Rheged

by McShame

Summary

Post S5 (AU); canon to the end of S4 & part of the way through S5. Gwen and Arthur have been married for several years, Merlin's magic has been revealed and Arthur has now reached a kind of cold peace with it. Then a delegation arrives from a kingdom based on magic, and suddenly Destiny is starkly and ruthlessly to the fore. The question is should - can - it be avoided?

WARNINGS: One scene may be interpreted as dub-con, infidelity, attempted suicide (magical/fantasy), season 5 spoilers. Angst. Please do not read if ambiguous consent or any kind of force used in sexual situations is a trigger or is distressing to you.

Notes

My thanks first of all, to The Muppet for allowing me to take part in her brilliant challenge and for her incredible organizational skills and kindness when blips were encountered.

Huge thanks too to my artist, the lovely Shayla, who worked so hard to put visuals to this story even though she had quite a few RL hurdles to overcome. Please go and check out her work here: http://shayla-kage.livejournal.com/15930.html - she’s very talented and imaginative (just look at her use of colour!) Thanks for choosing my story, Shayla!

And finally SO much gratitude I can't even begin to express it - to my beta-come-cheerleader and friend, the phenomenal Bluntolcow, who’s blunt and (very) occasionally a cow but certainly not old. She’s let me bounce ideas off her, sorted out all the practicalities, egged me on and nagged me and made me laugh and slogged through bonkers spoilers with
me – and just never lost patience with my neurotic doubts and fears about the story. She was the one who gave me faith that this was worth finishing. In truth, this is as much her story as mine, because without her it wouldn’t have seen the light of day. So… basically… it’s her fault really, and now you know who to blame.
Chapter 1

He wasn’t a sour man.

Not even his enemies would call him such.

Not even the ones he’d run through.

He was easy going; it was his natural state of mind.

But at this moment, right now, leaning here uselessly against a pillar at the edge of Camelot’s Throne Room, he was skirting as close to the border of nasty bad temper as he ever came.

It was the heat. Partly. Stinking. Stifling. Thick and filthy. And right then, to wind the spring of his irritation tighter, hair-trigger tight, a tickling drop of sweat, running disgustingly slowly between his shoulder blades, down to enter the swamp at the small of his back.

He looked around him darkly at the others in the room. All of them must be suffering equally, though few of them showed it, all of the knights and nobles and ladies standing here just like he was, wearing clothing so unseasonal only lunatics would consider it for this roasting hot early summer. And that’s what they all were, he thought grimly. Lunatics. Courtiers. When the fuck had he agreed to become one of those?

The man leaning next to him straightened suddenly, alert and respectful; forcing off the drowsy, buzzing heat, just like everyone else in the crowded hall.

Gwaine though, Gwaine deliberately took his time to straighten; a tiny, private, ridiculous rebellion, but one that left him feeling marginally more his old self.

He let out a heavy, weary breath and tried to pay proper attention to the small party which had just arrived in the hall from a doorway across from the twin thrones of Camelot. The sight, if anything, made his mood worsen.

“Nice of them to remember we’re here,” he muttered to the man beside him, and there it was. Sourness. He’d been trying for playful. The heat, he thought again.

And yes, he acknowledged, mildly ashamed, jealousy; it’d been far too long since he’d emptied his balls with any real enjoyment. But he was still sensible - and loyal - enough to keep his voice low. The days of easy, friendly insults, shouted openly, were rarer now.

“They love each other above all else. They deserve their happiness,” Percival replied quietly, the dignity of it, a kind of quiet reproach.

Gwaine pursed his lips; after all it was hardly an insightful statement given the obvious mutual regard which had been playing out in front of them for years, but something… almost dogged in the other man’s tone shook him to a kind of alertness and drew his glance.

They’d found themselves talking about Lancelot the night before, a few of them, half into their cups. It had taken ale, and a lot of it, to loosen their tongues at last, to force them to address their own long ago guilt, but Gwaine had forgotten until then that Percival had become a knight of Camelot as Lancelot’s friend, closer to him then than anyone save Merlin.

The friendship had thinned and loosened over time as Percival and Elyan, Gwen’s lost brother, had
become closer, and Lancelot had held himself just that bit apart, but even so… Gwaine knew the bond and the debt were still there.

Not that it mattered really, because they’d all let him down in the end, believing things of him so easily when they should have known that something was fishy. Instead they’d all just…sucked up the tale, and condemned Lancelot as a man who’d betrayed his king and his honour for a woman. A man they didn’t think about or speak of for years.

His memory should have been glorious; his brothers of the Round Table should have fought for the truth for him. But instead…

Gwaine frowned uneasily at Percival; at the strange conflict he could see on his friend’s handsome face as he watched the new arrivals. He fancied suddenly that he could see emotions flipping through those soft, blue eyes like slips of paper in the wind.

What was he seeing?

Guilt, he thought, sadness, resentment perhaps, and back to guilt again. Percival always had been painfully honourable.

They hadn’t known the real story of Lancelot’s true role for long… that it had all been a vicious game by Morgana Pendragon, and Gwaine had played enough of those with her himself to know that a man was nothing but a pawn when she turned those cold, cold eyes on you. The image of a girl’s pretty face winked, suddenly, disobediently, into his mind... a girl he hadn’t given a thought to for many a long day.

Eira. Sweet, innocent, lovely Eira. Morgana’s creature. Who would have made of Gwaine, a dupe and a fool. Long dead now, and rotting.

He shoved the memory aside impatiently... focussed instead, on one who deserved his guilt. Their guilt.

Lancelot had loved Gwen beyond all else, and Percival had known that from his time with him before Camelot, just as well as Gwaine had, because of Merlin.

They’d all just taken Arthur’s part, cared about his pain, and Gwen’s, and forgotten Lancelot’s; forgotten his devotion to Guinevere and Arthur, his generosity and stoicism, watching the woman he adored devoting herself to someone else.

And after he’d died for them, his friends had ended up betraying him. Condemning him. None of them had even asked what Merlin had done with his body.

Last night’s belated confessions had shown painfully that Percival felt guiltier than any of them.

Gwaine held his narrowed gaze on the bigger man for a long moment, waiting, then, when all he could see once more was Percival's usual good natured serenity, he followed his line of sight again.

Arthur and Gwen had all but slipped into the throne room, rather than entering in procession as a king and his consort should, but that surprised no one much any more. It reflected the relative informality of Arthur’s court. Or so Gwaine had been told. It still felt more than formal enough to him. Yet courtiers who lived for stupid fucking rules were still pining for the old days, when the king observed all the niceties.

He watched as Gwen, hand gripping Arthur’s tunic-clad arm as they progressed, responded to some whispered remark of his with a smile, first of teasing faux disapproval, then of bright-eyed
affection. She murmured in return, and Arthur’s solemnity dissolved into a broad smile of his own.

Gwaine sighed again and wondered grumpily when, if ever, they were going to stop being so pleased with themselves and each other. Though he supposed, he had to acknowledge they had plenty cause.

The king and queen had been married for years now, and though there were no children yet, no one could deny that it had worked brilliantly as a royal union. Guinevere was as majestic and noble and loved a queen as any born to the title, but she had the added mystique of her fairytale rise from nothing to glory, and all because of the twin gifts of courage and true love.

A prince she’d risked her life to help; who’d offered to give up his kingdom and indeed had given away some of his lands, for love of her; a young king who raised a peasant serving girl to become his queen out of that love. And now they ruled a shining kingdom together; a kingdom, rich in enemies as it was, where anything was possible... their future stretching wide and golden and perfect before them. There had been dark times and suffering on the way - the agony of the queen for example when the she’d been taken and tormented by her former mistress, the king’s mad half-sister, Morgana; taken, and her brother killed and her mind twisted. But goodness and justice had won out in the end, and she had been restored to her loving people in all her kindness and justice.

Well, Gwaine acknowledged, even cynics like him could appreciate how pretty the story was … when they weren’t dripping with sweat under a woollen gambeson, with mail on top, being forced to wait for the fairytale couple to finish their mid afternoon shag, or mid afternoon chat, or whatever the hell they got up to. Though, he thought, with a tiny, private smile, he actually got the whole power of love thing himself now.

He let the pleasure of that thought fill him for a few seconds, then his mind slipped back hazily to the subject at hand.

The thing was … the thing was actually, he mused lazily, that he didn’t believe for a second that it had been a mid afternoon shag. And that - being who he was - Gwaine found harder to identify with.

Of course even before they’d married, passion wasn’t really the word he’d have used to describe what was between Arthur and Gwen. Love, definitely; affection, respect, loyalty, reliance, an almost nurturing old friendship that sometimes smacked to him more of devoted mother and son, or sometimes father and daughter, than lovers crazy with desire for each other. And they had known each other forever.

But in truth it had always seemed to Gwaine, comfortable and sweet and easy and peaceful, rather than driven by love’s delicious madness. Which could be why it already felt so much like ... a partnership now. A royal partnership.

Not Gwaine's own cup of tea at all; he was a man, by contrast, who revelled in the madness - the need and want - with a large appetite for sex. But Arthur was so bloody awkward with women anyway that it was probably just as well he’d ended up married to the only one in existence he seemed able to truly relax around.

Gwen occasionally told Arthur off for his inability to sit on his throne and turn away from an adventure, but they never appeared to squabble or really disagree with each other; had never fought, that he’d seen. Arthur had never been the old Arthur Gwaine had known, when he was with Gwen. Though to be fair, he wasn’t really the old Arthur with anyone any more.

And it wasn’t as if they’d always acted the old married couple. At first, driving passion or not…
well... after all that repression... once sex entered the equation, anyone would have shaken off the
chains of duty for a bit to finally allow themselves physical pleasure in the relationship as well as
comfort. Who, Gwaine thought, after all, could resist lots of regular, uncomplicated sex?

For a while actually, Gwen’s quiet glances at Arthur had suggested to anyone who cared to look,
that the Princess might be quite a lot better in bed than Gwaine had ever imagined he would be.
And Arthur’s own ineffable, almost comical smugness; greater, impossibly, than ever before; his
tendency to grin hugely, unnervingly at the oddest of moments; his unstoppable, cheerful violence
every morning at training, had all spoken so eloquently of a man who was getting some every
night at last.

There was no doubt in Gwaine’s mind that Arthur had deliberately chosen the first knights of the
original Round Table to bear the worst of his initial post-sex euphoria.

But unnerving as it had been, at least that stage hadn’t lasted long at all, before the king and queen
seemed to settle into stolid, affectionate matrimonial comfort.

Mind, Gwaine was sure that Arthur was zeroing in on him alone to pick on lately. To everyone
else now, he behaved like the perfect king; Gwen appeared to have at last scared off, prattish
Prince Arthur. But with Gwaine... he knew there was something there, and more than that, he
thought he knew what it was.

He sighed yet again and slunk lower against his pillar, waiting for this latest ordeal to begin, just so
that it could be over. Truth be told, he’d lost interest five minutes after he arrived.

Arthur and Gwen sat down on their thrones, and Arthur, abruptly and sternly the king again,
nodded toward Leon who was stationed alertly by the door, also clad in his mail and thick, red
cloak, poor, poor bastard. Leon nodded in his turn toward someone else – Gwaine rolled his eyes –
and the doors were finally, grandly opened. The nodding began again, this time to unseen people
in the outer hall, and at last, after a minute or so of still, quiet waiting, a small procession began to
make its way into the room and toward the throne.

It was a less than grand group; the three bearded men at the head of it were dressed with little
ostentation in dark robes and followed by others equally humbly clad, bearing chests and bundles
presumably stuffed full of gifts for the royal couple. They looked in truth more like simple
travellers than a group of court diplomats, but then Rheged was a very long distance away and the
envoys had travelled for many weary weeks to reach Camelot to greet the king and his queen.

No one remembered such an expedition before, in fact no one remembered direct diplomatic
contact before, and given the state of war Camelot and the other kingdoms had come to endure at
the hands of the Saxons, and Morgana and Mordred’s perpetual enmity, no potential new ally could
be ignored. Especially not one such as this.

Gwaine had travelled far in his years, to more than a few lands, but he’d never even got near
Rheged, though he’d heard such tales of it, of it’s quiet wealth and security, all tied to devotion to
the Old Religion. Many Druids here may have been driven to hatred of Camelot, in the West
country they may have been all but wiped out, but in Rheged… in Rheged, magic was supposed to
be as everyday as water and bread, and magic users were treasured, so stories went.

The most powerful sorcerors in Albion and beyond – the most powerful in the known world - lived
there, it was said. And now, Rheged had come to Camelot.

Despite himself, Gwaine found his exhausted interest sparked awake again, and for the hundredth
time since he’d woken that morning, he wished Merlin were here on time.
The small group stopped in front of the thrones at last, clearly in Gwaine’s vision, and bowed low, as those in the rear moved forward to place caskets and golden bundles at Arthur’s feet.

“Please,” Arthur said graciously and warmly, “Stand and be welcome. Camelot is honoured to greet the envoys of a kingdom of such legendary wealth and prowess.”

The men straightened gracefully, and seemed to take in Arthur at last.

Gwaine supposed, with a kind of unwelcome pride, that the Princess did look the part; all golden hair and perfect features and broad shoulders, clad in Pendragon red. And the crown topping off the picture of course. He did look, Gwaine acknowledged reluctantly, sort of…godlike. If you didn’t know him.

The man in the centre of the group certainly seemed to think so. He bowed his head and raised it again in quiet acknowledgement, a look of awe – perhaps, Gwaine thought sulkily, diplomatic awe - on his face. He looked thrilled to be there.

At last he spoke, a gush of low, liquid syllables, and the man beside him bowed in his turn. He, like all his fellows, Gwaine thought, looked oddly neither young nor old; his face, above his close-cropped beard, smooth and tanned and unlined, yet somehow, not at all youthful.

‘Your Majesty honours us,” the translator said, voice low, mellow. “We are unforgivably tardy in this matter, my lord, but we beg to present our gifts…humble as they are ... in honour of your great kingship, and your union.”

Arthur smiled and inclined his head. “Again my lords, I’m honoured.”

Another bow, more smiles, and more translated whispers, back and forth. Arthur relaxed, and glanced at Gwen. Her lips twitched in acknowledgement, before she smiled warmly at the delegation, every inch the queen. Yet Gwaine noted that the men’s clever eyes did not waver from Arthur’s face. The translator inclined his head respectfully again.

“My King bid my lord Myrthryn of his court, bring these tokens of his respect and regard, Your Majesty, and his wish to consider friendship between you.” Arthur’s small smile widened and the man hurried on unctuously. “Even in our far distant land of Rheged, we have heard the great tales of Camelot’s golden king and his beautiful and powerful warlock, and we seek to honour you.”

Silence, stretching for a moment, two…. not yet awkward, but still, clearly thrumming with wrongness.

Arthur’s smile fixed and held; the whole room somehow frozen in puzzlement, the delegation waiting with a kind of dignified excitement, and Gwaine… Gwaine was suddenly close to losing it completely to a fit of unmanly giggles.

It was just…Arthur’s face…as if the much-anticipated delegation from Rheged had turned without warning and farted at him.

