behind him screaming in agony as the dragon breathed and engulfed him in flame. For a fraction of a second he took his eyes off the Afanc-like beast advancing on him and glanced toward the Great Hall. It was with great satisfaction that he saw a line of people running across the drawbridge and into the sanctuary of the castle, guarded by the soldiers with pikes.

He had a half-smile on his face when the blow came. The Afanc-beast had swiped at him whilst he was distracted and caught his shield, ripping it from his grip. The force of the blow knocked him backward and he crashed winded onto the stones of the courtyard. The beast advanced and Arthur tried in vain to scrabble backward...almost impossible since his right arm was still in its makeshift sling and his left held the sword. The creature put its huge clawed foot on his chest to stop him moving and leaned over him. The weight of it on his injured chest made the Prince's vision blur but he kept his eyes open. It looked at him sideways with its small soulless black eyes and snarled, exposing a mouth full of razor sharp fangs. It raised a huge clawed hand and swung it toward Arthur's head.

Arthur closed his eyes and awaited the death-blow.........

Chapter End Notes

......sorry about this outrageous cliffhanger. i really shall try to post the next chapter in the next couple of days!
Arthur waited for the death blow to hit
....and waited,
and waited.

He knew from stories told around the campfire (and indeed from his own too numerous near-death experiences) that the moment before one thought that one's life was about to end stretched out for an eternity.

His mind was a jumble of images. In rapid succession he saw scenes from his life; his father presenting him with his first pony, the first time he had been properly injured in training, the first time he had seen the sea and swum in it - then almost been swept away and drowned by it's unpredictable currents, the first time he had taken a man's life, the first tournament that he had won, the first time he had set eyes on Merlin....

He frowned at this last memory and wondered why it was there amongst the milestone memories of his life.

And as he frowned at this memory he was suddenly aware that his 'last moment' appeared to be going on for a very, very long time.

He opened his eyes and squinted blurrily up at the beast above him. It still stood on his chest with saliva dripping from it's wicked teeth and it's clawed hand was still high above it's head, poised to swing down and no doubt decapitate him with the force of it's blow. 'At least it should be quick and painess when it comes', he mused.

He suddenly became aware that it was standing stock still. At the same time he realised that there was a strange deep sibilant chanting voice just to the left of him, speaking words that he could not understand. He swung his head around and gasped in shock when he saw no other than Cedric the errant would-be manservant standing there dressed completely in black furs, arm outstretched and eyes glazed in a black film that made him look otherworldly. The voice that came from his mouth was not Cedric's however, and the sound of it made the hairs on the back of Arthur's neck stand on end.

"Cedric?" he asked incredulously in a hoarse voice, "Is that you? You're a s-sorcerer?"

The man gave him a quick glance and muttered some more words and made some strange gestures with his hands. On his command, the Afanc-like beast stepped back off Arthur's chest and hovered a few feet away, pacing and snarling. The Harpy and the Dragon also ceased from thier orgy of destruction and paced impatiently back and forth nearby. They reminded Arthur of hunting dogs locked in the kennels anticipating a hunt.

Arthur breathed in a sharp painful lungful of air and slowly rolled over. He shakily got to his feet, staggering backward away from Cedric.
"Cedric? Is it you?" he repeated. "Wh-where have you been?"

The man stared back at him, expressionless.

Arthur moved forward, looking closely into the eyes of the man before him. He clutched at the wound on his chest with his left hand to stem the bleeding that had resumed during the foray with the Afanc-like beast. His sword lay forgotten on the ground.

"You have magic" he stated, looking at the black orbs of the man before him. "You have magic, and command over these creatures and yet you spare my life? Why?"

Cedric continued to regard him impassively and to say nothing.

Arthur took one step closer, now well into the man's personal space. "You have power over these..things?" he asked, "Was it you that commanded them to attack the Kingdom? Who are you? What have my people done to deserve this?"

Cedric did not flinch and his expression did not change. Despite a feeling of repulsion, Arthur grew insensed and leaned right into the man's face and bawled "I demand you tell me who you are and why you have done this!"

"Step away Princeling", said Cedric in a voice that was not his own. It was deep and sibilant and seemed to vibrate inside Arthur's head. At these words, the three beasts became more agitated and began to move toward the Prince, hissing and screeching threateningly. Arthur raised his hands and took a step back away from the man.

"Do not assume that you can ever give me commands, boy" continued Cedric in the same even, chilling tone. "You are powerless against me, do you understand? You and your father and this Kingdom are all at my mercy. I alone decide who lives and who dies here."

"B-but why?" asked the Prince in consternation. "Who are you? You're obviously not Cedric......where are you from and what has Camelot done to deserve such brutal punishment?"

"This place is rotten to the core" continued not-Cedric, ignoring Arthur's questions. "You, your father and all those of royal blood that have ruled this land.....all the same.....nothing but lies and deceit come from your mouths. You pretend to be noble and good and virtuous and higher than the common man and yet you disregard the feelings and needs of those around you and cast people aside like so much chattle once you have quenched your lusts and grown bored. Time has only made you worse. For centuries your forefathers have ravaged this place and it's people. Now your father has the arrogance to assume that he is all powerful. The man is a fool. He thinks that he can defeat magic itself! The earth itself cries out in outrage at his barbaric persecution of anyone with magic. He has gone too far! It is time to end it."

Arthur stood shocked into silence by the man's words. His mind was reeling. He had to think of a way to stall this sorcerer. He took a step backward and bowed his head. He looked up through his fringe, suddenly deferential, at the man before him and asked, "Before you entirely lay waste to Camelot, could you at least do me the courtesy of telling me who you are?"

Not-Cedric puffed up his chest and looked into the Prince's eyes. "Very well" he said. "I am Cornelius Sagan. I was companion to the first of your line, King Aelrid. I lived only to serve him. I was faithful to him alone. I fought beside him in battle, rode beside him in the hunt. I helped him build this Kingdom and make it great. I did all he wished of me. It was I that built the Citadel in which you stand now."
Arthur gasped in surprise and looked at the man in wonder. He knew very well who Aelrid was, and he knew Cornelius Sagan had been his sorcerer with awesome powers. He had been taught that Sagan was dangerous and mad and thus Aelrid had executed him. What this sorcerer was saying to him now simply did not tally with what he had always believed.

"B-but that's not possible" stammered Arthur, "That was more than five hundred years ago! How can you still exist? You were a sorcerer who became too strong and went mad and tried to destroy the Kingdom. As punishment you were beheaded and interned...."