His noble queen apparently ignored, and Gwaine thought, with a kind of mean, half-ashamed glee, the eternally undervalued Merlin, described to Arthur himself in these terms of awed respect.

*Camelot’s beautiful warlock,* famed afar as surely as the mighty King Arthur himself.

And Merlin was beautiful, Gwaine thought fiercely - a strange, coltish, fey beauty. And he was brave. And clever. And as sweet and good at heart as a honeycomb melting in the sun of summer. And Gwaine hurt with him.
Because Arthur had never really seen any of that clearly… Merlin’s worth … not even when they’d been relatively, if dysfunctionally, close. Before Merlin’s magic was finally revealed.

Not even when Gwaine’d first met them, an odd couple in a tavern brawl. And the years after, when they were free to be prince and then new king and less than obsequious manservant… not even then, when Merlin had appeared the closest Arthur’d ever had to a true friend, had Arthur seemed able to see Merlin’s matchless worth, or his devotion.

Gwaine had never been able to understand it, even before he knew of Merlin’s magic himself… such willful blindness to something that seemed obvious to anyone with a brain. He knew, all the knights knew, that Arthur had truly valued Merlin; in some ways, Gwaine had seen from the first, he’d needed him, but he’d seemed utterly incapable of admitting it to himself or showing it to Merlin in any but the most oblique way.

It wasn’t even a royal thing… a class thing; Arthur had proven he was quite capable of seeing past the low birth of servants and peasants; of elevating them and showing them respect, but that had been reserved for Gwen and his peasant knights.

To Arthur it seemed, for all those long years, Merlin could never be more than he was, however wise and loyal. He could never be more than a peasant who could not fight, and therefore, eternally, a servant. A king’s servant, but a servant, treated with Arthur’s weird kind of affectionate, possessive contempt, leavened at the end only by Gwen’s influence.

That, while Merlin was his manservant, had been the mystery of Arthur: he’d relied on Merlin more than any other person in his life, as friend and follower and gadfly and conscience, yet never seemed able to acknowledge it.

Now of course Arthur had no choice but to see Merlin’s true worth, Merlin’s role in his life; his power. And, yes, Merlin had his reward for it. Eventually. When Arthur’d finally pulled his big head out of his own arse.

Merlin sat again at the king’s right hand, as Arthur had placed him the very first time they took their places around the Round Table - but no longer as just a gesture. Now he wasn’t just standing by, serving the others; he was a formal member of Arthur’s council. And any of Uther’s old advisors, or the men vying for position from the courts of the other kingdoms, now seeking Arthur’s ear; anyone who openly questioned Merlin’s elevation to Court Sorcerer and advisor to the king, was quickly and mercilessly set right.

Yet, for all that, for all Arthur had grown and finally allowed Merlin to grow, for all that Arthur may have decided to end his father’s war on magic, may be seeking to mend the fences Uther had destroyed; in his heart, his gut, for all he fought against it, conditioned as his father’s son and Morgana’s much betrayed half-brother, Gwaine believed Arthur still feared and mistrusted all magic and magicians. And Mordred hadn’t helped.

So Arthur’s old affectionate bullying of his manservant, his teasing disdain, had been replaced by a kind of uneasy, unnatural, over-formal tolerance… as if Merlin were no longer Merlin, but some unknown and potentially dangerous animal living among them.

Gwaine would never say it to Merlin himself, but he wondered if that was the most he was ever likely to get from his king. Never Arthur’s unstinting, unqualified admiration, never Arthur’s true respect..

Predictably, as the silence stretched too long in the room, Arthur gave the delegation a kind of ‘lets move on’ smile and inclined his head in necessary acknowledgement of the first statement at least.
“A friendship with His Majesty the King of Rheged would be welcome indeed.” His tone was firm and bland, drawing a line, before any more confusing nonsense was spouted. He turned his head pointedly toward Gwen and put his hand on hers, “But I’m remiss. Allow me to introduce to you, my queen, Guinevere of Camelot.”

The expression on the translator’s face didn’t change from benign warmth, and yet somehow his bewilderment was clear. His small smile stretched to politeness though, and he turned to murmur to the man beside him.

Myrthryn, Gwaine thought avidly.

Myrthryn listened and a small frown appeared on his brow. His eyes darted to Gwen as if seeing her properly for the first time, the splendid velvet gown embroidered with golden thread; the gorgeous, bejewelled band on her head, her twin throne, Arthur’s hand on hers. Hard to miss really.

Myrthryn barely moved in reaction, yet he seemed somehow to still; a diplomat on unexpected ground. He spoke quietly to the translator, the syllables liquid and beautiful.

“My lord Myrthryn begs pardon, Your Majesty,” the translator said carefully, “Our land is far distant from yours and our customs it seems are different. Perhaps, the tale became confused in the telling.”

Arthur’s expression moved to polite if puzzled acceptance, but there was no doubt that there had been a hiccough in the diplomatic exchange; the question thrumming silently but shriekingly around the room... ‘What tale?’

Myrthryn turned his body pointedly toward Gwen and bowed respectfully, the men with him swiftly following his example. His lips moved and the translator nodded. “My lord begs me to tell you that your queen is lovely indeed,” he said.

But it was clear to Gwaine that the strange sense of awe in the men was gone; now they seemed formal and polite. And it was only then, that the point struck home in Gwaine’s mind.

The delegation had come to pour praise and give blessings to Arthur’s reign and marriage; but not, it seemed, his marriage to Gwen.

And inevitably that point was striking home elsewhere too. Gwen was smiling widely as she inclined her head in thanks, and Gwaine could see the amusement there, barely held back.

“Different customs can be very confusing,” she said tactfully, not the slightest sign of the peasant girl of old. Arthur threw her a quick, grateful smile.

Gwaine himself was aware he was actually smirking only when Gwen’s gaze darted across suddenly and shockingly, to meet his own. Her brows rose minutely in complicity before she looked back at the diplomats from Rheged.

“Forgive me my lords, but would it be fair to say that you expected to find King Arthur wed to … his sorceror?”

Gwaine felt his eyes bug, before his smirk widened to a huge, white grin. Now there was the peasant girl, everything out in the open, and the reason Arthur had chosen the right queen. She, at least, was still Merlin’s friend.

Arthur’s face, Gwaine noted with delight, was flushed pink and he was all but scowling, the exchange between Gwen and Gwaine himself, he realised, duly noted.
Myrthryn though, once he understood, seemed to look at Gwen with a new focus. As he spoke, his eyes didn’t leave her.

“My lord Myrthryn again begs your forgiveness, your Majesty,” the translator said blandly.

Gwen shook her head slightly and her mischievous smile gentled. “Truly there’s nothing to forgive. But I’m interested in the customs of Rheged, my lords. Are men there permitted to marry each other?”

Something stilled in Gwaine’s heart. Arthur, he noted vaguely, had gone from pink to red.

Myrthryn listened to the translation but suddenly he spoke directly to Gwen. His voice was soft, heavily accented and he was, perhaps, less than fluent, but he was mesmerising.

“You are gracious my lady. And …yes… in the Old Religion by which Rheged lives, all people may wed, each to the other, as their hearts call them. It has always been so. But…” he bowed his head slightly. “That is clearly not the way of Camelot .”

Gwen smiled, unperturbed and gracious. “No,” she said and she managed to sound neutral. “It’s not our way, though it may once have been.” She hesitated, ignoring the audible intake of breath in the hall, and went on, following the path of logical conclusion, “Is your king then, married to a man?”

Myrthryn’s eyes locked on hers.

“His Majesty’s consort is Lord High Sorcerer to his court.”

Gwaine let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. His emotions were beyond him, but thrumming through them was that one thread of new knowledge: In the Old Religion, men can marry. In all his travels, he hadn’t seen that. He knew he was smirking like a fool.

“So… the king of Rheged always marries the Court Sorcerer?” Gwen tried for clarity.

Myrthryn smiled, eyes warm. “Oh no, my lady. Destiny joined them. But… the union of the power of king and sorceror has proven fortunate indeed for our kingdom.”

Destiny joined them.

It sounded like a figure of speech but it was lovely all the same.

Gwaine was almost shocked when Arthur broke the respectful silence, because he hadn’t expected it of him; he’d thought the king had distanced himself completely from the exchange. But Arthur couldn’t seem to help himself asking the obvious question; the one obsessing any monarch. The one that must be especially obsessing him.

“Your king then…” he hesitated, “Your king has no heirs?”

“My king has two sons, your Majesty,” Myrthryn replied smoothly, “and two daughters. But he is much blessed beyond that, to also have achieved the …” He stopped and seemed to grope for the words, “… the union of his soul.”

There was another short silence, more questions hovering now than had been answered, and it seemed Arthur was realising just how alien the kingdom of Rheged actually was. But Gwen again broke it.

“That sounds… quite beautiful.“ She looked across at Arthur warmly, and he met her eyes, both,
Gwaine thought, probably considering their own bond as just that. “I’ve never heard marriage described quite in that way before, but it’s lovely.”

Her gaze finally returned to Myrthryn and she smiled warmly, so full of charm that Gwaine couldn’t help grinning with her. Beside him, he heard Percival draw a long, deep breath.

Myrthryn smiled too. “My lady,” he acknowledged, then seemed to hesitate again, as if he wondered whether to continue. “The bond shared by my king and his consort though, goes beyond simple marriage. It’s a union so powerful, once realised…once consummated in magic… it lives forever. Past death.”

Well, Gwaine thought, wincing, that’s pissed all over Arthur’s world-beating romance.

But Gwen simply allowed her wide smile to fade to a kind of fascinated frown.

“That’s possible?” she asked softly. “You can use magic to…?” she trailed off.

“Such unions are very, very rare my lady, and only between creatures of magic. My king and my lord found their destiny while they were still boys, many years ago. Their souls were…” He frowned and seemed again to struggle for the word, “meant…” He shook his head, apparently impatient with the limitations of his fluency. “They were… halves … of a much greater whole. They are …two sides of a coin. They could choose others of course; they can choose other, lesser bonds, as indeed my king has done with the mother of his children… but they know that only with their union, locked eternally by magic, can they be whole and complete in this life, as… in others. They were destined to be so… to be thus… and they would not fight it. They are all to each other.”

Gwen’s lips parted as if she wanted to speak, but no words emerged. She looked captivated.

“An interesting tradition,” Arthur said. His voice sounded harsh and overloud in the hushed hall. “Perhaps we can speak of it and other matters, at greater length when we dine.”

He smiled politely but the hint was very clear, and Myrthryn took it, with a deep bow. The whole delegation seemed to take a step back.

“We are honoured, Your Majesty,” he said. Then, “But…may I ask…? My lord… Merlin…?” Arthur stared at him, frowning, but the urgency in the man’s voice was compelling. “Tales of his power have reached us. That Emrys has come among us, and we should have lived to see it…”

Emrys. Gwaine knew how uneasy that name still made Merlin, though he tried not to show it openly– as if he were some kind of god of magic, of their religion. He’d accepted it and used it, in his fights against Morgana and Mordred, in any fight where Arthur needed him, but sometimes he tried to explain to Gwaine why he was absolutely sure there had to be a mistake.

To Gwaine, the Rhegedian honestly appeared to be more anxious and besotted by the idea of Merlin than he’d been by Arthur’s gorgeous golden reality. He could imagine how pissed off Arthur must feel about that.

“Merlin is on an embassy for me,” Arthur said smoothly, eyes narrowed. “He’s expected to return within a matter of days.” Gwaine could hear the slight dismissiveness; almost see the thought ‘Let’s see how beautiful you think he is when you see those ears’. But Myrthryn beamed as if Arthur had promised him treasuries of gold.

That evening, at the first great feast for the delegates from Rheged, Mythryrn sat on Arthur’s right with his interpreter; Gwen, as ever, on his left, and Gwaine sat with his fellow knights, next to Percival again, close enough to watch but not hear. But his spirits were light, and he and Leon
between them managed to cheer up the sombre Percival.

After the first pleasantries, Gwaine noted that Arthur seemed focused intensely on his conversation with Mythryrn and Mythryrn in turn looked nowhere but at the young king of Camelot. Gwaine, as he sank deeper into his cups though, thought that it didn’t look to be a particularly enjoyable exchange, judging by Arthur’s expression. He looked…Gwaine fancied he looked almost shaken at times, eyes fixed, brooding on some invisible point, one hand twirling the stem of his goblet; the fingers of the other hand pressed tight across his mouth as he listened, frowning, to his guest. At times Gwaine thought, he looked as if what he heard disturbed him.

Then, out of the blue, as Gwaine slumped in his seat, mellow and happy, Arthur’s eyes snapped over for no reason and met his own. The hardness there was almost enough to sober him. Almost. But he was becoming used to it now.

He was pretty sure Arthur hadn’t liked his romantic relationship with Merlin from the very start, though he’d never tried to interfere; didn’t believe perhaps that his knight should be consorting with…fucking…a sorcerer, even one Arthur himself had raised to the council.

Maybe it was the openness of it - because neither of them hid, since two men together, in love even, wasn’t exactly unprecedented. It was far from the social ideal of course – even Arthur and Gwen didn’t meet that – but there were enough of the old ways left even in Camelot to allow it without active persecution.

In truth Arthur’s chilliness to he and Merlin made no sense really, but then, maybe in some well-hidden part of him Arthur actually missed the closeness of friendship he’d lost. Or maybe he believed Merlin would yet betray them all and turn Gwaine into a frog in the process. Gwaine could never work out if that bit of extra force in Arthur’s arm against him at training now, came from protectiveness of him, or jealousy of him.

He met Arthur’s eyes without a flinch, and raised his glass, smiling, and he fancied Arthur knew very well what he was thinking.

*His* faith in Merlin was unshakeable.

Men could marry in the Old Religion.

Merlin could be his, as surely as Gwen was Arthur’s.

When Arthur dropped his gaze and turned his attention back with new intensity to Myrthyrn, it felt to Gwaine like victory.

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“Gwaine… I just… I don’t know that it’s such a great idea. I mean it’s lovely and everything but… Arthur. He’s sort of turning a blind eye to us at the moment but…”

“Merlin…” Merlin turned his head on the pillow and gazed limpidly at Gwaine. It usually worked. “And don’t try those cow eyes either. It’s not up to him who I marry, or you marry, or anyone marries…”

“Well…actually…”

“We’re not important enough,” Gwaine dismissed and rolled onto his side to face him, all the better to direct the force of his will at his road-weary, shagged-out lover.
Merlin hadn’t even managed to wash the grime of the road from his body before Gwaine was there in the room with him, throwing out his manservant, backing him up against the wall of his chambers for a desperate, yearning kiss. Which led to a slow, erotic removal of his clothes and then a desperate fuck bent over the side of his mattress. His wonderful, soft feather mattress which was now moulding ecstatically to the bruises and aches on his body. The fuck had both helped and made things worse, he thought ruefully; relaxed his muscles no end, but his poor arse…already aching from days on horseback…

‘Aw…Is your little bottom sore?’

Merlin blanked that old surge of nostalgia with automatic and brutal efficiency. Those days were long past.