"Silence fool" hissed the man, "you know nothing. Your history is nothing but lies. The only madness that plagued my whilst I lived was belief in the integrity of Kings! I served your forefather with my whole being, my life was his, my heart was his! Yet on the word of a painted whore that he had known for barely half a year he cast me away - banished me from the Kingdom that we had built together"

"Th-that's not true" interjected Arthur, "What you say cannot be true...

"YOU KNOW NOTHING, PENDRAGON" said the man, his voice getting louder as he became angrier. "You people have lied and cheated for so long now that you do not know what is truth and what is lies! Enough of your talking - I shall listen no more! It is time to raze this rotten Kingdom to the ground."

As he spoke he raised his arms and the three creatures stirred and took to the air, hovering above thier heads.

"NO!" shouted Arthur in a panic, "WAIT! Please, I implore you, do not slaughter any more of my people - they are innocents in this!" He stood as straight as he could and looked directly into the eyes of Sagan before continuing, "I am the only son of Uther Pendragon, the last of the decendents of Aelrid......I have no children. If you kill me the line of the man that wronged you is ended.... won't that be revenge enough? Take me and let the people live, they have done nothing."

Sagan lowered his arms and the creatures dropped back down to the ground again and continued thier pacing. Sagan walked toward Arthur and let out a deep throaty blood-curdling laugh as he did so. He caught Arthur by both wrists. The Prince did not resist.

"Oh, I've got a much much better idea than that" he said as he leant forward. He raised one hand and placed it on Arthur's temple and muttered some words of magic. At the touch Arthur's whole body became rigid and he was held in a trance. "I shall possess this body and use it to slay Uther. That will certainly be a poetic revenge."

Not-Cedric muttered some more words of magic and suddenly his whole body shook and shuddered as the soul of Cornelius Sagan left him and moved over into the form of Arthur Pendragon. When the transfer was complete, both men fell backwards. Cedric remained inanimate, the glaze of death over his staring eyes. After a few moments Arthur sat up slowly. He blinked twice and his eyes became completely black. He slowly raised his left hand and felt over this newly possessed body. Upon finding the wound across his chest, he muttered an incantation. For a few seconds there was a blinding blue light. As it calmed he ripped at the bandages and makeshift sling that had constricted his movement. The deep wound was completely healed. He climbed quickly to his feet and looked around until he located his fallen sword. He picked it up and tested the weight of it in his newly-healed arm. He commanded the three beasts to fall in step behind him. They walked purposefully toward the entrance of the Great Hall.

The last surviving Knight that had accompanied Arthur on this mission stumbled into his path. "You majesty?" he asked, "Arthur?"

Without even breaking step, Arthur raised his sword and swung it in an arc, cutting off the head of
the Knight even as he spoke. He did not even look down at the body as he marched onward toward the Castle, intent only on slaying Uther Pendragon.....
Merlin barrelled up the stairs from the Dragon's Cavern and along the tunnels and passageways that led back up to ground level. Despite the feeling of wonderment at the new powers the Dragon had bestowed upon him, there was a Kingdom and a Prince to save...

As he got closer to ground level, he met more and more people. He was puzzled to find that the dark dank dungeons in which he had been so alone just hours before were suddenly teeming with Camelot's citizens, including the injured who had until now been treated in the Great Hall. It was a strange scene. Noblemen and peasants rubbed shoulders and sat around the walls and inside cells, all notions of class and rank for the moment forgotten. He gasped in surprise when he stumbled across Uther and the members of his Inner Court sitting in the furthest, darkest dungeon. The cell door was wide open of course, and an impressive retinue of Royal Guards kept watch, but the picture was nevertheless unsettling. Merlin searched in vain for Gwen, Morgana or Gaius so instead stopped one of the pages that he recognised from the kitchens.

"What's going on?" he inquired, "Why are the dungeons filled with people?"

"Where have you been, Merlin?" asked the boy in return. "Those creatures have virtually ripped the citadel apart up there! Walls and windows are collapsing around us. The only place that we can shelter from them is down here."
"Is Arthur here?" asked Merlin in alarm, "I left him in his chambers recovering from his wounds, is he safe there?"
"No, he isn't here." said the boy, "I didn't see him, but Maisie from the kitchen tells me that he led a rescue mission to get people across the drawbridge and into safety...."

"B-but that's not possible!", exclaimed Merlin, "He was badly injured and I gave him enough sleeping draught to stun a horse!"

"I'm only saying what I heard." said the boy raising his hands. "In any case - whether they were led by Arthur or not - the last of the Knights went out to rescue townsfolk. They were all gathering up in the Great Hall the last time I saw them."
"Thank you" said Merlin, clapping the boy on the shoulder and hurrying up through the noise of the crowds below ground to the noise of the battle above.

The going got harder as he encountered a stream of people hurrying in the direction that he was coming from. He had to shoulder his way through and grew frustrated as the crowd got thicker. Several times he was held up as masses of people tried to crush through doorways. With no small effort he fought his way through into the Great Hall. The noise there was incredible. There were soldiers shouting instructions over the semi-hysterical cries of relief of the townsfolk that had been rescued from beyond the walls. Merlin skirted groups of families and friends who were having tearful reunions and being moved along through to the vaults below the castle. With a good deal of
shoving he eventually made it over to the doorway where the mass of the soldiers stood.

He caught the sleeve of the closest guard to him to grab his attention. "Where is the Prince" he called above the noise and commotion. The soldier glanced at him and acknowledged him as Arthur's manservant. He nodded out into the courtyard. "He's out there with the Knights" he said.

Merlin peered out through the open door. He could see thick smoke and the red glow of a fire, but very little else. "Are you certain that Prince Arthur is with the Knights?" he asked the man.

"Saw him with my own eyes" replied the man. "The plan to get the people from beyond the wall is his - he led the Knights over to fight those ...things....so that we might have a chance. Bandaged and with his arm in a sling, he was, but that didn't stop him." He shook his head in wonderment at the Prince's bravery.

"Let me through" said Merlin, starting forward. I must get to him!"

The soldier put a hand on his chest to stay him. "Son, it's hopeless." he said shaking his head. "Even our finest Knights stood no chance against those beasts. It was a suicide mission. As we bought the last of these people through only Arthur and one other were still alive, and one of the beasts had knocked Prince Arthur to the ground.....I couldn't watch after that.....there's not a chance that he still lives."

"There's always a chance! Let me through!" said Merlin pushing the soldier aside and rushing out into the courtyard. He shouldered his way through the mass of soldiers and townsfolk who were crowding into the Hall as fast as they could. Tears began to prick at the corner of his eyes; he couldn't have come too late to save Arthur, could he???

Just as he was pushing through the last of the last group of people he was swept sideways by a surge of panic in the crowd. He turned around and stood as tall as he could to see what was causing this new commotion. His eyes widened and his heart leapt in relief when he saw Arthur striding purposefully toward the Great Hall.