“Merlin? Are you even listening? I’m trying to be romantic.” Merlin mmmed an encouraging sound, eyes delightfully closed at last. “Merlin!” He jerked back from the slow, drifting slide of sleep. “Look, he’s doin’ his best to mend fences properly with the Druids, isn’t he? And he wants a relationship with Rheged? He has to show he’s happy to accept the Old Religion too. So he can’t reject a custom like that, can he?”

Merlin sighed inwardly.

It made sense, he knew. But Arthur was Arthur. He wasn’t sure Gwaine still quite understood what that meant. The idea though… the idea of being married… wanted that way so much, that someone like Gwaine would want him for good...

Once, years before, he’d longed for it with Freya, but a marriage of fugitives, with the responsibility of their fate in his hands would have been very different from this - what Gwaine was offering. A union of equals in their different ways, both with a role to play in the new Camelot and the new Albion.

And yet…it seemed like tempting fate…provocation… rocking the boat when things were going fine. Or as fine as they could be.

He turned his head, looking sadly at the bathtub standing empty near his bed. Bran hadn’t managed to even begin to fill it before being hustled out the door by a ferociously horny Gwaine. He’d protested loudly of course, for effect, while all but cooing over them as he was propelled from the room.

Merlin often thought that if his mother had been a man, and extremely sarcastic, she’d have been not unlike Bran.

‘Go on Merlin! Don’t be such a big …girl!’

He closed his eyes again, his lips turning up slightly in a kind of sad smirk. He missed it bitterly, that strange, close relationship with Arthur, when Arthur had trusted him and treated him like dirt in equal measure.

He sat up slowly, wincing. There was a lot to do before he could actually sleep, and he was running away. He knew it, and so did Gwaine. He closed his eyes, sighed, and opened them again, turning his head to look down at the naked man lying beside him.

Gwaine looked unhappy and brooding, and it made Merlin feel appallingly guilty; that he’d basically taken Gwaine’s excited, romantic suggestion that they tie their lives together formally, and picked it apart. He sighed again.
He’d been at court too long, he thought; around the Pendragons for too long.

He reached a hand down and stroked Gwaine’s smooth upper arm.

Gwaine looked lovely, stretched out in Merlin’s bed, long hair tangled, sweat still glistening on his slender, well-muscled torso. He was a man who could charm and bed just about anyone he wanted and before Merlin, he generally had… yet, here he was, offering everything - his heart - to Merlin.

He’d been desperate when he’d barrelled into Merlin’s rooms, muttering about months with just his right hand, and having to watch Arthur and Gwen floating around in a haze of smug unity.

Just the idea that Gwaine, who could have anyone, had waited for him…

“I need to think about it. Is that alright? Can you give me a bit of time?”

Gwaine’s expression softened at once, too quickly, Merlin thought with amusement, but then Gwaine had long since worked out a Strategy To Manage Merlin, or so Leon had once drunkenly confided.

At last he got up and wandered to the bowls of water set on a table near his clothing cupboard, spelled them to the perfect temperature, and wearily began to wipe the grime and sweat and semen from his body before carefully beginning to shave off the light beard scruff he’d grown on the road.

But he couldn’t stop worrying at it.

He thought nervously that their best hope if they really did it – tried to wed- would be Gwen. He’d always hoped that somehow she could change things, work her own magic on Arthur to loosen his suspicion of Merlin’s power. Of course even Gwen had changed quite a bit over the years; become more … more queenly as time and the war went on, and then… what Morgana had done to her…. But it had been happening even before she and Arthur married really; she hadn’t been the giggling, tongue-tied girl he’d conspired with for longer then he could clearly remember. But Merlin could understand that. How difficult must it have been, to be a peasant preparing to transform into a queen? And, she’d still been his friend, even after she settled perfectly into her role, and he was still just a servant; she’d still treated him like a confidante at times, shamed Arthur into treating him a bit better. His magic had been… a major blip on the road for them, but she’d forgiven him his years of lies and never turned her back on him. And she’d never shown any disapproval of his relationship with Gwaine.

He chewed on his lip as he wiped himself down quickly and efficiently, trying to prepare himself mentally for the evening ahead. To focus.

Bran had told him what was still expected of him: that he must report to the king before the evening’s banquet, where he would meet with the delegation from Rheged.

And actually, much as he was dreading another stiff, awkward audience with Arthur, the thought of the feast afterwards really excited him, though he’d have sworn when he all but fell off his horse at the main door, that nothing could have done that tonight. In truth he hadn’t exactly been sleeping well during his embassy to the Druids.

This was Rheged though… a kingdom which had never veered from the Old Religion; where magic had always been honoured and nurtured. How would that be?

The thought of it propelled him into the fine clothing laid out for him on his chair, watched all the time by Gwaine’s warm, lustful eyes.
How much they may know, these men of Rheged? And they might even share some of it with Merlin, if they didn’t view Arthur Pendragon’s pet sorcerer, as a traitor to his people.

Merlin sighed and pulled down his tunic, guts beginning their uneasy, nervous grind at the prospect of explaining to Arthur the outcome of his less than triumphant embassy to the Druids.

He’d made progress, yes, far more progress than he’d personally expected to make in such a short time, and he’d learned so much, talked long into the night. But he knew that wouldn’t be enough.

The Druids, like everyone else, had factions; those who held to peace, learning and gentleness in all things, and those who’d become so embittered by Uther’s genocidal campaign that they’d lost that innocence, and now completely mistrusted and loathed the Pendragon line. And much as it pained Merlin to admit it, that suspicion was justified; Arthur had his own terrible guilt to bear regarding the Druids and all creatures of magic. But the king was so determined… so determined still to make amends, even after Mordred’s ultimate betrayal.

They’d called him Emrys, all the time – ignored his repeated insistence that his name was actually Merlin, which had irritated him to no end - but they never explained the significance of it beyond the idea that everyone was depending on him. Merlin knew they were still holding back vital information; things that they said he would find out in time. It was incredibly frustrating, incredibly frightening to realise they thought he was special when he knew he wasn’t really. But he’d learned a lot, even so.

To Arthur though, who expected everything now, who wanted these loose ends quickly tied, another flank secured, Merlin knew his successes would appear trivial. And he could hardly recount his campaign to Arthur, as Arthur could recount his own battles… How could he describe the insanely ambitious magic he’d performed, to impress the Druids?

He hadn’t even known himself when he tried, if he could manage it, but he found the thing that seemed to awe them most was doing magic without words, just thinking the thing, willing it. It was something he’d always been able to do under extreme pressure but it had been almost… unconscious. With his growing strength, he was finding that it was easier and easier to control, but the trouble was, he could still never quite tell when it wasn’t going to work as predicted.

Which, to be totally honest with himself, it still didn’t. Occasionally.

But most of the time … well once, trying that magic with the Druids, he’d thought the power would destroy him in wielding it . But he’d amazed himself in the end. And it had been good, healing…. using his magic again for peace, rather than destruction.

He couldn’t exactly share that euphoria with Arthur though, not when the king viewed magic as he now clearly viewed Merlin… as a weapon he mistrusted, but may need to utilise.

Merlin bit his lip and clenched his fists, preparing himself.

It was ironic; when he’d started as Arthur’s manservant he couldn’t have cared less if Arthur got annoyed with him, if he thought he was crap at his job, because he didn’t really want to be a manservant for anyone. But now…now he desperately wanted to show himself worthy of the role he’d been given; the trust Arthur had shown in him.

It was all so different.

And he’d wanted this, hadn’t he, for all those years? That Arthur should finally see him for who he was; appreciate that he was more than a loyal clown, the worst manservant in the world, who even
so sat up all night to write his speeches so Arthur would see he had a brain?

And now he had respect. He wasn’t still in exile, he wasn’t in the castle dungeons; he was on Arthur’s council at last after being discounted and mocked and overlooked for so long. Gaius had ceremonially given him his seat at Arthur’s right hand at the new Round Table; Gwen sat on his left. And Arthur was meeting his destiny, acknowledged by the major kingdoms of Albion as the inspired leader they needed to survive the savage war machine of the Saxons.

But right now… right now Merlin wished that he still had that stupid feathered hat, just so he could stick it on his head and maybe get Arthur to mock him - smirk that superior, triumphantly wicked smirk. Find the prattish prince; the disdainful, arrogant, almost-friend he’d first known, rather than the distant, serious, careful king he was about to meet.

“He’s just flesh and blood, you know.”

Gwaine’s voice cut sharply into his self-flagellation. Merlin could hear the edge to it. But he was aware that Gwaine veered close sometimes to resenting Merlin’s continued focus on Arthur, even after Arthur had reacted so badly and still so warily to his magic. But it was in his blood now; in his bones, that driving need to see Arthur safe and happy. It had almost finished him, when Mordred had been at Arthur’s side in Camelot; the obsession with trying to stave off a future only he had seen, Arthur's death on Mordred's sword. It had sucked all the laughter, all the joy out of him; driven him on and on to panic and stupidity, staggering alone through a tunnel of desperation and fear. His moroseness then, he knew, had probably driven he and Arthur further apart, because how could Arthur know that Merlin's grief was for him?

But, Merlin supposed wearily, it wasn't as if he and the king had been all that close even before that, what with Arthur’s ever deepening reliance on his wife and his knights. He’d lost the last of his innocence after Arthur regained Camelot for the second time and married Gwen. After that, Merlin had been forced to see painfully - and Mordred’s time at Arthur’s side had confirmed it - that for all they’d been through together, for all he’d done for Arthur, and for all the moments Arthur had still let him in, still let him see he cared, still kept him by his side at all times, he would always essentially be a servant in his eyes. And however often he’d been proven right, Arthur still trusted others rather than listening to him.

Morgana, Agravaine, Mordred; it had seemed to become more and more belittling, more undermining, more threatening as the stakes raised each time. Only his magic had given him worth or status, in the end. He’d grown up a lot since then. Let go of stupid ideas of equal friendship between princes and peasants.

Unless they fell in love with you of course, he thought wryly.

Well… it had worked for Gwen.

He shook his head impatiently.

This was beyond ridiculous. He needed to get a grip.

Arthur had restored magic to the kingdom hadn’t he? Fulfilled Merlin’s greatest, most hopeful dream? Trusted him enough, even as a servant, to accept Excalibur, honed by the breath of a dragon, pulled at Merlin’s urging, and with his secret magic, from stone? He’d listened to Merlin's advice sometimes. He’d kept him by his side always, until his magic was revealed. He’d cared a lot in his own way.

Merlin drew a deep breath and managed a cheeky grin for Gwaine.
“I know. ‘S just… he’s probably expecting I’ve brought a paper with every Druid’s allegiance written in blood.”

He’d go to Arthur, endure his distant disappointment, then hurry to the banquet. And after…well maybe, if he had the energy, there could be time with Gwaine as well, to remind himself that he was still young, still a man, still flesh and blood and bone.

He kissed Gwaine goodbye in his bed, left his room quietly, and set out for the king’s unofficial quarters in the West Wing of the castle, where he worked and occasionally slept when he wasn’t with Gwen.

As well as the ones they shared, the king and queen, like all royal couples, had their own chambers, because their separate schedules could require them - particularly Arthur - to receive visitors and come and go at all hours. Gwen had Arthur’s mother’s old rooms for her own use, which showed, Merlin thought again, how very much Arthur loved and trusted her. But, Arthur and Gwen slept in the same chambers more often than not, in Arthur’s old rooms; the ones Merlin had known so well. Sharing a bed that often was unusual for royalty apparently - or so Gwaine said - but Merlin supposed it proved their closeness and comfort with each other.

The guard outside the king’s door looked at Merlin sideways as he knocked, but Merlin was used to that now, even if it still stung …that half superstitious fear in their eyes after years of being told magic was the epitome of evil. And all that fear was now directed at him.

He straightened as the door opened almost at once, and the king’s manservant, William, nodded coolly, as he slipped outside and away. It was to be a private audience then.

Merlin took a deep breath, and entered, the weird familiarity hitting him at once, because the layout of the rooms was very similar to Arthur’s old chambers. They could indeed be prince and manservant again. Except then, he hadn’t knocked.

Arthur was standing by the window, leaning against it, gazing out, arms folded across his broad chest. He was dressed casually in his loose white tunic and simple brown trousers, barefoot, not ready for the banquet at all.

For all his years of struggle and leadership, he looked young and golden and as he turned to face Merlin, oddly brooding; Merlin’s prince and king clashing.

"Merlin." Arthur inclined his head briefly, in greeting. He was frowning.

Merlin carefully returned his restrained nod. “Your Majesty,” he said soberly. And oh, he thought for the millionth time, things had certainly changed.

‘Arthur,’ the conversation went in his head, ‘There’s kind of good news and bad news…”

But what emerged was, nervously, “Sire. I’ve made some progress…”

Arthur waved him to silence.

Merlin opened his mouth again, then closed it, waiting for a signal. He loathed this.

Arthur pursed his full mouth consideringly, frowning even more deeply now, still studying Merlin with that cool gaze. Judging him; finding him, Merlin supposed, wanting, as ever, but now far too measured to say such a thing to his Court Sorceror.

Instead, with a small, sour moue, he walked to the table and sat in his chair, set at the end, picking
up the goblet in front of it. He flopped back and gestured Merlin shortly to sit in the other chair at
the table’s side.

Merlin swallowed and scuttled forward, sat gingerly, and looked at the full goblet of wine sitting
there prepared for him.

“Drink,’” Arthur said. His voice was hard and it sounded like an order, not an invitation, so Merlin
did, a small careful sip. Once he would have launched again spontaneously into an account of his
doings; now he waited for a cue. It felt odd though, this strange sense of hostility; it had been so
long since Arthur had shown him any strong emotion.

The silence stretched.

“Have you been back long?”

Merlin cleared his throat. “Er no… no. Um… Sire. I mean, I just had time to change and…”

“So. You haven’t seen Gwaine?”

Gwaine?

Merlin frowned, totally at a loss now, and worried.

Had Arthur somehow got wind of Gwaine’s plan? Was he unhappy that one of his knights should
think to wed under the Old Religion and to a warlock? Put like that…he could see it might be an
issue.


Arthur’s jaw clenched and he glared down at the table, long fingers twirling his goblet stem,
turning it round and round on the table. His thoughts seemed to be angering him; in fact to Merlin’s
nervous eyes, he looked close to homicidal, and it was a long time since he’d seen Arthur like that.
But for long seconds the awful silence ticked on.

“Tell me…” Arthur’s mouth seemed to twist and Merlin’s apprehension rocketed aloft and took
wings. The king’s voice sounded harsh, older suddenly, and Merlin opened his mouth to do just
that, as if compelled…

Tell him…Arthur … all about Gwaine’s insane lovely determination; about this… *dream* that they
should wed? Admit that he, Merlin, was actually kind of considering it; the concept of being loved
that much, of not having to be alone? Considering throwing both of them on Arthur’s mercy, as
idiots in love. Well, it was worth a try? But he didn’t get the chance.

“You told me… after you.. returned…” Merlin’s eyes snapped to Arthur’s, startled, and he closed
his mouth. “You told me what the Great Dragon said to you. At the start.” Arthur scowled down at
the goblet, moving it relentlessly between his long fingers. “About… destiny. Mine. And…yours.”
He seemed to force his eyes up to meet Merlin’s by an act of will. Merlin stared speechlessly back.
“Repeat it again. What he said. The Great Dragon. His exact words.”

It was an order again, hard, relentless, no question of it, but Arthur, to Merlin’s eyes, was bracing
himself for the reply.

Merlin stared at him, guts really churning now with worry. It was more than a sore point between
them; Arthur had almost run him through when he’d admitted he’d set the dragon free. Twice. And
then... the White Dragon...
Merlin could still see Arthur’s look of disgust, of betrayal, barely lessened by Merlin’s babbling excuses.

“The… um… the dragon…?” he croaked, but the withering stare he received was familiar enough of old to gather his wits. He tried to think. What had the dragon said, word for word? ‘You cannot hate that which makes you whole?’ Yeah, he thought he’d skip that one. But the gist of it…

“He said… well… at the start, that it was my destiny to… to stand with you, protect you… and help you become a great king and… unite… Albion.” He trailed off.

Arthur’s jaw clenched. He was glaring into the goblet again, still twisting the stem back and forth between his strong fingers, as if the wine within was showing him grim, unwanted things. Merlin stopped.


What else? Merlin’s mind began to blank.

So many things, but they’d all been at the beginning, in his first months in Camelot. It was so long ago.

“Well, he helped me… advised me what to do… at times… When there were magical attacks… on Camelot, I mean… on you. Or your father. He did help a lot… really… with the Questing Beast for one… and The Black Knight… the Dorocha… Agravaine, Mordred…” He stopped. Arthur’s eyes stayed fixed on his own hands and Merlin could see yet again that all the things he, Merlin, had done in all that time, the horrible, terrifying choices he’d had to make alone, hidden in the shadows, all for Arthur, were viewed now by Arthur himself with disgust. Unworthy acts of betrayal. But he plodded on, grimly. It seemed a lack of gratitude was to be his eternal lot with Arthur, prince or king. “Near the start he said… he said I was… one side of a coin… and… you… were the other,” he said finally, defiantly into the frigid silence. “That we were bound and set together by destiny. Two halves of a…” his voice slowly petered out, “…whole.”

It sounded ludicrous now. Pitiful.

Merlin looked down at his own goblet and raised it shakily to his lips, gulped too large a mouthful of the king’s good wine, but the burning of the liquid in his throat helped him bite back his emotion.

He looked up again bravely and met Arthur’s burning stare.

But when he looked into those hard, searching eyes, he was stunned by the depth of feeling he saw there, and he couldn’t hope to untangle it.

Merlin took a deep involuntary breath, felt his own eyes widen, startled and wary, and he realised abruptly that, whatever had happened in his absence, whatever he’d thought this might be about, he was lost. Totally out of his depth. He felt like a rabbit caught in the sights of a crossbow.

“Arthur?” he asked nervously and then caught himself, “Sire?”

Arthur’s mouth worked and he swallowed hard.

“A delegation arrived from Rheged two days ago.”

Merlin blinked, totally lost now. “Yes,” he said, cautiously, voice hushed. “Bran told me I was to meet them tonight.” Arthur frowned impatiently, as if trying to place the name, so Merlin was
forced to mutter embarrassedly, “My… manservant.”

He registered the quick ironic quirk of Arthur’s lips with a kind of desperate nostalgia.

“Right,” Arthur said gravely, turning away from the open target as Merlin’s Arthur never would have done. He loosed the stem of his goblet and drummed his fingers on the table, then abruptly he stopped the movement. “You know how invaluable an alliance with Rheged could be. They came to pledge friendship. And to bring gifts to celebrate my marriage. Very belatedly, of course.” His eyes stayed fixed on his own hand. “The thing is…” His mouth thinned, “they arrived believing I’d married you.”

Merlin stilled. It took him whole seconds to begin to understand, and then shock blanked his mind. He realised his mouth had dropped open and he couldn’t stop it.

Arthur lifted his goblet and took a savage swig of wine, blue eyes blazing angrily over the rim.

“I…” Merlin began helplessly, but he didn’t truly know what to say, and he could feel the flush of nervousness on his face heating and deepening into the crimson stain of desperate embarrassment. The immediate, instinctive thought that Arthur was joking, setting him up, died stillborn in seconds; those days were long past. And Arthur wasn’t a good enough actor to feign this seething upset.

Merlin found he was trying as hard as he could not to picture the scene, and all he could feel at first was a huge, unnerving gratitude that he hadn’t been present when that little gem was revealed.

Had it been in front of everyone? All the knights? The nobility? Why hadn’t Gwaine warned him?

Then, guilt, ridiculous, automatic guilt set in, as the things he’d heard murmured among the Druids, heard and instantly filed away… easily, relentlessly ignored as irrelevant to him, all suddenly flashed back, horribly threatening. And there was a horrible, automatic sense of responsibility too, that ambassadors of magic had so embarrassed Arthur in front of his own court.

He wondered then, still half stunned, why Arthur was telling him at all. Was he meant to laugh? Apologise?

“I’ve talked to their leader, over the last two days,” Arthur went on steadily, still staring hard at Merlin like an insect on a pin, as if somehow, as ever, he was being held to blame. “Myrthyn. That’s his name.” Arthur drew a deep, deep breath; released it slowly. “Their king and his court sorceror are… bound. Wed.” He bit the word off distastefully. Merlin looked back at him numbly; wide-eyed, waiting, horrified. “They had heard…” Arthur grimaced and swallowed, “Believed…”

Merlin couldn’t bear it any more.

“Well, that would explain it then!” he blurted, all desperate overdone cheer, “They just got… confused… Their customs aren’t ours. Thankfully!”

Was Arthur trying to prepare him for the mockery of the court? Warning him, from some left over friendship? What? Merlin’s heart was racing, skittering like a mouse on a wheel.

He found he was grinning desperately, a pitifully false attempt at camaraderie.

Arthur didn’t return it.

“Yes,” Arthur bit out with cold precision, “That’s what he said at first… before the court.” He
threw his head back suddenly, his strong, smoothly tanned neck stretched before Merlin’s eyes, Adam’s apple bobbing, as he sneered at the ceiling. “Forgive us… Our customs are different…” He dropped his head again and stared at Merlin for long, angry seconds. “But I spoke to him. Later. And the day after. Did you know that we were foretold? Merlin. You and I? Did your dragon tell you that?”

Merlin drew a sharp breath, the discounted words of Taliesin, of the Druid priests echoing emptily in his head.

“I …told you…” It occurred to him suddenly, stupidly, that he and Arthur were talking like people again, as they used to, but it didn’t sober him enough to stop. He was beyond that. “He said… the dragon said…”

“Two sides of a coin. Yep. Funnily enough that’s exactly how…exactly how Myrthryn described it too… his king’s bond with his sorceror. It’s what caught me first. Those … exact… Words.”

Arthur took a deep draught of wine, and his voice sounded even more displeased when he’d swallowed, his eyes trained again on the goblet as he set it on the table. “He very graciously gave me all the gory details when I asked.”

He drew a deep breath through his nose, then let it out in a long, angry sigh.

He looked up and held Merlin’s gaze effortlessly. “A binding of two souls.” Voice somehow accusing, full of suppressed anger. “Destined to be linked; meant… always… to be united… in this life and all that follows. A union of two halves, essential to make a whole, or neither will ever be complete. Set in place by magic. Between creatures of magic. Beyond death. Eternal.”

There was a long, shocked silence when he finished, as Merlin stared back at him, wordless and appalled.

Where was this going?

Arthur looked to him, Merlin realised with a kind of mounting, animal panic, aggressively focussed, the way he’d always seen him before a vital tournament or a battle to the death. The way he’d looked after Merlin had told him about his ancient destiny as the king who would forge Albion forever.

“Arthur…?” Merlin’s throat felt parched. “I don’t…”

“Did you know…? Merlin? Just… neglect to tell me? Again.”

“No! No I didn’t! Arthur!” And he hadn’t. The dragon hadn’t said that. Not like that.

But what he had said…Merlin thought now, mind skittering with fear… He should have known. Looking at it now, Kilgarrah had always more than implied it, hadn’t he …he’d told him over and over that they needed each other to be whole?

‘You cannot truly hate that which completes you.’

How, looking at it now, how could he have ignored the implications of that? But Merlin had ignored it, with perfect ease, hadn’t even thought to look at it that way, blanked it because it was just… ridiculous. And anyway… all the dragon had talked about for years was Merlin’s role as Arthur’s protector whose task to shepherd Arthur safely to his place in history. Nothing more. Merlin had almost forgotten all he was told at the start, until he’d been forced to tell his whole story to Arthur.
“Its just … *their* king though,” he put in desperately, ‘It doesn’t mean… *you.*”

But his gut suddenly knew differently. And so, he was beginning to see, did Arthur.

Those beautiful eyes glared at him, flinty, accusing.

“Myrthryn told me. He explained it all… the legends of the Old Religion.” He pursed his mouth. “You should know them, shouldn’t you?” He looked coldly furious. Raging with accusation and resentment, as if this was somehow his fault. Merlin’s fault. “After all, it’s you and me. Apparently. He said these bonds in magic are incredibly rare anyway. But we’ve been foretold for centuries. That’s what he said. Emrys.” Merlin started, and he knew Arthur had seen it; saw it in the curl of his lips “That’s who he says you are, Merlin. But we knew that. The Awaited One. The greatest warlock ever born,” His steely glare bored into Merlin. “And the Once And Future King who’ll conquer evil with his aid … unite all before him. And defeat the power of death to protect mankind in its greatest need."

Merlin took a gasping breath. “Arthur…” He felt quite terrified and yet he didn’t know why. “I don’t know what …” Then at last, from nowhere, a desperate focus, even if it betrayed all he knew. “Look… It makes no difference. Its just a legend!”

“It’s *your* religion, Merlin! Its magic.” Then, “You *knew*!”

“No! Not… The Druids … well they may have mentioned something about my destiny and maybe… something about it being… tied to the The Once And Future King, but not specifically…”

Arthur stood and threw back his chair in one smooth, violent movement, the scrape of wood on stone shockingly loud in the stillness of the room. He turned and paced to the window, then turned again. He looked ragingly angry now, emotions boiling at the surface, on the edge of violence as he rarely was off the field.

“And were you going to tell me?” He seemed to be fighting to keep his voice level but it was still loud, intimidating. “Or keep it from me, ‘for my own good’ like so many things you’ve hidden? So many things you manipulated me into and away from?” The volume lowered but it sounded no less threatening, just colder. “Can I ever really trust you, Merlin?”

And there it was, what Arthur so clearly felt every time he looked at him, but never voiced aloud any more. What hurt Merlin all the time now, as he hadn’t believed he could hurt: the exchange of what he’d gained - Arthur's knowledge and tolerance - for all he’d lost - Arthur’s blind belief in his loyalty.

Suddenly it was an intolerable rage building and boiling in Merlin’s ears and his head and his blood. All the injustice of it - of all he’d done, all for Arthur, his focus; of all the tears he’d shed for him, all the dark, bitter guilt he bore, all the long overlooked years of fear and mockery and slow rejection, only to climax in this. He pushed back his chair too and jumped to his feet, unable to bear the vulnerability of sitting down a second longer.

“And what was I supposed to say, Arthur? *Exactly*?” Yelling. “If I’d even thought it through myself? Oh I know! I could’ve said… the Druids have this deranged idea that I may be the most powerful sorcerer ever, and without you me you can’t be the greatest king in history! How’s that your *Majesty*? And the Great Dragon says we’re two sides of a coin, so maybe that *really* means we should be bound together! You and me! *Merlin!* That incompetent servant you never wanted or respected and don’t trust! Then there’s the little detail that you don’t trust the Old Religion either and you loathe magic. But… that’s destiny for you! How deep a dungeon would you have shoved me into? *Sire.*”
Arthur stared at him through his rant, silenced. It felt almost like old times. His full mouth tensed, and then his shoulders seemed to slump minutely, anger draining from him almost visibly. He looked away.

He said, slowly, carefully, “You think I haven’t been scratching through it every hour since they came? Trying to find a way not to believe it. But if they’re right, it’s part of it... all of it. You and me. Two halves of a whole.”

“And you know what’s involved?” Merlin asked harshly. “You know what you have to do to form a union like that? It’s not like a friendly agreement. Did your chatty visitor tell you that?”

Arthur looked away, his mouth a twist of distaste.

“Myrthryn said… “ He straightened, flushing. “It’s formed through the force of life. Seed. And magic. To do it... I’d have to take you, and your magic finishes it.”

Merlin stared at him, and his pulse was thundering in his ears like the tide.

Gwen was his friend. And Gwaine was the true knight who’d just laid his heart at his feet. This had to stop.

“This is madness, Arthur!” He said, voice low and sure, even to his own ears, no nonsense. “You have your queen. One day she’ll give you children... Pendragon heirs. And she’s beautiful and kind and brave! She’s the perfect wife; your true love. Even the dragon said so!” Arthur looked at him sharply and Merlin nodded frantically in confirmation, desperate to get through to him somehow. “Yes. That’s how the spell binding you to Lady Vivien was broken! Gwen! You’ve known for years that she was for you! You defied your father; turned your back on political marriages, offered up your throne... hell you handed over Gedref, remember? Just to be with her. You waited years to have her! Just her!” He laughed suddenly, “This is insane! I’ve never ever seen you as...as content as you’ve been since you married! You could have lost her when Morgana took her, but you were lucky! You have your true love. She’s totally yours! And here you are, letting yourself get screwed up listening to insane prophesies from mad old warlocks!”

He ground to a halt eventually, uneasily aware of how over the top that had been. But it was all true. And he was desperate to make Arthur see, to stop this madness before it damaged him...damaged them any more. He was sure Arthur had just needed to be reassured, that was all, and Merlin had years of practice in doing that.

Arthur was looking at him, expression impossible to read. Then he looked away.

“Well. You’re certainly a loyal friend to Guinevere,” he said uncomfortably. His gaze snapped back to Merlin, eyes hard, unreadable. “Or are you just that desperate to run away from this?”

Merlin stared back, shocked into silence. And at last then, the knowledge became real in his head, that Arthur wasn’t just discussing this. This wasn’t some exchange of views.

“I don’t understand,” he said at last and he knew he sounded plaintive, pitiful, lost, very far from a great and legendary sorceror. “I don’t... what do you want me to say?”

“What do you want Merlin?” Arthur countered nastily. “To forget it? See Albion’s ultimate destiny laid out before us, inexorable and ...there... and just ignore it? Like cowards?”

Merlin swallowed hard. He stood tall, urgent, defensive.

“We don’t have to ignore anything, Arthur! Can’t you see that?” and he was pleading now, “I swore
it to you. I’ll stay by your side, protecting you and helping you… or die beside you. It doesn’t have to be more than that. If you try to make it more… we could ruin everything! Think of Gwen … and I …love Gwaine.”

“Are you this…Emrys? Are you sure?” Arthur interrupted harshly. His stare was steel; a challenge.