"ARTHUR" he bellowed, struggling to be heard above the screaming around him and shoving his way through to his Master. It was only as he got closer that he understood the reason for all the consternation of the crowd that surrounded him. Arthur stood tall, unhindered by injury and his storm-blue eyes had gone. Instead he viewed the world through completely blackened pupils. These eyes were such a stark contrast to his halo of blond hair that it gave him the look of a demon. Merlin's heart sank into his boots when he realised that Sagan had possessed the Prince. It leapt back into his throat when he realised that Arthur was flanked by the three beasts. Against all his instincts, he pushed on toward the Prince.

"Arthur!" he called again, finally breaking free of the crowd and stumbling out in front of the man. "Arthur! It's me! Merlin..."

The Prince paused for a fraction of a second before striking Merlin aside with the hilt of his sword. The boy stumbled backward and crashed down painfully onto the stone paving of the courtyard from the force of the blow. As he lay trying to get breath back into his winded lungs, the Harpy-beast came and leant over him. He closed his eyes and waited for the death blow, but the thing simply screeched foul breath into his face before falling into step between the possessed Arthur and heading through into the Great Hall.

The hysteria that had greeted Arthur and his unholy retinue at the entrance of the Great Hall continued as he walked through it. People rushed aside and cowered against the walls and crushed their way through to head underground. Merlin followed after and watched helplessly as small
children and the elderly were knocked over and trampled during the paniced stampede of humanity. Mercifully, the beasts did not wreak havoc and destruction inside the hall. They seemed to be completely in the thrall of Arthur and followed behind him. As he strode through the Hall with his sword aloft, the Prince demanded, "Where is the King? I command you to tell me where he is!" He seemed to be addressing nobody in particular and nobody answered, merely hurrying away from him as quickly as they could.

Merlin alone followed after as he headed into the castle and kicked open the great doors to the Throne Room. It was empty. Merlin had caught up with him by this point and stood blocking the entrance with his body. He closed his eyes and took a calming breath and summoned to himself all the energy and knowledge that the Dragon had recently imparted upon him. Arthur turned and faced him and hurried toward him with sword raised.

"Where is Uther" he demanded, leaning the point of his sword against the boy's heart. Merlin didn't flinch, but instead stared searchingly into the black eyes. "Arthur, I know you're in there somewhere. It's me - Merlin.."

The sword point on his chest wavered uncertainly and for a moment a frown flickered across Arthur's face. Almost immediately, the Prince's head tilted upward and the sword pressed threateningly into Merlin's ribcage. "Move aside, Sorcerer, or die" said Arthur in a low threatening voice.

Merlin shook his head and resolutely stood his ground. "Arthur" he pleaded, "I know you're in there. You're too much of a stubborn prat to give in so easily! Fight this thing inside you!"

The sword wavered again and the prince's arm dropped. He shook his head and frowned. For a brief moment Merlin's heart leapt as he thought Arthur had overcome the possession but then it plummeted into his boots again when the man before him muttered words of magic and took a step back. The three beasts advanced snarling and screeching toward Merlin.

He drew in a breath and summoned all the power that he could feel surging through him. He raised his hands and concentrated his mind. "Assuiss" he said quietly and sent a burst of energy through his fingertips.

Immediately he was knocked backward by the force of the explosion he had created. The three beasts simultaneously returned to the rock from which they had been created and blew apart.

Merlin was still recovering from the blast and trying to pick himself up, when the form of Arthur came in to view, grabbing him with one hand around his throat and pulling him to his feet. Merlin fought for breath as he was pushed against the wall and Arthur squeezed tighter. His instinct told him to throw the man from him with magic, but he was reluctant to cause Arthur any harm.

Not-Arthur leaned right into Merlin's face and stared. Merlin fought to keep his eyes open as black dots appeared at the corner of his vision. He bought his hands up and tried to wrench away the hand at his throat.

"Who would have believed it" said Arthur in a strange hollow voice, "...you a Sorcerer - and a powerful one."

Merlin gasped and looked defiantly into the eyes of the man in front of him. He knew he could blast the man away from him with a single thought, but he did not want to hurt the body of Arthur in any way. "I won't let you hurt him!" he said through gritted teeth.

"And you're going to stop me?" said the not-Prince laughingly, squeezing just a little harder to
make his point.
"I'll stop you" said Merlin, breathlessly and defiantly.

"He does not deserve your loyalty. He treats you like a slave" reasoned the thing possessing Arthur's body.

"That's not true!" gasped Merlin, with some difficulty. It was hard to pull air into his lungs but he would not harm Arthur's body to save himself.

"He cast you aside without a moment's thought" continued Arthur-Sagan.

"That doesn't matter.."

The grip on his throat eased a little as Arthur-Sagan reasoned, "It must hurt so much, to be so put-upon, so overlooked when all the while you have such power..."

"That's the way it has to be!" exclaimed Merlin, as loudly as he could.

"Does it?" questioned the man. "You are young Merlin, look inside yourself, you have yet to discover your true power. I can help you. Think Merlin - to have the world appreciate your greatness. To have Arthur know you for what you really are!"

"That can never be!" said Merlin, shaking his head.

The hand around his throat eased it's grip a little and Arthur's other hand came up to caress Merlin's cheek. The boy flinched back from the touch as Arthur-Sagan continued, "It can! If you join me! Together we can rule over this land. Arthur will tremble at your voice, he will kneel at your feet!"

Merlin closed his eyes and said a little breathlessly, "I don't want that."

"You'd rather be a servant?" continued Arthur-Sagan, now in a cooing cajoling tone, still stroking his cheek.

Merlin let out a frustrated whine in his throat before turning his head aside. His mind raced and his breath came fast. All of a sudden his body relaxed and he looked down toward the floor letting out a sigh of defeat. He looked up deferentially through his fringe to the man holding him loosely around his neck and stroking his cheek. In a subdued tone and in almost a whisper he said, "Very well...."

Arthur-Sagan did not relinquish his grip entirely, but loosened the pressure on the boy's throat a little more and leaned back to look at Merlin triumphantly. He chuckled low and deep in his throat. "So glad you finally saw sense, Warlock" he said, "It would have been a terrible shame to extinguish such power as that which lives within you. Together we shall bring this Kingdom to it's knees...."

"Shhhhh" said Merlin, bringing a shaky hand up to Arthur's face and softly putting his fingers on the other man's lips. "Just........kiss me."

A brief flash of surprise flickered across Arthur's face but it was soon replaced with a smug smile. "Very well" he said as he leaned in and captured Merlin's lips.