“Arthur…I don’t… Look, I don’t know. Honestly.” He held out his hands, palms up, in supplication. “The Druids… they keep calling me that… The Cailleach … did…” He hadn’t told Arthur about that before, he realised suddenly; the visions that came to him when Morgana tore the veil between the worlds. Taliesin. The Fisher King. And Mordred… oh don’t forget Mordred…. He hesitated, but all his past dishonesty, all his lies to Arthur, forced his tongue. “I know I’m …different …more powerful than most, because I can do things… do magic without spells and… slow time,” he saw Arthur’s eyes widen slightly – he’d held that bit back when he showed Arthur how strong he was - but he hurried on, “But I don’t know… I don’t feel like some legendary sorceror. A lot of the time I’m sure they’ve got it wrong.”

“You battled Nimueh and killed her.” Arthur’s voice was relentless, low and powerful. “You told me. And all the things you did to help me… over the years…”

All those things you resent me for…

Just then, as if the gods were laughing, a shaft of evening sunlight broke through the window and lit Arthur’s hair to new gold and Merlin thought in that second that he looked like some young warrior god, too beautiful and terrifying for the world. Certainly too great and fine for Merlin. The despair he felt was almost solid in him; a lump in his chest.

“It doesn’t matter! Does it? If I’m Emrys or not! I’m your servant. Any power I find I have… it’s yours! Arthur?! I told you… until the day I die! It doesn’t need to be…”

Arthur moved suddenly, three long paces until he was directly in front of Merlin, still standing defensively in front of the table.

“Or maybe it does, Merlin. Maybe, I want it to be.”

Merlin stared at him, and Arthur glared back, all impatient power. Merlin raised his hands helplessly. He felt like he was losing, losing an important fight.

“What does that…? You’re not a creature of magic!”

“I was born of it. Myrthyrn said that’s enough.”

“I don’t…” Merlin closed his eyes, shook his head, panic making his thoughts thick and slow, like congealing honey.

“I know, Merlin. I know you don’t. And that’s why it’s down to me. I have to choose. I have chosen.”

Merlin stilled. His eyes snapped open to meet Arthur’s, hot and feverish blue, and he felt his breath leave him as violently and effectively as a punch in the guts.

“It’s madness,” he bit out. “Arthur…”

Arthur barked a hard, bitter laugh. “It’s destined, Merlin. They’ve waited for us for centuries. Apparently. It’s not very polite to drag it out any longer, is it?” Merlin shook his head fiercely,
denying, still denying. But it was finally coming to a head. No more jousting. Arthur’s eyes were holding his now effortlessly, like a stoat with a mouse. “Myrthyrn made it crystal clear … all that it means. All that you mean. Now. The future. So. Just as I claimed Camelot, as I claimed Excalibur, I’m claiming you.”

The air in the room seemed to thicken abruptly, heavy with meaning. With power.

Merlin drew a deep, shuddering breath. Because yes, the shocking, visceral knowledge was there in his bones and in his blood, just as Arthur had declared it to be. Merlin belonged to him, was made for him, just as surely as his sword and his father’s kingdom.

“No.” he shook his head dazedly again, “No…” Why did that sound so weak? Arthur’s full lips pushed out to a considering pout but he said nothing as they stood staring at each other and the terrifying silence stretched again. “Don’t I get a say?” Merlin blurted childishly, desperately, at last, nerves shredded.

Arthur’s face softened very slightly, wide mouth quirking into a small, wry, lopsided smile.

“Not really, no.” He said reached out a hand to cup Merlin’s jaw, a first, definitive touch.

Merlin shuddered, and Arthur saw it, taking in his reaction like a hunter judging prey. He seemed to not even consider the possibility that Merlin could easily use magic against him. But then Arthur had demanded that vow from him when he’d made him sorcerer to the court. Merlin hadn’t actually admitted to the times he’d used his power to control Arthur, or get back at him, or all the things Dragoon had done, but when they reconciled he’d sworn on his life and his honour never again to use magic against his lord or upon him without his express permission. How could he now break that solemn bond to Arthur? How?

Yet he had to stop this. Somehow, he knew he had to, but he’d had no time, no time to work out tactics, no time to plan. He closed his eyes tight, firmed his jaw.

“We cant… You think I’ll lie down for this?” And his raging frustration burst out of him. “You don’t even want me! God Arthur. Have you ever even lain with a man?”

Arthur’s expression changed with almost comic speed from focussed intensity to the old patented look of utter disbelief, mouth lifted on one side in a sneer of amazed incredulity, the look he used to employ endlessly when he was about to explain the blindingly obvious to his idiot manservant. As if he couldn’t believe anyone could possibly be that dense.

“I’ve been on campaign, you dolt! I’ve patrolled for months at a time. You really think I’ve never tupped men? Boys?”

Merlin had the feeling that the look he was giving in return was equally familiar to Arthur; he knew he was gaping. But Arthur was absolutely right. That was exactly what he’d thought; he’d just never considered the realities of a soldier’s life, and in his own experience as Arthur’s servant he’d never seen him give another man so much as a second glance. Not even before he fell in love with Gwen.

“But you…I know you!” he persisted with automatic, accusing defensiveness, “You don’t want men!”

“Of course I don’t,” Arthur snapped impatiently, again clearly stating the obvious to the moron. “I mean I don’t …look at them and find them… beautiful or anything.” And Merlin suddenly saw the embarrassment writhing there underneath the familiar sneering front, as clear as paint, because
Arthur hadn’t changed that much, for all his apparent comfort with emotion around Gwen. He hated talking about this kind of thing, and that, as ever, manifested itself in impatience, “I don’t want to…hell to … romance them... or ….lie in bed imagining fucking them. I’m a man for women, I know that. But… of course I’ve bedded men, when it was all that was on offer.”

There was a short, uncomfortable silence.

“Right,” Merlin said flatly at last, and he thought he probably felt as awkward and exposed as Arthur must feel.

It could hardly have been less romantic. Or more honest. At least he’d been honest.

It was totally the Arthur of old, he thought half-hysterically --Merlin’s Arthur, saying bluntly what was in his head without any idea of the effect on another’s emotions.

But the force of Merlin’s disappointment was bewildering and frightening, considering the fact he’d known all of it before... except for the convenient campaign sex of course. And, he was meant to be resisting, wasn't he?

What had he hoped though, deep down?

That Arthur had harboured some secret desire?

He felt the acid burn of angry shame, souring and stabbing in his gut. It was intolerable.

“So that’s the union you want is it?” he spat then, maddened, arms spread wide in furious, provocative mockery. “That’s it? The one fated for centuries? Meant to last for eternity? You’d have to force yourself to lie with me to even complete the union. And… what…? You’d pretend I’m Gwen? Why?? Why even think to do it? Why betray her for that? And Gwaine…”

Arthur’s hand snapped out, snake quick, and grabbed one of Merlin’s gesticulating arms. He looked beyond furious himself.

“It has nothing to do with want. There’s no betrayal. And I’m not having to force myself to do anything, Merlin. There’s men. And then there’s you.”

Merlin stared at him, mouth half open to protest, completely thrown... he wasn’t a man? No betrayal? But Arthur had apparently had enough of talk and resistance. He reached out impatiently, grabbed the back of Merlin’s head and hauled him close, the other hand sliding under his tunic and up his naked back and then he was right there, mouth on Merlin’s startled lips.

Vaguely Merlin had time to think just this: that Arthur had decided before Merlin rode back through the gates of Camelot. That this had been an ambush; that Arthur knew him so well, well enough to push this before Merlin had a chance to work out a way to thwart him. And then just like that, rational thought was gone, wiped out by the fizzing chemistry of that mouth moving on his, overwhelming.

Because... Arthur kissed just as Merlin had imagined he would, and yes somewhere in his deep subconscious he must have imagined it, because there was no surprise.

He was arrogant and in charge, and disturbingly, horribly good at it, moving Merlin as he kissed him, tongue probing against his shocked lips; backing him across the room. Merlin was vaguely aware that he was making tiny noises when Arthur lifted his mouth; dazed, whimpering noises.

The connection between them was terrifying and it seemed as physical as the Druids and the
redoubtable Myrthyrn had suggested it had to be. The terrible, awful rightness of it.

At least to Merlin.

Arthur still had the presence of mind to set about Merlin’s tunic, hauling it roughly over his head with no warning and no ceremony, catching his ears painfully as it went. He was all no nonsense urgency, down to business. Or perhaps he just wanted to get Merlin under him before he started arguing again.

In seconds, Merlin could feel the edge of cold air on the skin of his back and Arthur was less than a foot away, hauling off his own white shirt to show his broad, lightly haired chest. Beautiful, Merlin thought despairingly through his shock and panic. He was so achingly, perfectly beautiful; hair ruffled by his tunic and face set with absolute, cold-eyed determination, a warrior about to enter battle.

They stood glaring at each other for a long moment, like adversaries in the arena, both breathing heavily, naked from the waist up. Merlin was tall and he’d become much broader and well-muscled with manhood, no longer the skinny boy who had come to Camelot, but he still felt almost puny before Arthur. He clenched his teeth, dry-mouthed. And in that long, brutal moment, he realised, with appalled self disgust, that he’d actually become aroused as he’d talked sex and magic and betrayal with Arthur. His cock was as hard as an iron bar in his fine breeches, for all he’d lain with Gwaine not an hour before.

His throat worked with impatient, horrified guilt and he looked away, totally ashamed, to the side. And it was only then, as he registered his surroundings at last, that he realised Arthur's manoeuvring had taken them to the side of his bed.

Merlin looked down at it, completely startled, then up again, mouth open to once again begin a vicious protest, just as a strong, broad hand planted itself in the middle of his chest and shoved hard. Merlin toppled like a felled sapling and before he could bounce on Arthur’s feather mattress, Arthur followed him down, crawling over him, then dropping the whole length of his body down on him. They both froze for a fraught second just like that, heaving for breath, and there Merlin was – lying topless on the king’s bed with Arthur, half naked, on top of him.

Their skin caught and rubbed, and Merlin all but whined. Arthur’s triumphant, narrow-eyed smile though, was enough to stiffen his spine.

He managed a furious, “Arthur!” and began to struggle in earnest, pushing at Arthurs wide, muscular shoulders with the flat of his hands, wriggling like an eel beneath him. But each movement seemed only to make things worse; the lump of his clothed erection rubbing with appalling ecstasy against Arthur’s hard body.

He had to stop after a few useless seconds, heaving for air, sparks going off behind his eyes, and he was barely aware at first of Arthur’s fingers fumbling at the ties of his breeches. And then he was.

It was surreal how fast it was happening; terrifying how fast Arthur was propelling them toward a point of no return.

Panic returned in earnest.

Arthur had let his weight lift to get at Merlin’s laces, and that allowed Merlin freedom to begin to wriggle again, even as Arthur tightened his powerful thighs around his lower body to keep him still. Merlin moaned, and struggled harder, trying to use his forearms and his elbows, but without his magic he knew it was a hopeless match – just like the first time they'd ever met and he blindly
took Arthur on; an ordinary boy up against the best warrior in Camelot, with all his elegant power.

But still, even then, Merlin had been enough to cause trouble.

"Merlin will you …stop…!" Arthur spat and Merlin thought with a kind of hysterical satisfaction that this wouldn’t be his normal experience in bed at all. Gwen would be gentle, adoring, playful maybe, submissive. The thought made him fight harder.

Inevitably though, Arthur outflanked him. He lifted his weight further and allowed Merlin loose long enough to wriggle away up the bed, away from him, but in seconds he pounced again, pinning Merlin’s still-narrow wrists above his head with one big hand while the other groped underneath the pillows to which Merlin had so conveniently taken them. He produced, triumphantly, a short bladed knife.

Merlin froze to panting stillness and Arthur smirked, barely out of breath.

He looked totally in control, Merlin thought wildly. Not angry, just flushed by the struggle and the challenge.

Merlin couldn’t comprehend it – why Arthur wasn’t shaken by what he was doing. Why he seemed so utterly determined to go through with it.

He didn’t let go of Merlin’s hands, but he rolled to one side and deftly slid the blade into the ties of Merlin’s breeches, severing them with one sharp pull as Merlin gasped in shock. Then, still holding Merlin in place, he slid the knife to his own groin and cut his own laces too.

Merlin did the only thing he found he could at that moment. He squeezed his eyes as tightly shut as possible, more horribly turned on than he had ever been in his life.

He barely registered the moment his wrists were released. He held them dazedly where they were as Arthur knelt up, shuffled down the bed and pulled Merlin’s breeches and underclothes down to his boots with one violent tug. And then his boots were off too, cloth following inelegantly in Arthur’s relentless hands. He’d make a lousy manservant, Merlin thought weakly.

He cracked open his eyes to look, and make himself face the fact that, for all his struggles and denial, he was lying stripped bare on Arthur’s bed, with a massive erection, resting swollen and red on his belly.

He watched, heart hammering with panic, as Arthur slid upright to shimmy down his own last pieces of clothing. Then, there he was too, standing magnificently nude and fully aroused. Of course, Merlin thought despairingly, a fight would excite him.

Merlin had glimpsed Arthur without clothes before, of course, many times, though as prince and as king, he’d actually been quite prone to modesty. But Merlin had never allowed himself to look properly. Not really. And he’d certainly never seen his prick standing, though he’d seen enough sometimes to know it would be impressive, just like everything else about Arthur. But he hadn’t been prepared for how lovely it was, perfectly in proportion with his beautiful body, long and thick and a kind of dusky-flushed golden-rose, rising from a nest of dark blond hair.

He looked at Arthur, openly awestruck, as Arthur stared steadily back at him, taking in his own pale, excited nakedness. It didn’t seem to be putting him off.

Arthur was so different to Gwaine; bigger, broader, more muscled, face young and smooth, and all of him it seemed, from the hair on his head to the skin of his feet, golden.
Merlin thought dimly that it made total sense that Gwen had looked at Arthur after their wedding night as if she couldn’t believe he was possible. And that brought him horribly back to reality again.

He had to focus on them.

Gwen and Gwaine. And Arthur. It’d hurt him too, destroy him, if Gwen couldn’t forgive this insanity.

He twisted desperately onto his front and up to his hands and knees, trying to propel himself across the bed to the other side. It was his one hope of escape, since Arthur was past reason, and he couldn’t depend on his own body not to just capitulate the moment Arthur touched him again.

But he had no chance, as he’d known deep down. Arthur was behind him and on him at once, easily pushing him down flat onto his front and blanketing his body with his own.

Arthur’s thigh, thickly muscled, warm and heavy, pushed between his legs. And now Merlin could feel that magnificent cock, hard and eager against the swell of his arse, and he was panting like a dog, head turned to the side for air while Arthur was barely breathing hard. Then Arthur leaned his head closer to Merlin’s, and sucked his earlobe into his mouth.

Merlin yelped, then moaned, his head abruptly and frighteningly spinning with lust, and with as much movement as his restricted position would allow him, he reflexively humped his excited cock hard into the mattress.

Arthur let the lobe slide from the hot wet of his mouth and huffed a tiny, victorious laugh against Merlin’s ear.

“Stopped fighting it?”