After a moment, Merlin responded. As he closed his eyes and deepened the kiss, a single tear ran down his cheek..........
Chapter End Notes

...sorry - another cliff hanger! The story is almost finished - shall try to update as soon as possible!
Merlin's hands were shaking almost uncontrollably as he raised them and caught hold of Arthur's jaw to deepen the kiss. He took in a breath through his nose and whined softly deep in his throat. He gathered his resolve for what he must do next.

He focused on all the power contained within him. He was long aquainted with the magical energy that was his own...it had been an inherent part of his being for as long as he could remember and it had grown in strength as he grew to manhood. Now, side by side with his own power, was that gifted to him by the dragon. He felt so full of these combined energy that his body pulsed with it and he wondered if Arthur-Sagan could feel this pulse through his trembling. In his mind he uttered a spell and channeled the power through the palms of his hands and through his lips. As it flowed from him it was so strong that he felt the heat of it.

The vital knowledge imparted to him by the Dragon was that the soul of a being took the form of one of the basic elements from which all things were created. He himself was Earth. The Dragon - naturally - was Fire. Merlin opened his mind and sought out the souls of Arthur and Sagan. His heart jumped a little in relief when he discovered that they were of differing elements. Had they been of the same stuff, Merlin's job would be almost impossibly hard. But no, Arthur's soul like that of the Dragon, was also of Fire. In contrast Sagan's soul was Water. It encircled that of Arthur and lapped thickly at the edges of it extinguishing it slowly and steadily. Just a candle-flicker of Arthur's remained.

With his mind Merlin sent forth the power of the Dragon to join forces with that of Arthur. The remaining flicker of Arthur's flame jumped joyfully and fused with the stronger flame. Simultaeously Merlin stretched out with his Earth soul and began to soak up the thick dark Water of Sagan's being. The soul of Sagan relinquished it's attack on Arthur's soul when it felt the caress of Merlin's. It was convinced that Merlin had accepted it's offer of union and was thus combining them into one Being. Merlin did not let his concentration waver for a moment as he eased this black liquid mass gently away from the Fire-soul of Arthur and embraced it with his own.

Arthur's Fire-soul flickered and was beginning to recover it's strength.

When Merlin was sure that his own had encompassed the whole of Sagan's, he breathed again and began to draw the mingled souls back into his own body.

It was not a pleasant feeling. It was as though he was swallowing still-living snakes that thrashed and expanded in his throat and beneath his skin making all his nerve endings tingle and his head pound. Everything within his nature cried out to him to relinquish his hold upon this alien soul which felt as though it was pulling him under. But he knew that to give up now would be to lose Arthur and indeed endanger the very future of Camelot. For many moments he thought that his body would burst apart and his mind would explode from this sensation of holding two combined
complete souls.

As soon as Sagan had completely left Arthur's body, the Prince slumped to the ground, eyes unseeing. Merlin crashed down with him, still holding him in an awkward embrace. Merlin took a few moments to find his breath again now the kiss was broken, and to renew his strength. The next part of the process would be the hardest and most dangerous. He oh-so gently placed his palm over the Prince's heart and uttered a spell. Immediately, Arthur convulsed violently then went rigid as his heart stopped. "I'm so sorry, Arthur" whispered Merlin, "I'll fix you soon."

He had no choice but to stop the Prince's heart. If he didn't succeed with the next part of the process, there would be nothing to stop the soul of this evil sorcerer from re-entering Arthur, then all would be lost. As long as the Prince was 'dead', Sagan's soul could not re-enter. Merlin prayed to all the gods he knew that he would indeed succeed, for if he did not then Arthur would truly be dead.

Slowly, slowly Merlin began to expand his own Earth-soul and to soak up the Water-soul within him. Merlin continued until it was almost completely dried up. As soon as Sagan realised that Merlin was attempting to entirely absorb his being, he fought back. The Water-soul within Merlin was suddenly thrashing and pulsing and boiling. It ripped free from Merlin's Earth as searing steam. When it had broken completely free it hovered and whirled as an angry vaporous cloud. It expanded and grew larger then fell again as rain and inundated Merlin's Earth-soul. Merlin fought as hard as he could to prevent his own Element from being utterly overwhelmed.

On the very edge of his consciousness, Merlin was aware that he was grinding his teeth, that hot tears still escaped his eyes and that he was trembling almost uncontrollably from the mental exertion that he was going through. His pulse beat so loudly in his ears that he feared his heart might burst.

His momentary loss of concentration to acknowledge what was going on on a physical level was a huge mistake. Quick as a lightning, Sagan's soul fought back and took control of Merlin. The Water of his soul swirled angrily around and pounded and mixed into Merlin's Earth so thoroughly that a thick sludgy muddy flowing mass was formed.

The boy gasped, convulsed and his eyes flew open. He stared out at nothing, his bright blue eyes suddenly darkening to an inky black. He blinked and looked out at the world. The colours were dimmed, his hearing was muted. It was as though he was looking from below the waters of a murky lake. He felt a numbness and and emptiness in his heart the likes of which he had never before known. He held up his hands in front of his face and studied them, then impatiently brushed away the dampness of tears from his eyes. He looked around the Throne Room and his gaze settled on the great statue of a unicorn that stood in the corner behind the throne. A muttered word and a wave of his hand animated it. It shook its mane and blinked at him and began to move forward. Another word transformed it into a giant writhing snake. A mere thought and the thing exploded and shattered into shards of rock that smashed into the walls and ceiling of the room.

The possessed Merlin laughed low and deep in his throat. From where he sat he looked up at the great stained glass windows and one by one they exploded outward into the courtyard. His muddied mind filled with images of how he would tear the Citadel stone by stone until he found the King who he would then tear apart piece by piece....

A voice behind him suddenly cut into his evil reverie. "Merlin?" it said.

Merlin looked up to see an old man with long grey hair staring down at him, eyebrows knitted together and a look of deep concern on his face. Merlin said nothing, simply staring up at him.
Some part deeply buried within him knew this face.

"My Boy?" asked the man again.

A burst of flame as sudden and as bright as lightning flashed through Merlin's mind as he recognised Gaius. Slowly slowly, sparks of his own soul broke the surface and thrashed against the heavy blackness that tried relentlessly to pull him under again. He blinked mutely up at Gaius, his internal battle making him unable to speak.

"Merlin, is that you?" persisted Gaius, cautiously walking forward and looking searchingly into the boy's eyes, then placing a tentative hand on the top of Merlin's head. "Is Arthur alive?"

Merlin blinked up at him in puzzlement for a short second then followed Gaius's gaze down to the body in his lap.

The eyes of the Prince were glazed and the lips were beginning to go blue.

The shock of seeing this man who was his main reason for living, his destiny, all but dead in his lap was enough to ignite the spark of Merlin's own soul into total rebellion. Quick as a flash and without conscious thought he pulled Gaius down next to him and laid his forehead against that of the Physician. With great effort he summoned the Gaius's soul to him.

Gaius was of Air.

Harnessing this new power Merlin called a whirlwind into being that wrestled his own Earthly soul from the muddy mass it had become. He called up that fragment of the Dragon's power that still remained within him and the wind fanned the flame and it grew stronger. Slowly the overwhelming waters of Sagan's soul began to dry up and recede.

But Sagan was strong, so very strong, and he fought back with all of his being. The battle was fierce and Merlin let out a long deep cry of agony as he struggled and felt himself going under again.

With the very last of his reserves Merlin called up the Fifth Element. Love. In a flash he acknowledged that he loved Arthur with all his being and life would be pointless without him. With superhuman effort and will, Merlin focused on this and expanded his soul to encompass it. Sagan could not fight this new tool. He had too long ago forgotten what Love was. Earth, Air, Fire and even his own Element of Water could be changed and corrupted. But Love could not - Sagan could not touch it. His soul shrank away from it as Merlin held it before him like a shield. When the soul of Sagan was isolated and cowering Merlin made his move. With shaking hands he pulled the heart-shaped gem from his pocket and held it to his lips. He gave a sudden sharp exhale and expelled a long blue stream of energy containing Sagan's soul into the stone. When he felt the last of that soul leave his body he cast away the gem with all his might. Before it had come to rest beneath the Throne, he uttered a spell and shattered it into a thousand pieces. The bright blue energy flared iridescent for a fraction of a second and then dissolved to dense black dust. Another word from Merlin and a whirlwind whipped into existance and scattered the dust far and wide.

He leaned back against the wall and gasped in a few frantic breaths. He opened his eyes again and gathered the lifeless body in his lap to himself with shaking arms. He placed his hand over the Prince's heart and with the very last of his strength sent a surge of energy into Arthur to restart his heart.

The body in his lap thrashed from the shock, then went limp.
"Arthur" Merlin breathed hoarsely, "wake up".

The Prince didn't move.

Merlin moaned low in his throat and laid his shaking hand over Arthur's heart once again and sent another pulse.

Again the body in his arms thrashed around then went still.

"Arthur, please..." whispered Merlin, shaking the man's shoulders and brushing his hair back off his face and gently slapping his cheek.

Arthur remained still. Merlin stared helplessly down at his impassive face and fresh tears fell unbidden from his eyes. He simply had no more strength left. His tears silently slid down his cheeks and dropped onto the eyelids of the man in his arms.

Suddenly, Arthur's brow and eyes twitched and he frowned. He slowly opened his eyes and stared up in puzzlement at the man cradling him. "Merlin, why are you hugging me, and why are you crying like a girl?" He asked in a hoarse indignant voice.

Merlin let out a sob, smiled down at him weakly....and promptly passed out.

Chapter End Notes

Blimey, that was a hard one to write........
Another chapter or two and this tale will be told.
Merlin wakes up confused and in Arthur's chambers.

Merlin had a horrid overwhelming feeling of deja-vu as he was woken by the sound of hammering and of Arthur's voice calling his name from the next room. He gasped and attempted to sit up but a woozy feeling in his head and a shooting pain up his right arm made him flop back down again. He opened his eyes and blinked, somewhat confused as to where he was and how he had gotten there. He ascertained quickly that he was in the antechamber to the Prince's room. Daylight was slanting down through the high window, which meant it was approaching midday.

"Wh...wha?????" he muttered incoherently, looking up at the window. He did not understand how he'd been allowed to stay sleeping for so long - especially in this room!

"At last!" said a voice right beside his ear. Merlin was so startled he almost leapt off the bed.

"Hey! Calm down!" said Arthur, placing a hand on Merlin's chest and pushing him back down onto the bed. "Gaius says you need to take things slowly.....although you've been out cold for three days which is a hell of a sleep even for you."

"Wh...wha?" repeated Merlin, turning around and blinking uncomprehendingly at Arthur until he came in to focus properly.

He was even more confused when he realised that a small smile was playing on the Prince's lips rather than the scowl he would expect having been found still abed at such an hour of the day. "What am I doing here?, What's that banging noise??"

Speaking made him realise just how dry his throat was. He coughed and smacked his lips. Immediately, Arthur helped him sit up, propped some pillows behind him and handed him a goblet of water. Merlin looked at the Prince a little warily as he accepted the goblet and drank some.

"Don't look so suspicious, Merrrrlin" said Arthur a little indignantly. "It's only water!"

"S-sorry" said Merlin, getting his own voice back a little, "Thank You....but er - what exactly am I doing in bed in your chambers at midday? And what IS that racket?" (The hammering had suddenly gotten louder).

"The noise is workmen beginning to repair the Citadel walls" said Arthur, "Those....things...almost succeeded in destroying it completely. You are in bed because somehow along with myself and Gaius you were in the Throne Room when the Sorcerer and his creations dissapeared..."

"Oh......... OH!" said Merlin, beginning to remember and becoming a little uneasy about what Arthur might recall of the demise of Sagan and his manservant's role in it.

"Yes", continued Arthur, a little miffed at being interrupted mid-sentence, "as I was saying....I woke up on the floor and in your lap and you were crying like a girl, and when I spoke to you, you fainted clean away. Gaius says that you passed out because you lost a lot of blood from that stab
wound in your arm" (he indicated the bandage tied just above Merlin's elbow where Cedric had stabbed him) "...but I think you fainted because you are, in fact, a girl"

Despite himself, Merlin huffed out a laugh and mumbled "Prat" He became serious again and said carefully, "I don't recall any of it....what do you remember?"

Arthur frowned a little before continuing. "Not much really" he said, scratching the back of his head. "I remember being out in the Courtyard with my arm in a sling, luring those - things - away from the drawbridge. Then I was almost trampled by one of them, then that Cedric fellow appeared and he was apparently a sorcerer!...."

"Told you not to trust him..." mumbled Merlin indignantly.

Arthur ignored him and continued, "...and the next thing I know, I am in the Throne Room, fully healed and being cuddled by my idiot of a manservant!"

Merlin frowned at him and Arthur ruffled his hair fondly. "Okay, okay - so you were right about Cedric. I apologise. What about you....can YOU remember how I got to the Throne Room? Or where the Sorcerer and his beasts went?"

"Errrrr - oooohh" blundered Merlin, scratching at his cheek and looking as if he was trying to recall. "Can't say as I do..........d-did you say Gaius was with us there?"