Which naturally set Merlin off again, writhing and twisting under Arthur’s considerable weight while Arthur gasped a laugh and rode it out, until Merlin had to slump at last to exhausted stillness. Then and only then, the weight lifted off, and Arthur’s mouth pressed against the back of Merlin’s neck, then lower by an inch or two, and lower, travelling down his spine.

Merlin lay worn out and shivering under the onslaught, but how could he deny that his skin was singing with the power of the connection between them, every touch a rightness, even as he knew how wrong it was.

“I’ve never done this with a man before,” Arthur murmured, low and intimate, almost surprised. Another kiss, this time in the small of Merlin’s back, “It was always just … release. After battle. Like madness. It has to get out somehow…” Then, musingly, “You have skin like a girl.”

Merlin planted his face in the cover. He wanted to buck and fight again for that, but he didn’t have the strength, and Arthur had started to lick where he’d kissed, all up his spine, and his bones were melting. He’d knew he'd never felt like this before, not even during the best sex of his life, with Gwaine. It was as if Arthur had taken command of his senses, every touch perfect; as if Merlin had been waiting forever for each exact kiss, each touch. Forever.

He registered Arthur’s weight returning as the other man stretched out an arm, and pulled something from beneath the pillows, dropping it in Merlin’s eyeline on the bed as he rolled off to the side, then reached for it. And it was easily recognised; a small covered jar of the oily salve Gaius had created to smooth weathered skin. Merlin had mixed it often enough to know its scent instantly.

He closed his eyes tight again. More evidence Arthur had prepared the battleground before Merlin
even knew the war was on; the knife and this.

He’d thought of every eventuality, like any great general. Merlin, willing or unwilling; Arthur had strategised for it.

Arthur ran the flat of his big hand down Merlin’s back then, from nape to the swell of his bottom, as if he were gentling his warhorse or his hunting dog. Treasuring them.

‘Merlin, I’m prepared to face all manner of horrors in this world, but if you think I’m sharing this bed with you...’

Merlin gritted his teeth.

What could he do? What could he say, that hadn’t already been said?

“You’ll force me then?” It came out coldly, far more coldly than he felt. Arthur stilled.

“Now you’re pretending you don’t want me to have you? Your prick doesn’t seem to agree.”

“It reacts to… to stimuli.”

“Stimuli” Arthur said dryly and stroked his back and bottom again with a hard, demanding hand, “Like looking at me.”

Merlin grimaced, unseen.

Somehow, with his face hidden like this, he managed a level tone. “So I find you beautiful. Everyone does. You’ve always known that, haven’t you, really… and all that rubbing and stuff... But... I don’t want to do this, Arthur. What ever you say, it’s betrayal.”

“You know differently, Merlin. You’re running away.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Then stop me. Come on, Merlin. You can do it with a flick of your fingers.”

“You know I promised not to...”

“Yes. And you know you’d break that in a second if you convinced yourself somewhere in that wooden skull, that you had the right of it.”

Merlin opened his mouth to deny it, closed it again. Because how could he argue against such a brutal truth?

Arthur let him keep his silence.

“If you don’t want it ... truly, if it's false, ” Arthur continued relentlessly, "...it won’t form. Myrthryn told me. Both… parties have to recognise each other in the final moments; both have to want to be complete. If you don’t want instinctively it in your…your soul… if it’s not the destiny they claim it is, it won’t happen. If it’s not meant… nothing will happen. Except... we’ll have lain together once. That no one will ever know about,” he finished, voice suddenly significant with threat.

Merlin’s eyes bugged with outrage and he tried to twist underneath Arthur's weight to deliver the response to his face. “Hey!! I’m not the one holding you down am I?”
“Fine,” Arthur snapped. “So…can we get on with it? Finally?”

“I don’t seem to have a lot of choice do I? Seeing as how you’re squashing me flat to the bed, and your prick’s probing my bum?”

“I knew you’d see reason, Merlin. At last.” Arthur’s voice dripped sarcastic disdain.

Merlin huffed a breath, the weird familiarity of the exchange a hurt to his heart. He’d missed that, at least, like a limb; the insulting banter they used to thrive on; the way they once understood each other so well, while other people believed they were constantly at war. Even in this insane situation, it somehow warmed him just a little.

So, when Arthur rolled off him again, he didn’t move, didn’t struggle or try to roll away. He just lay there and accepted.

Because if there truly was a choice in the end, he simply wouldn’t do it. That was it. He would accept this, this single time with Arthur, and then, when his part came, he would turn away from any magical completion of their connection. Arthur would have to accept then that it wasn’t meant; that this Myrthryn had it wrong, though Merlin knew now in every cell of his body, that he had it right.

But he knew he had to resist, when the stakes were so very high. And if Arthur realised what he'd done and wouldn’t forgive; if he took it as the rejection of their absolute joint destiny it was at root, well Merlin would just have to take the consequences. It wasn’t as if he had much of a relationship left with Arthur to lose now anyway.

‘But you could have’. His treacherous mind whispered, ‘You could have everything. Everything you’ve wanted so badly, deep down.’

Arthur.

Always, always Arthur.

From the first, Merlin had known he'd belonged to him.

He’d just succeeded until now, in hiding the extent of it from himself, to spare the pain.

He was excellent at hiding.

But he could hardly deny now what had been cowering inside him all along, dragged by this, all unwilling, into the light… all those seething, selfish, disgusting feelings....

Merlin knew why he'd entombed them immediately and efficiently from the start. Because he’d known always, deep in his bones, that it was never going to happen.

Arthur would never, ever put him first; would never see him that way. Never want him like he wanted women, like he came to want Gwen.

So why acknowledge even the ghost of a wish? He’d never allowed himself. He’d never been one to cry for the moon.

And when he'd found that Gwaine loved him as more than a friend, it had all been so easy.

But if Arthur had... if he’d even glanced toward him…? Face it now.

If he had... Arthur, his golden prince, the arrogant, noble pillock he’d offered his life for over and
over; lived his life for from the first…? So beautiful and glorious he sometimes stopped Merlin’s breath in his throat...

Merlin hadn’t even looked at men like that before Camelot, he realised with a kind of revelatory hysteria; before he sank his life so deeply in Arthur’s. Just like Arthur, his eyes had turned to women. Morgana for a while - a boy’s idle admiration. And he’d loved Freya so quickly, so desperately, before it all became too late. But then there had been no one, just the odd fleeting fancy that barely held his interest. No one at all, for so many long, lonely, furtive years. Watching over Arthur. And now… now he found all he wanted each night was the touch of a man’s hand, a man’s skin, a man’s prick.

_Gwaine_, he reminded himself desperately. He was happy with him.

The sound of the wax lid popping from the neck of the jar made him jolt in nervous shock, and almost at once, Arthur’s long fingers pulled his arse cheeks apart.

Merlin’s face flushed a blazing, agonised red, but it was still buried in the bedclothes, so Arthur at least didn’t see that, though he seemed to be taking his time studying the rose of Merlin’s hole.

Merlin’s eyes squeezed painfully tight again as he waited, obediently still, feeling more physically exposed than he ever had in his life. Then at last, he heard a quiet huffed breath and Arthur’s finger stroked lightly down his cleft.

Merlin whimpered and quivered like a deerhound held back from the hunt.

Another soft huffed laugh. “Ssssh! I’ll get to it.”

The jar was thrown, lidded again, onto the bed near Merlin’s cheek, and Arthur’s slippery finger pushed at his opening. It slipped easily into relaxed, come-slick depths.

Arthur froze. Merlin gasped a short, shocked breath and squeezed his eyes closed even tighter until lights flashed behind his lids. He didn’t believe he’d ever felt shame or humiliation like it.

He’d forgotten- how could he have forgotten? – that Gwaine, his lover, had had him before his audience with the king? Had spent himself very generously indeed inside Merlin’s arse.

He felt weak with guilt over his own lack of fidelity, when Gwaine had shown so much.

And yet …he knew that what he felt most of all in that moment, was dread that Arthur would be repelled.

A man like him would never tolerate another man’s seconds.

He heard a heavy swallow. Then, tensely, “I see you didn’t waste any time.” _You slut_, echoed in Merlin’s head, horrifying and gutting. He didn’t move a muscle, waiting for Arthur to pull away.

_It’s for the best_, he told himself. _This is what you wanted._

But it wasn’t. Not remotely.

The contrast that must be ringing in Arthur’s head between he and Gwen…

_But it's not fair!_ he wanted to yell.

“He’s my lover,” he said out loud and he didn’t know if it was meant to be an explanation, an excuse or a defiant provocation.
Afterwards Merlin never understood if it was that, or sheer outrage at finding his supposed partner in legend fucked full of another man’s seed, but far from pulling away in disgust, Arthur instead, within a few devastating seconds, rolled between Merlin’s thighs, spread them with his own, shoved the large, rounded head of his prick hard against Merlin’s hole and pushed home.

Merlin let out a long, gasping moan and his mind blanked with shock, even as Arthur’s weight and momentum slid his sex in and up, all the way to the root.

Merlin’s channel, still relaxed and open and slick with oil and semen, opened to it like a scabbard to a sword.

“I think he’s going to find,” Arthur gritted, “he’s been replaced.”

There wasn’t any real pain at the brutal completeness of entry, even though Arthur’s girth was significant, and his prick, he’d have been thrilled to know, was bigger than Gwaine’s. But the starbursts of stunning pleasure going off all over Merlin’s body, those were new.

He’d discovered he loved this – being taken – anyway, once Gwaine had persuaded him to try it. But this was beyond the normal physical stimulation he experienced on his lover’s cock.

Was it the shape and size of the prick now owning him?

Or the wrongness of the situation heightening every emotion?

The fact that it was Arthur - beautiful, magnificent Arthur - at long last?

Or was it that pull, the connection that had made everything between them, so right and intense from their first meeting? The whole relationship between them, everything, even the fights and the abuse; more exciting and better and more thrilling than with anyone else.

He didn’t want to think about that.

He couldn’t. He had to hold his focus. He had to.

But Arthur circled his hips, and lights went off in Merlin’s head, his pleasure spot, already sensitive from the energetic fuck with Gwaine earlier, now pressed and massaged perfectly.

"Arthur", he moaned desperately again.

Arthur at last though, seemed to be having a few problems of his own.

“Don’t… move”. He held Merlin down by sheer weight, resting on his body, every inch of his prick buried up to the balls. “God…You feel…” Panted, tense. “How...?”

“Arthur...” It sounded worshipful.

They lay perfectly still, joined physically, for long, long seconds, Arthur’s cock twitching intimately inside, then Merlin felt Arthur’s upper body lever off his back, even as his groin pressed harder still against his arse. Arthur’s weight, Merlin realised, was being held on his shins and straight arms, as he pulled his dick out very slightly and then pushed slowly back in.

They both moaned this time.

“Merlin,” Arthur’s voice was strained, forced, it sounded through gritted teeth, “Tell me. What I have to say... There’s a pledge that has to be made. Tell me the words.”
It was meant to be an order, there was no doubt about that, but Merlin thought suddenly that Arthur sounded...young, almost nervous, as apprehensive as he'd ever heard him. It caught at Merlin’s heart as effectively as anything ever could. Because any chink in Arthur’s carapace of invulnerability had always melted him. And maybe Arthur was frightened too by what they were doing. Frightened of magic, of eternity.

Arthur had gone this far, hunting down this ultimate destiny he believed he had to pursue, and Merlin had it in his power now to stop it, this part of it at least; crush the possibilities.

“Tell me,” Arthur said again but he was asking now as much as demanding.

And Merlin had never had the will to turn from that simple thing; Arthur asking him for help.

He found the words ready on his tongue and he didn’t really know how. Absorbed somehow from the books the Druids had allowed him to see? Or perhaps they were carved in his brain, ready for just this.

He reached out a shaking hand and curled it around Arthur’s braced and straining wrist for comfort. Arthur drew a quick, audible breath.

“You...say... Arthur ...this is... We can’t...”

“Tell me!”

“I... you... say...you say...'I... Arthur Pendragon... son of Uther, king’...’” Merlin managed haltingly, voice thick with tears, and Arthur, after a tiny pause, began.

“I, Arthur Pendragon,” and his voice was firm and quiet, no sign of doubt; even the strain on his body barely audible. “Son of Uther, king,”

Merlin swallowed, staring blindly at the bedcovers under him. He used to wash Arthur’s covers, launder them. “Claim... claim ....Merlin, son of Balinor... as my completion.”

“Claim Merlin, son of Balinor...” A tiny hesitation, “…as my completion.”

“I forge... and seal this union... with my seed.”

Arthur drew another deep, deep breath then continued as confidently as he’d recited the coronation oath; as certainly as he’d pledged himself to Gwen and then crowned her queen himself. “I forge and seal this union with my seed.”

Merlin closed his eyes tight. He was so afraid.

*It wont work anyway,* he thought cravenly. *If it’s not meant or its just...superstition. Or if either one of us rejects it ...if we aren’t ready for it at our core. If I reject it...*

But if they weren’t ready now, when would they ever be, in this life?

Merlin knew Arthur would never try again, and Merlin himself would take every step anyway, to make sure it never again got this far. It was now, or not at all, and he would have to let Arthur go of his own volition.

It was too soon, and it was too late.

For safety, for peace, to preserve the faith and solidarity that had pervaded the heart of Camelot since the new king retook the throne and married a servant queen for love.
To save Arthur from himself. Yet again.

“Is that it?” Arthur asked calmly.

Slowly, Merlin nodded his head, eyes bleak with moisture, still gazing blindly down at the rich red cover, feeling the beauty of Arthur’s prick wedged, heavy and solid, inside him as if it belonged.

“Now you…” Arthur murmured softly, then, quietly, “Merlin.”

Merlin took a shaky, tear-filled breath.

He could do this part at least, he thought; not reject him here, openly. Not yet. And maybe, he wanted to say it.

“I…Merlin… son of …Balinor, dragonlord…” Arthur heaved a tiny, sharp breath on top of him and Merlin thought with a flash of fierce pride, Maybe he forgets… I’m not so unworthy of him after all. “Accept your claim… Arthur Pendragon. I… recognise you. I will take your seed …and seal our union.”

They were both still, both silent, then Arthur leant down still braced impressively on strong arms, and brushed his lips against the back of Merlin’s neck. Merlin’s breath caught on a sob.

“Its not too late, Arthur...” he babbled. “It’s really not. If we stop now, if you don’t spend in me… We can… You can…”

Arthur pulled his erection back an inch or two, shoved forward savagely and Merlin sobbed again, silenced. He was terrified.

There was a long pause, broken only by the sound of their shaky breathing but suddenly, instead of speeding up his movement, beginning to pump his cock, Arthur pulled back, all the way back, his prick sliding slickly and smoothly out of Merlin’s arse as his weight lifted off Merlin’s body until the head of the shaft popped free.

It was a stunning shock.

To be given, so abruptly, what he’d been struggling for against Arthur’s formidable will...

It took Merlin long seconds to accept that it had actually happened; to understand why he felt so gapingly empty, physically and emotionally.

And in that second of realisation, that Arthur had listened to him, or thought better of it at this last moment… stopped it, before it could happen …. what he felt wasn’t relief as he decently should, but blind panic that it was lost to him now.