"Yes he was" said the Prince. "He was sitting next to you and was out cold. I managed to wake him up and he explained that he'd seen one of the creatures knock me unconscious and you, apparently, had come to pull me out of harm's way when suddenly the Sorcerer and those - things - just......dissapeared."

"Dissapeared" repeated Merlin, "Oh?"

"Yes" said Arthur, looking puzzled, "I was surprised too!"

"D-did he say how they just.....dissapeared?" asked Merlin with a little trepidation.

"Yes he did" said Arthur, suddenly with authority. "Apparently, when we unearthed that tomb the other day, we unleashed a curse. In his time the man buried there had been a powerful sorcerer and before his execution for treason he had vowed to wreak havoc on the Kingdom."

"Well, he certainly did that" interjected Merlin.

"Indeed" conceded Arthur. "Anyway - according to Gaius - the curse only had a three day lifespan. He says that the spirit of this sorcerer just - dissapeared - when it did because it's time was up."

"Wow" said Merlin. "So I guess we were lucky, really."

"Mmmmmmm" said the Prince. "Gaius reckons that it caused so much damage because it knew that it's time was short."

Merlin wriggled up the bed a little so that he was sitting up properly. "H-how many people died?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"98 men-at-arms including 15 of my best Knights" said Arthur sadly, "and 143 civilians."

Merlin hung his head and closed his eyes. His whole body shook as he silently cried. Tears flowed down his cheeks, dripping onto his blanket. "Oh no" he said almost in a whisper, "I am so sorry."

Much to his surprise, Arthur sat on the edge of the bed and pulled him into an awkward hug,
rubbing soothing cirles on his back. "S'alright Merlin" he said, "It's not your fault."

Merlin just wept harder. Arthur leaned back and looked into his face in alarm. "Er......I think I'll go and get Gaius now" he said. "I think you may still be in shock."

Merlin nodded and Arthur stood up, giving him a last concerned look before hurrying from the room to bring Gaius.

Chapter End Notes

Not much more to go...one more concluding chapter and this fic shall be finished, methinks.
Merlin was still sniffling occasionally when Arthur returned. The Prince cautiously poked his head around the door to the antechamber then turned to speak with somebody over his shoulder. When Gaius came into view he wore such a look of deep concern on his face with one eyebrow raised that it caused Merlin to break into uncontrollable tears again. Arthur looked panicked and made as if to come toward him to comfort him, but Gaius grabbed his arm to gently prevent him from doing so.

"It's better if I tend to him alone, Sire" said the Physician softly.

"Yes, yes - of course you're right", conceded the Prince, reluctantly taking his eyes off Merlin's crumpled face in order to address Gaius. "I shall, er, go see how the workmen are coming along with the repairs".

Gaius waited until he heard the outer door to the Prince's chambers close before he spoke.

"Merlin?" he asked anxiously.

The boy wiped at his eyes and nose with the sleeve of his bedshirt and between sobs choked out, "G-gaius, what have I done? Th-there are so many people dead and it was all my doing! I h-have to tell Arthur....."

"My boy..." began Gaius softly, heading toward Merlin in order to give him a reassuring hug. "You can't blame yourself for this - you were possessed. You acted against your will....."

"But don't you see?" cried Merlin, "It's my fault! I'm supposed to be this great sorcerer and yet I let this thing possess me!" He waved his arms around in consternation. "I got so angry and frustrated with Arthur that I summoned those...things...into being and now more than two hundred people are dead! BECAUSE OF ME! I h-have to confess....I cannot live with this guilt" He bowed his head and wept again.

Gaius grabbed him firmly by the shoulders and shook him gently. "Merlin, Pull yourself together" he said sternly, "None of this was your fault, do you hear me, none of it. It was Sagan that did all of those things, that made you think the way you thought and behave the way you behaved. It is Sagan that is responsible for the deaths..."
"But don't you see? I LET HIM POSSESS ME!" cried Merlin.

"Merlin, you must stop this" demanded Gaius in a voice that would broach no argument, "Sagan was the most accomplished Sorcerer that the Kingdom has ever known and he dabbled in dark magic. Your own magic is greater than anything I have ever seen, but you are young still, and untrained...this is why he managed to possess you."

"But..." said Merlin again.

"No 'buts' Merlin" continued the physician, "Sagan may have possessed you but it took a long time for you to succumb to him and even then he did not entirely conquer your spirit. You are the only person that retained enough free will to fight back. That took enormous strength and courage on your part! You risked your own life and your own soul without a thought in order to take the curse from Arthur. Then you destroyed Sagan himself, thus saving the Kingdom......I think that is quite enough to make amends for any sins that you feel you may have committed. Now, I don't want to hear another word about it."

Merlin stopped weeping and looked up at him a little skeptically.

"And what do you think would happen if you confessed?" continued Gaius. "Would it bring back those poor souls that lost their lives?"

Merlin frowned and shook his head, his bottom lip quivering a little.

"Even if anyone believed you - and I'm not sure they would since all the eyewitnesses saw Cedric casting spells and commanding the beasts and are therefore convinced that he was responsible for it all - even if they believed you, what do you think would happen? Prison? Execution?" Gaius paused and looked to Merlin for an answer. The boy shrugged in response.

"Whatever the punishment would be", the old man went on, "It would take you away from Prince Arthur and your shared destiny and THAT, my boy, would be an unforgiveable crime."

Having finished his speech, Gaius sat on the edge of the boy's bed and huffed out a breath, somewhat exhausted by his tirade. Merlin blinked at him and sighed deeply. "Maybe you're right" he said in a subdued voice.

"My boy, I KNOW I'm right!" replied Gaius laying his hand on Merlin's arm. "And another thing...I don't think Hunith would ever forgive me if I let you go to jail or get executed!"

Despite himself, Merlin huffed out a laugh and pulled the old man into a hug. "Thank you Gaius" he said quietly. In reply Gaius patted his back soothingly. By and by he pulled back from the hug and held a now smiling Merlin at arm's length. With a mischievous twinkle in his eye he added "...and I am much, much too old to clean out that leech tank."

Merlin laughed loudly, his face crinkling and his eyes dissapearing into crescents.

"That's more like it", said the Physician in a satisfied voice. "Now then, when you've eaten something perhaps it will be time for you to get up out of this bed and begin to get yourself back together....there's a lot of injured people that still need tending to and I shall need your help. And I'm quite sure Arthur would be pleased to have you back at work for him - he's been fussing like a mother hen ever since you became ill."