Grief.

He lay frozen there, head still turned to the side on the covers, eyes wide and staring, seeing nothing, because he knew something right had been ripped from him; something he had never admitted he’d wanted so very badly, but couldn’t, shouldn’t have. He drew a glass-sharp breath.

“Arthur…” He began, half sobbed.

Hard hands grabbed his shoulder and his hip and before he could really grasp what was happening, a smooth, ruthless movement flipped him onto his back. He looked up, dazed, into Arthur’s sweat-damp, determined face.
He was kneeling astride Merlin’s shins; wide, muscular chest glowing with sweat, erection huge and swollen and dark with blood, the foreskin forced back and the head glistening with moisture Merlin didn’t want to guess at.

He stared at the picture Arthur made, and gaped.

Arthur didn’t look like a man who had given up.

“I want to see you,” Arthur said levelly, accusingly. And Merlin realised he meant, ‘I don’t trust you. I don’t trust you not to hide and stop this without meeting my eyes.’

Merlin swallowed hard against the lump of fear and loss, still huge in his throat, and allowed himself to feel what he shouldn’t feel.

Relief. Huge, huge, soaring and terrible.

“You don’t need to say the words,” Arthur continued harshly. “The magic. It’s in your blood, in your heart. You told me that once. If its right, your magic will make it happen.”

Their eyes locked, Arthur’s hard and focussed; Merlin’s wide and shocked with exhilaration and despair. Because Arthur knew him; better, it seemed, than he knew himself. And he was right.

His own reaction now told him; that damning, damning relief told him. The thought humiliated him but he had to look at it: maybe Arthur had always guessed how much Merlin wanted him, deep down in the core of his being.

‘No man is worth your tears....’

He shook his head helplessly and looked up at Arthur, taking him in... how ridiculously glorious he was. His hair was damp and tousled, a golden mess on his head; eyes big, blue; lips full and wide, the most beautiful, sensual mouth Merlin had ever seen on a man. And yet there was nothing feminine about him; his body was broad and manly and graceful. Nothing else, no one else compared.

Merlin had hidden it from everyone, most especially from himself, but he knew that Arthur had been, for far too many years, the sum of his desires, and for this one moment, he was allowed to have him.

And Merlin had always, always belonged to him.

He didn’t even try to protest when Arthur reached to grasp his knees and push them back, exposing him brutally. He watched with a kind of stupified passivity as Arthur shuffled forward on his knees, looked down to take his cock in his hand and positioned the head of it against Merlin’s hole again. He was still looking down there when he pushed the first inches in, again an easy, delicious slide, then he looked up again, eyes seething with heat, and held Merlin’s gaze as he slid his whole length home again to the base in a long push, until his big, firm balls rested against the skin of Merlin’s arse.

They both made desperate sounds.

Merlin was well beyond speech; whining shamelessly as the emotional and physical pleasure of having Arthur’s sex inside him again at this new angle, became overwhelming.

He thought he’d lost whatever purpose he had in the perfect intensity of it, but he tried; still tried to regain his feeling that this was wrong. Yet it felt beyond right.
Arthur pushed himself over him, arms braced again by Merlin’s head and Merlin couldn’t help but reach up and grasp his shoulders, the skin smooth as a young boy’s over iron muscle, and his legs wrapped round Arthur’s strong hips, and he clung, writhing on his cock, offering himself completely because he couldn’t help it.

And then Arthur began to move, to fuck, and Merlin was truly lost. The feeling of it again, the intensity of it was like nothing he had ever experienced; that amazing cock touching him in all the places that delighted him inside, looking into that face, the one face in the whole world that he lived to see.

It felt like destiny. Like the crown of Camelot on Arthur’s head; Excalibur in Arthur’s hand. Arthur had chosen to embrace this, and Merlin felt the inevitability of it with every stroke of Arthur’s sex inside him, with every second of melting ecstasy that took them closer and weakened his will. He could see the dazed pleasure on Arthur’s face, as Merlin moved with him, surrendering absolutely; the amazement, Merlin thought perhaps, with desperate, unworthy hope, that coupling with a man could feel so good.

The pace was quickening, Arthur’s thrusts shorter, faster, harder. His head dropped down, hanging between his shoulders and he was really screwing in earnest now, hips pumping out of control. Merlin had never been fucked like it before; he could hear himself whimpering and moaning like a bitch in heat, begging for more, shameless, for Arthur to hold nothing back, fuck him until he broke apart.

But, in the final moments he still somehow found something in him; something that whispered, gasping, desperate, urging, offering, warning, “Arthur. You can… still…”

Even in the throes of near orgasm, Arthur understood. He pulled his head up and stared into Merlin’s eyes, accusing, almost angry, but also somehow, accepting. Then he gritted his teeth, and shoved his cock in deep, once, twice, three times in answer, burying it as deep as he could. He whispered, “Merlin!” and he came hard, head thrown back in ecstasy, seed spurting in deep, long gushes, soaking into Merlin’s body, rooting there. Possessing.

It happened just as Merlin had desperately denied, yet known in the depths of his soul, that it would, once the choice was given to his heart and his magic and his instinct, and not his head. Once Arthur began it, there had never truly been a chance that Merlin could stop it, because Merlin was so instinctively Arthur’s. He hadn’t fought him genuinely, he acknowledged with writhing shame; he’d helped him.

He could see the golden tendrils of light twining around their bodies, feel the strange jolt inside him as if his being was locking into place, locking them into place, and words spewed from him, out of his control, words he shouldn’t know really, even though he understood somehow that Arthur had been right and they weren’t needed.

“Twam healf geanalæcan.” Arthur’s head lowered at once and he looked at Merlin, panting, mouth half open, eyes agonised and avid, and Merlin’s body arched and his semen gushed from him too as if it were happening to someone else. “Feorh geanalæcan begeondan deab. On lif-e ge on legere” He was gasping the words, and he knew his eyes were glowing gold, unearthly, but he held Arthur’s awed and pleasure-shocked gaze, and came and came and came, milking the last of Arthur’s seed, inside him, face twisted, panting the final words of the spell to complete them. “Fore …ecnes. Wit beon an. Wit …beon hal.”

And it was done. And, it seemed, could not be undone.

They froze in position for whole seconds, gazes locked, stunned with ecstasy, lungs heaving for
breath, and then slowly Arthur sank down onto Merlin’s limp body, head tucked into his shoulder and he lay there, muscles slack, feeling increasingly and oppressively heavy, though Merlin had no wish for him ever to move.

He felt numb, hollowed out, and he didn’t want to think, not about anything, just to lie there with Arthur on him and in him.

Finally though, the slow, embarrassing slither of Arthur’s spent sex leaving Merlin’s hole seemed to wake him from his daze, the trickle of Pendragon seed following it, underlining the immensity of what they’d done. Merlin felt...owned in a way he never had before, and he wished...he wished so much that he could revel in it, this moment. But Arthur rolled off him, and they lay side by side, looking up in shock at the canopy of Arthur’s bed.

He didn’t know what to say. And neither, it seemed, did the man who’d just fucked him.

Finally though it was Arthur, still winded, horribly strained, but desperately searching for humour. “So... that’s what a legendary orgasm feels like.” Or normality. Or something.

Merlin knew he should take his cue; say something offensive or idiotic or cutting back. But in the cold shock of reality he couldn’t. He was torn between shrivelling embarrassment at all Arthur had seen of him and knew about him, and stunned disbelief at what they’d done; the union they’d sealed and how they’d sealed it. What those words, that instinctive spell had meant.

They had to salvage what they could. Oh God... make this as harmless as they could.

“No one has to know.” He turned his head desperately, urgently toward Arthur and only then, realised what that had sounded like. A denial.

Arthur stared at the canopy a moment longer, then turned his own head on the pillow to meet his gaze. His expression was indecipherable.

“Yes. You’re good at secrets, aren’t you, Merlin? How could I forget?”

Merlin held his eyes, agonised. He knew that Arthur couldn’t forgive his lies, his many, many lies and manipulations over the years and that he’d come to hate secrets, to view them as the opposite of nobility, which in his eyes, was truth. And he had cause; all the carnage and havoc that had followed his own birth, the secrets kept from him by his own father. And then, the man Arthur had trusted with his vulnerabilities, his faith for years, had been unveiled as a liar and a sorcerer at the heart of his own inner circle. A puppetmaster, he’d very clearly feared for a time.

“You know now though, Arthur,” Merlin said urgently, his purpose forgotten. “You know you can trust me.”

And it struck him just then, with a blinding clarity, why Arthur had pushed for this.

Emrys. The supposed greatest warlock of all time, bound to the king, and no room for doubts now. Merlin’s gaze blanked and held, and the pain of that realisation skewered his heart.

‘Merlin? What is it?’” Arthur asked sharply.

Merlin refocused to meet Arthur’s narrow-eyed stare; he could read Merlin so frighteningly well sometimes. But Merlin was accustomed to hiding with him, hiding his power first, then hiding his adoration, even from himself.
“Nothing. Nothing.” It seemed though, that his smokescreen no longer worked.

“What’s going through that pea brain of yours now? I can see you think you’ve figured something out.” Merlin blinked. “You’ll have got it wrong, whatever it is,” Arthur sighed wearily.

A knock sounded at the door, sharp and shocking.

Merlin jolted and stared at Arthur, wide-eyed with panic. Even Arthur seemed shaken for a second, then he shouted calmly, “Yes?”

Merlin’s eyes widened even more with disbelieving horror.

“I wondered if you required my services to dress, my lord,” a voice shouted through the heavy door. William, the King’s manservant. “And I am bade tell you that the queen is ready to go down to the banquet, Sire.”

“Right,” Arthur called, “Give me ten minutes, then return.”

Merlin let out a shaky sigh of relief, unable to believe their luck that the man hadn’t just walked in. “That was…”

“That was how a proper manservant behaves, Merlin. Stunning, isn’t it?”

Merlin glared at him for a few satisfying seconds before reality came crashing back, but he’d enjoyed them while they lasted.

He had ten minutes to dress and flee.

He rolled swiftly to the far side of the bed and padded, embarrassedly naked, round the foot to the other side, where Arthur lay and Merlin’s clothes were strewn on the floor. He snatched up his trousers and underclothes first, disentangling them from the knot Arthur had shoved to the floor with his boots, and when he managed to wrestle them free at last he dragged them on quickly, desperate for any cover from Arthur’s considering gaze. And he was considering, Merlin could tell, studying Merlin as seriously and assessingly as he might judge new horseflesh.

But agonisingly self conscious as he felt, when Merlin hauled up his trousers and discovered his ruined laces, he met Arthur’s stare, his own outraged.

“You had to use a knife!” he sniped.

Arthur smirked as if he was rather proud of it and pointed toward his cupboard of clothing. “Get another one in there,” he ordered imperiously and rolled off the bed himself.

Merlin, confronted by his standing nakedness, whirled and did so, extracting a spare length of leather and lacing himself up with his back turned away.

When he was decent he turned again to find Arthur still studying him, frowning, mouth out in a considering pout, arms folded and leaning, half seated against the table. He was dressed again in his trousers, still unlaced, barefoot and bare-chested and he looked so effortlessly beautiful Merlin wanted urgently to flee.

Yet Arthur seemed so bizarrely, eerily normal; as if he hadn’t just had sex with his sorceror on his bed. As if they hadn’t just completed a ceremony of magic, of destiny, so powerful it still held Merlin’s heart clenched in terror.
As if nothing out of the ordinary, in fact, had happened. Except that Merlin suddenly seemed an object of fascination.

Merlin clenched his jaw and reached down for his tunic, slipping it on swiftly, before bending to tug on his boots. Arthur didn’t move or look away.

Merlin drew a deep bracing breath as he straightened.

“Like I said.” he said doggedly, “No one has to know.” Arthur didn’t speak, just continued to look at him, face blank of readable emotion but that small, thoughtful frown still in place. “It’d be insane to tell anyone. It’d just …hurt people…Gwen and …Gwaine.” He saw a muscle clench in the other man’s jaw, but still Arthur’s gaze remained level, a judge waiting for arguments. Merlin ploughed on. “Really. What we …did… I mean… it was to complete the tie between us. For destiny. For …for Albion. And the future. Nothing else. We know that.. we know that it’s there… now …” He swallowed heavily. “But… they may not understand and… it could ruin everything, Arthur! Cause all kinds of arguments and … fights… It’s not going to happen again and …and we’re the only ones who know that we’re…sort of…”

“Married?”

“We’re not! Married!” Scandalised. “This was…different. Kind of…spiritual!” Arthur snorted. “You’re married to Gwen!”

“And you want to marry Gwaine?” Arthur sounded mocking now; less than benign.

Merlin jerked with the shock of reminder, and that Arthur seemed to know.

He said defensively, unsurely, “Well. He said… he kind of… wants to exchange vows, yeah… after hearing… How did you know?”

Arthur grimaced, gave a tiny one-shouldered shrug. “I didn’t, for sure, until you confirmed it. But he didn’t exactly hide it. After the Rheged delegation mentioned it, he looked as if he’d been belted by a fish. Even Guinevere knew.”

“You talked about it with Gwen?” Merlin squeaked and he didn’t know why that felt such a betrayal. But he ploughed on regardless, “Look… it doesn’t matter. You’re married to her and you worship each other, and it’s lovely. I’m happy with Gwaine and…and we can leave it at that. You know you can trust me now. Enough to use my powers and all… So perhaps we…”

“That’s the second time you’ve said that…as if this …thing is some kind of unbreakable pledge. You can still lie to me, and you probably will.”

“But… you know now. However much you …you lost …trust… you know now, how committed I am to your cause. I’m bound to you now. I’d never have done that… been able to do that if I could bear to betray you!” Merlin was animated now, eager, desperate to convince.

Arthur watched him assessingly for a second or two after he finished, then finally looked down and to the side, at the floor.

“I never thought you would. Actually.” He muttered. “You stood by me through everything, didn’t you? You offered your life for mine repeatedly. But your lies…the secrets… the things you did behind my back…” His eyes darted up again suddenly, puzzled and demanding, as if he’d just properly registered Merlin’s phrase. “Use your powers?” he quoted.

Merlin frowned, startled, still trying to take in what Arthur had said.
“Well… You said, you wanted Emrys. Bound to you. Just like you have Excalibur. Two magical …weapons,” he trailed off.

Arthur stared at him, narrowly. “And you think that’s what it’s about?”

“Look, it doesn’t matter. It’s done. And the thing is… the important thing is... we mustn’t tell. Arthur. These insane ideas you have about secrets… Sometimes …sometimes secrets just need to be kept! You know it’d cause…”

“Arthur?” The door opened and Gwen stepped into the room, smiling and lovely. She stopped at once when she saw Merlin, but her smile widened if anything. “Merlin! You’re back!!”

Shock and fear congealed into a shivering lump in his chest, but if Gwen registered the tension of argument between them she showed no sign of it, no sign of suspicion either, at finding Arthur stripped to the waist, no sign she could smell sex in the room. Instead she grinned and moved straight over to Arthur like an iron ring to a magnet. She slid her arm, with easy familiarity and unconscious possessiveness, round his bare waist.