As Gaius left the room Merlin sighed and smiled fondly. He wondered how he had ever gotten through life before he had met this wise old man. Slowly he got up from the bed, got into some fresh clothes that were laid out on the back of a chair and headed out from the chambers to face the
world again.
Master and Servant Reunited

Chapter Summary

Merlin finally gets back to work as Arthur's manservant and things return to normal....kind of....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next few days were exhausting. Despite his injured arm, Merlin was kept busy running back and forth between the Citadel and the Lower Town with medicines for those injured by the beasts. In his spare time, he headed back down to the Lower Town and visited those who had lost family members to see what he could do to help. He assisted with the rebuilding of walls and roofs and bought what food he could from the Camelot stores to help those most in need. Late in the evening when most of the Castle was sleeping, he and Gaius would go down to the tomb of Sagan and painstakingly sort through all the treasures contained within in order to check that no more of them held magic of any kind.

Arthur, too, was exceedingly busy. Once the harrowing task of burying the dead had been finished, he was commanded by his father to oversee the rebuilding of the walls and towers of the citadel. He was also occupied with replacing those Knights and soldiers killed by the beasts. He spent long hours down on the training grounds putting the new recruits through their paces. Although physically exhausting, this served as a good therapy and helped him to cope with the grief of having lost so many good men. He was especially pleased that the humble foot soldier who had so impressed him with his bravery just before they had faced the beasts turned out to be an extremely able swordsman. Arthur was in no doubt that with training he would become an excellent Knight. His name was Sagramor.

Arthur had excused Merlin from his manservantly duties for a few days. Officially he said it was in order to allow the boy to aid Gaius tending to the injured although privately he had been rather shaken by Merlin's lengthy bout of unconsciousness and wanted him to have the chance to recover fully. He of course had no idea that Merlin was working twice as hard in his 'free' time.

Thus it was almost a full week before the two men met again. Arthur arrived back at his chambers exhausted from the training grounds late one afternoon to find Merlin busily remaking the bed, humming quietly as he worked. As he walked in Arthur looked around to see that his chambers were spotlessly clean for the first time since the attack of the beasts. He took off his gauntlets and sat heavily down at his table. Merlin finished fluffing up and straightening the last of the royal pillows then looked up at him.

"Arthur, you look exhausted!" he exclaimed, hurrying over and helping to remove vambraces and hauberk before lifting the heavy chainmail from Arthur's shoulders. The Prince did not argue or resist and let Merlin move his limbs around in order to remove his armour. When the weight of it was gone from his shoulders he let out a long groan and stretched his muscles then looked up at Merlin.

"You're not looking too clever yourself" he parried, noting the dark rings under the boy's eyes and the fact that he was even thinner than before. His face was so drawn that his already prominent
cheekbones looked sharp enough to cut cheese with. "Is Gaius actually letting you sleep? And are you eating anything? You look like the wind might blow you away!"

Merlin huffed out a small laugh as he laid the armour carefully across a chair. "I'm just fine, Sire" he said smiling, "You should know as well as anyone that I'm stronger than I look."

"Hmmmmmm" hummed the Prince in a noncommittal manner. "Even so..."

"You, on the other hand need looking after" said Merlin decisively. "I don't know who has been tending to you this week but you smell like a ripe cheese. When did you last bath?"

Arthur bristled and opened and closed his mouth trying to form words of protest to this outrageous statement. Before he managed to do so, Merlin was heading toward the doors of the chambers with purpose. "I'll go and organise a bath for you, Sire" he said, "We don't want you making your nice clean sheets all smelly now, do we?"

With that he was gone, leaving Arthur frowning at the door indignantly. He shrugged his shoulders and began to unlace the jacket that he wore beneath his chainmail. As he took it off he sniffed it and wrinkled his nose and reluctantly conceded that his irritating manservant had a point - he stank. He threw the smelly coat into the laundry bin and then walked over to the door, stopping a passing maid and ordering supper for two to be bought up to his chamber.

When Merlin returned about fifteen minutes later with the big wooden bathtub and a group of maids carrying buckets of hot water he found the Prince exactly where he had left him at the table. Now however he was sound asleep with his head resting on his hands. Merlin smiled fondly and quietly ushered the bucket-bearers into the chamber to deposit their loads then sent them on their way with thanks. He poured the buckets of water into the bath and threw in some sprigs of lavender and rosemary. With a last glimpse over his shoulder to check that Arthur still slept soundly, he muttered a quiet spell to heat the water just that little bit more so that it would be the perfect temperature. Once that was done he laid out some clean towels and a fresh set of clothes in front of the fire then went over and shook his master gently awake. Arthur groaned and shifted but resolutely kept his head down on the table muttering an incoherent protest.

"Oi, dollophead" said Merlin softly, shaking him again, "Wake Up. You smell like a goat and your bathwater is getting cold."

Arthur slowly moved his head to one side and drawled, "If you call me a dollop head, an old cheese or a smelly goat again I shall have you hung for treason."

"Ooops, sorry Sire" said Merlin sounding not sorry at all, "I thought you were still asleep."

"And do you often call me abusive names when I am asleep?" said Arthur, sitting up and giving Merlin his sternist look. It was a little disconcerting when Merlin blinked twice at him before folding over in fits of laughter.

"Sorry Arthur", he said once he could breathe again. "It's very hard to take you seriously when one side of your hair is sticking up like a cock's comb. Arthur tutted and smoothed down his sleep ruffled hair and tried to look stern and irritated again, but the moment was lost.

Instead he stood up and stretched then stood passively as Merlin came over and began to strip his clothes from him. Despite his recent fit of laughter, Merlin went about his task quietly and efficiently. When Arthur was down to just his breeches, his manservant left him and went to put more wood on the fire then began to light candles around the chambers to chase away the evening gloom that was fast descending. Arthur watched him for a moment before slipping off his breeches
Merlin almost dropped the lighted taper that he held when the Prince let out a long loud and almost obscene groan of contentment and declared "Ah, Merlin, this is divine - how do you do it?" as he sunk into the hot bathwater. The groan had caused Merlin to blush so he was glad that the Prince was facing the other way. When he had regained his composure he said cheerily, "Glad I can do at least one thing right. Now make sure to wash all the nooks and crannies before you even think of getting out again."

Arthur tutted and laughed. "Merrrlin you are forgetting yourself again" he said imperiously, "I give the orders around here." The effect was somewhat ruined by the fact that he was dilligently soaping his armpit as he spoke. He continued, "Now he may have had his faults, but that Cedric chap did at least know his place and how to behave around royalty."

"Yeah, and look how that turned out!" said Merlin, blowing out the taper and walking over toward the bathtub. Without asking, he grabbed the flannel from Arthur's hand and started scrubbing his back. "Of course, if you really want I could start being a weasly obsequieous arse-licker that goes everywhere with a clothes brush in my pocket (who carries a clothes brush? In what world is that normal?) and then steal from you when you sleep..."

"Yeah" Arthur laughed, "and then you could turn into a sorcerer and try to kill me and destroy the Kingdom."

Merlin ceased scrubbing his back for a few moments before resuming again, huffing out a non-convincing laugh and saying "Indeed, Sire." in a voice a few octaves higher than his usual. Arthur thought this a little bit odd, but merely shrugged it off. Despite the boy's bravado, deep down Arthur knew that he was as shaken as the rest of the Kingdom by Sagan's devastating attack. Both men were silent for a while. Merlin finished with Arthur's back and set about washing his hair. It was one of his favourite tasks. He never stopped marvelling at how it went from dusty brown to the colour of spun gold after he'd washed it through with soap and chamomile a couple of times. "There, that's you all done" he said, depositing a towel upon the royal head and giving it a brisk rub. "Though this bathtub might need disinfecting before we can use it again." He just about managed to stand and jump back before Arthur took a swipe at the back of his head.

"Insolent whelp" mumbled Arthur, slowly standing up and getting out of the bath, "I don't know how I put up with you."

"Ah, you wouldn't have me any other way really." said a grinning Merlin as he approached bearing a large fluffy warm towel that he handed to the Prince.

Arthur took the towel and wrapped it around his shoulders, revelling in the warmth of it for a while before wrapping it around his waist. "No, you're right" he said to Merlin's back. The boy was busily collecting up dirty clothes from the floor and chairs.

"Sire?" said Merlin, not looking up from his chores.

"I really would not have you any other way." said the Prince still watching him. Merlin stopped what he was doing and looked up quizzically at Arthur. After a few moments he grinned like an lunatic and his eyes disapeared into little crescents.

"Blimey" he said laughing, "That must have been some blow to the head that you had - I've been here for half an hour or more and you haven't called me an idiot ONCE, and now you are saying you don't want me to change! Wonders will never cease...."

"Seriously though, Merlin" said Arthur cutting into his mirth, "I acted like an arse this last week and I treated you appallingly. I am sorry. I should not have doubted you. You have time and again
proven yourself to be a good and loyal....friend.....and it was wrong of me to cast you aside so carelessly."

Merlin stopped laughing and looked at him intently. He said nothing.

"You mean..." continued Arthur, "....you mean a lot to me, and I really couldn't imagine not having you about. I don't mind admitting that you had me worried when you didn't wake up for three whole days."

Merlin stared at him and his eyes began to fill with tears. "Oh Arthur" he said quiety. He looked like he was moving in to embrace his master. Arthur wasn't sure how he would respond. The moment was broken by a loud knock on the door and the maid's voice announcing that supper had arrived. Merlin hurried over to the door to take the tray and Arthur dissapeared behind the changing screen and put on his clean clothes.

Merlin was setting the tray down on the table as Arthur reappeared, fully clothed. "Er - are you hungry?" he said looking quizzically at the large amount of food. "and since when did you start eating honey cakes for supper?"

"You are eating here with me" commanded Arthur. Merlin blinked owlishly at him.

"Well don't look so shocked", said the Prince a little flustered. "You look like a matchstick! I'm not convinced that Gaius is feeding you enough, so you can eat here with me. Now sit down and shut up."

Merlin did as he was told, mumbling, "didn't say anything..." as he did so.

"You didn't have to", said Arthur, sitting opposite him and beginning to dish up food for them both, "You think louder than anyone I have ever met."

Merlin said nothing but took the plate proffered to him by Arthur and began to eat with gusto. As they ate and drank, they talked of the previous week. Arthur told Merlin about all the new Knights-in-training descriing the merits of each new man, They remembered and spoke of those men that had fallen. For his part Merlin told Arthur how the injured men were doing and when he thought they would be well again. He told him also of his work in the Lower Town, trying to help people rebuild thier homes and their lives.

Arthur nodded as he spoke then said, "No wonder you look so weary. You know, there are other able bodied men in Camelot Merlin...you really don't have to rebuuild the town singlehandedly." he joked.

"I feel it's my duty" said Merlin rather earnestly.

"You're duty" said Arthur, sipping wine and sitting back in his chair, "Is to help Gaius tend the injured and to be my manservant. I don't want you overdoing it and fainting away like a girl again."

Merlin laughed a little and countered, "I think we've ascertained that I am not a girl."

"Indeed" said Arthur sternly. They lapsed into a companionable silence for a while, drinking wine and watching the flames dancing in the fireplace. Arthur was beginning to feel his lids drooping when he was started fully awake by a sudden snorting snuffling sound. Merlin sat with his chin on his chest, sound asleep and snoring like a contented sow. Arthur snorted a laugh before leaning over and shaking his shoulder. "Wake up, you lightweight." he said.

"Gnnnnnnrgh" responded Merlin, dopily opening his eyes and blinking around. "Musta dropped
off" he mumbled, scratching his nose, "sorry 'bout that". He promptly fell back to sleep. Arthur reluctantly stood up and shook the boy by both shoulders. "Come on, Merlin, wakey wakey" he said. He pulled the boy to his feet. Merlin scowled but conceded. "S'pose I should go to bed" he said and started heading for the door. Arthur had time enough to reflect on how like a newborn foal his manservant looked as he walked before the boy's legs gave way and he fell in an ungraceful heap about halfway to the door. "Ooops" he said, making no effort to stand again.

Arthur rolled his eyes and picked Merlin up off the floor in his arms. "You really cannot hold your drink, can you!" he exclaimed. "There's no way I'm letting you walk through the castle in this state - you'll fall down some stairs or some such nonsense - you can stay in the antechamber again."

"Alright" said Merlin, looping his arms around Arthur's neck and laying his head against his chest. "Mmmmmm, you smell all clean and Arthur-ey" he said dreamily. Arthur rolled his eyes and carried him through to the antechamber, depositing him on the bed and taking off his boots, jacket and neckscarf. He looked down at the boy and shook his head and turned to leave. He was prevented from doing so when Merlin grabbed him by his wrist and turned him back around. Merlin's eyes were still closed. "'S a bit cold in here", he mumbled plaintively, "Stay?" and gently pulled at Arthur's arm.

Arthur rolled his eyes, sighed - then kicked off his trousers and climbed into the bed behind Merlin, enclosing him in a warm full-body hug. As he pulled the blanket up over them he kissed the top of the boy's head fondly. "G'night Idiot" he said, ruffling his hair.

"G'night Prat" responded Merlin.

Within minutes they were both sound asleep.

Chapter End Notes

That's it - finally finished. Thanks to all those who 'kudos'-ed me as I wrote and posted comments. It means a lot. Hope you enjoyed!!!

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