“Yes,” Merlin managed, then added guiltily, “Your Highness.” He bowed.

“Merlin!” Gwen scolded, “Don’t start.”

Merlin looked up and met her twinkling gaze. It had taken her a little while to recover fully from her abduction, the loss of her brother and the withering guilt of what she had done afterwards, out of her mind, in Morgana's name. And of course there had been the effects of Merlin’s unveiling as a warlock. But she was resilient, and far stronger than her sweet nature suggested, and she’d returned to normality with determination. Today she was wearing a purple silk gown threaded with silver and she looked beautifully content, dignity and nobility surrounding her. Merlin could barely remember Gwen the servant girl, who’d tripped through the corridors with him on endless adventures.

“I see Arthur’s got you back to your duties…” She said, mischievously, “He’s always saying that you’re the best manservant he ever had and how much he misses you…”

Merlin tried to grin as Arthur looped his arm round her shoulders and looked down at her with deliberately veiled amusement.

“Don’t encourage his delusions, Guinevere,’ he said dryly. "He’s deranged enough as it is.” She smirked up at him and stroked the skin at his waist comfortably.

Merlin swallowed and tried to herd his emotions into some kind of manageability, but there were so many: shock, followed by fear, followed by relief followed by…followed by anger and resentment and jealousy and shame. He knew he had to run away.

He began to back off from the pair of them, still grinning his forced, sunny, idiot’s grin.

“Yes, that’s me,” he got out. “Mind bogglingly deluded!”

He backed into a chair but he righted it and kept going, not taking his eyes off them as they stared at his retreat in amused unity.

“We’ll see you at the banquet, Merlin,” Arthur called, an order, as he reached the door and wrenched it open.

But, as he nodded an automatic acquiescence and escaped into the corridor, he turned at the last
moment to pull the door behind him and saw them standing there in the golden glow of the setting sun, grinning at each other, amused clearly, by the fool’s performance. He saw Gwen reach up to meet Arthur’s lips in a tender, affectionate kiss and then Merlin closed the door, as silently as he could.

He walked away.

He hadn’t been given a kiss really, he thought hazily, not one like that. And now he’d been reminded of how Arthur looked when he was in love, and he knew for certain that he hadn’t been given that either.

He stumbled back to his rooms in a daze, found them blessedly empty, so he locked the door, dropped his breeches and scrubbed urgently between his legs and the cheeks of his buttocks with the same dampened cloth he’d used earlier, wiping away the excess seed Arthur had left there.

And he made himself remember doing this exact thing just before he left Gwaine; made himself feel all of the shame.

Because he’d left this room full of his lover, the man who adored him and would never betray him; and he was back in it not an hour later, arse drenched with the king’s seed; Arthur’s seed. A man who wanted to use him. A man who would never love him like that; never want him; a man who belonged heart and soul to someone else. His own friend.

And yet …that man was still the one he loved insanely, with every instinct he had.

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He dropped the soiled cloth in the water ewer and slowly pulled up his breeches, perilously close to tears.

The trousers were surprisingly decent he supposed, given the way they’d been treated.

Now, all he had to do, he told himself, all he had to do was survive the banquet and see Gwaine; look him in the eyes and pretend. Forget what had happened. That was all.

He tried to rally; stiffen his spine.

How many times had he faced despair alone, chained by secrets, and forced himself to go on?

He’d managed to convince himself for so long that all he felt for Arthur was friendship; couldn’t he do it again?

But… two sides of a coin? Two halves of a whole? You cannot truly hate that which completes you?

How had he ever pretended to believe that what he’d been told could mean mere affection, or loyalty, when the way the dragon had framed it had made it so clear? They were intended for each other; created to match and complement each other.

From the moment he’d been told; from the day he’d met him, Arthur had been his instinctive focus, his obsession, good and bad, but he’d always, always refused to look at it head on.

Because, meant or not, Arthur didn’t want him, or love him. He loved Gwen.

And now Arthur had forced it; all to appease Destiny.

They were bound together. Complete.
He thought of the words of the spell that had come from him at the end, come from some deep place inside him, the words he thought he understood as they poured from him.

‘Through life and death... for eternity... we are one... we are whole...’

He slumped down on the edge of his bed, despair and worry and fear seeping into every cell.

No, it wasn’t a marriage. It was painfully less. But, whatever they tried to pretend, it was also much, much more.

What had they done?
Merlin dressed alone for the banquet and when Bran arrived ready to help, he dismissed him. Bran very obviously sulked, but he seemed to recognise that Merlin was in no mood for challenge and so he left him to himself, informing him huffily that he’d meet him in the banqueting hall.

Merlin had found he couldn’t bear the idea of sitting at the feast table wearing the clothing Arthur had all but torn off him. So he’d changed to his other formal attire, a blue so dark as to be almost black. Its sombreness matched his mood.

It took an effort of will to leave his chambers, but like a knight donning his mail, he found that old, dissembling mask of blithe unconcern, so much a part of him now that when he looked in his mirror, he could almost believe in it himself.

Still, he had to stand before the door for long minutes, trying to brace himself, until at last he slipped out and walked through the corridors quickly, doing all he could to hide his halting stride, sore still from those two hard fucks. And he would not let himself think on that. Wouldn’t even acknowledge the existence of memory if he was going to make himself move forwards as he should, and not scuttle back to his rooms to cower and lick his wounds like the coward Arthur believed him to be.

When he arrived, smiling with careful delight in the banqueting hall, he found to his enormous relief that he wasn’t late - the king and queen were still to arrive. More than that, he realised he hadn’t been set a place near the royal couple and their visitors. It was like a rescue.

Instead he slipped in among the knights who were in their usual spot, mingling half way down the left leg of the huge U-shaped arrangement of tables, and Gwaine, when he saw him, managed to manhandle Leon down a place and haul Merlin to stand behind the seat next to him as they waited for Arthur and Gwen. Merlin slumped against it with a nauseous mixture of apprehension, guilt and relief churning his belly; because whatever else, Gwaine always managed to make him feel safe, valued, protected.

His well-honed skill at concealing his true self served him now though. He managed what he hoped was a warm grin.

Gwaine smirked back, wickedly.

“You changed into my favourite,” he murmured.

Gwaine had chosen the colour for Merlin because he loved him in dark shades; said they made him look powerful and dangerous and like a Court Sorceror. Which was ridiculous, but Merlin had always enjoyed the conceit, and enjoyed even more the look in Gwaine’s eyes when he wore the tunic.

Tonight though, tonight it was …too much.

They waited for perhaps five further minutes until the king and queen arrived through the main doors and progressed through the hall, Gwen’s hand on Arthur’s arm. Merlin thought he could see as well as anyone else there what they’d probably been doing. Gwen looked happy and …Merlin couldn’t help labelling it for the first time, smug; Arthur, dressed in gorgeous red and gold, looked relaxed. Gwen’s mouth, Merlin thought with a stab of agony, looked to him perhaps very slightly swollen.
In truth Merlin had seen them look just like that many times since they’d wed. Contented.

Just… this evening…this evening he found he’d been expecting …something … Some sign maybe that Arthur had been shaken too, even a bit; something less likely to force him to find and know his place in Arthur’s life quite so quickly.

He was terrified by the depth of pain he felt as Arthur and his true love swept past him, united in their happiness, while he stood and watched, torn from his place of safe denial.

And yet... he knew it was exactly what he’d told Arthur had to happen. They had to go on as they’d been.

Not, Merlin thought wryly, as he watched him lean down to listen, with great concentration, to Gwen, that Arthur showed any sign at all of wanting it differently.

This was right.

No one could know. Least of all the people who would be most hurt by their moment of …

What?

Madness? Infidelity? Selfishness? Destiny?

He sat and ate what he could force down of the food Bran placed in front of him and tucked himself behind Gwaine and out of Arthur’s line of vision from his place at the centre of the U of tables. Gwaine didn’t seem to notice anything was amiss. In fact with Bors and Percival across from them and Leon at their side, it was a relaxed, boisterous meal, and Merlin found he could shelter behind their exuberance.

Tonight though, he thought of Lancelot and his quiet smiles with a new, desperate admiration; remembered the way his eyes had stayed determinedly away from the young lovers. He thought he’d felt sympathy when Lancelot was alive.

Now it was empathy, total empathy.

As time went on and with each goblet of wine, Gwaine leaned closer, but that was normal. Usually, round about now, Merlin realised with a flash of unhappy self-knowledge, he’d be darting glances apprehensively toward Arthur, to see if he was frowning with disapproval at them. And it was as if the thought had the physical power to force his reluctant eyes up at last and toward the king.

But Arthur, when he looked at him, wasn’t looking at them at all; not, in fact, it seemed, remotely interested.

As his kingship had progressed, Arthur had become customarily more careful and dignified in public, but at that moment, his head was thrown back with unusual mirth, his strong throat stretched and bared, golden skin on display.

And Merlin abruptly flashed back with horrible clarity to the last time he’d seen Arthur exactly like that, and he hadn’t been laughing. He’d been coming, spurtling; the moment Merlin had first felt the flood of Arthur’s semen inside him, the moment the bond between them began to lock in place. Merlin felt his skin begin to flush, and his cock and his arse twitching with desperate, lovely memory. He squeezed his eyes shut and fought to blank his mind, beat the image away.

He opened them again to a jolt of panicked shock.
He was being observed.

Not by Arthur, thank God - he was focussed on Gwen and the Rhegedian next to her, also laughing at his left side- but by the man on Arthur’s right, a dark-haired, grey-bearded man with an oddly unlined face and hooded dark eyes.

He was staring at Merlin as if he’d suddenly spied the richest jewel in the kingdom.

Merlin didn’t recognise him, but he knew he must be one of the party from Rheged who’d started off this whole awful chain of events. And since he was seated in the place of honour, it was a fair assumption that this was the ambassador himself, Myrthryn.

Merlin met his eyes helplessly for long seconds; his own, he knew vaguely, must seem wide and startled and worried. So he did the only thing he could think to do in the face of such mesmerised attention. He hid behind a huge, moronic smile.

It broke the moment at least.

The man smiled back at Merlin very slightly, nodded his head, and turned to Arthur, who was focussed now on his own plate.

Whatever the man said though, it brought Arthur’s eyes up at once unerringly and Merlin was caught in his gaze like prey. Merlin’s false smile fixed, meaningless now, as he looked into Arthur’s unreadable face, just as Gwaine’s arm came to rest expansively and possessively along the back of his chair.

He thought he saw Arthur’s eyes harden slightly, or perhaps he imagined it; but Merlin looked away at once anyway, turning eagerly, desperately to Gwaine.

“Er…” Merlin murmured out of the side of his mouth and Gwaine turned his attention to him at once, “Don’t look, but I think I’ve been rumbled by the Rhegedians. Is that Myrthryn, on Arthur’s right?” He found he surprised even himself with the believability of his false cheer.

Gwaine, quick as ever, didn’t do what everyone usually did to that request; he didn’t look. Instead he grinned brightly at Merlin.

“Yep. Only a matter of time. Told you he was obsessed.”

“Yeah, thanks for the support,” Merlin snarked, with a fair try at mock bitterness. His throat felt tight and raw with apprehension.

“Well, you’re big news in Rheged,” Gwaine said fairly.

“My lord…”

Merlin jerked, startled, as Arthur’s manservant suddenly appeared behind their chairs, silent and elegant. William was as far a choice of personal servant from Merlin as it had been possible for Arthur to make. His whole being defined discipline - all iron-grey cropped hair and spare, ascetic frame and steely dark eyes; he looked as if he’d never indulged in a sweetmeat or a jug of ale in his life.

He'd been Uther’s servant before Arthur became king, and took over when Merlin had… left the job. When the revelation of his magic had broken his relationship with Arthur like a dry stick and his old life had collapsed around his head.
Merlin had thought it was a terrible appointment when he’d found out about it, because William would never, ever question or challenge anything Arthur did. He was even worse than George. But maybe, he thought despairingly now, he’d just been jealous.

The man leaned close over him, between himself and Gwaine, displaying all the proper discretion Merlin had never learned.

“His Majesty has requested you attend him to meet the ambassador from Rheged, my lord,” he murmured expressionlessly, because he really was the perfect manservant.

Gwaine hid his mouth behind his hand and Merlin glared at him, even as he loved him just a little bit more for the distraction of his normality, his mischief, his care.

He didn’t look at the head of the table.

He got up obediently though, the churning of his stomach building and intensifying until he feared it was going to turn to water. But he straightened, gathering himself, and he followed William, face set to mild interest, trying desperately to hide how little he wished to do this now.

William led him round the back of the U of tables, behind the twin chairs of the king and queen, to a new chair, set beside Myrthyn, and just two away from Arthur. But as he neared it, passed behind Arthur, Myrthryn rose and bowed deeply; as deeply as he might pay respect to royalty.

“My Lord Emrys,” he breathed, awed. His voice was heavily accented but deep and clear.

Merlin swallowed and bowed in return as he slipped behind the man and into the newly placed chair. Myrthryn sat too and simply looked at Merlin, smiling, apparently delighted.

“Well…um…” Merlin began uneasily, “The Druids call me that …but I don’t… I’m Merlin. Please,”

Myrthryn smiled charmingly and inclined his head. “As you wish,” he said softly and somehow he made it sound as if it were a quirky affectation of Merlin’s.

Merlin flushed. “I’m…. honoured to meet you, Lord Myrthryn,” he said, carefully polite, trying urgently to remind himself how much he really had been looking forward to this, before… everything. “I’ve heard so much of your land of Rheged. I look forward to learning more.”

Myrthryn’s smile widened to a delighted grin. He raised his voice until it reverberated across the room, to make sure the king and queen could also hear, the consummate diplomat. “And we have heard much of you in turn, my Lord Emr…Merlin. I was just telling his Majesty in fact that all we had been told appears true.”

Merlin looked at him apprehensively.

“Oh?” he managed.

Myrthryn inclined his head again. “We were told …that Emrys had come at last. That he is young, and powerful beyond any that have come before or will come after. And as beautiful as a fawn at bay.”

Merlin stared at him, wide-eyed and speechless, and he felt the blood rushing to his face in a tide of mortification; knew he was turning from pink to red to scarlet; knew that his ears must be glowing.

Myrthryn was watching his blush with a kind of fascinated, approving delight, possibly at his
modesty, perhaps even at his humanity. But Myrthryn wasn’t the person who concerned him.

He turned his eyes, without conscious will, beyond him, to Arthur, to find Arthur’s gaze -- inevitably after that-- upon him. He wasn’t smiling; he was frowning slightly in fact, mouth pursed, gaze intent and heavy, as if Merlin were some strange new creature which had materialised unexpectedly in front of him to puzzle him.

Gwen, however, leaning forward from behind him, looked more than approving.

“Well, its true, Merlin!” she said warmly, full of the generosity that made her so lovely. “You are beautiful. Really!”

Merlin’s eyes fell, his face now agonisingly red, emotions such a tangle of shame and chagrin and pain and pleasure. And over them all, the horrible, traitorous wish that he could have found some acknowledgement in Arthur’s eyes, rather than his wife’s.

He looked desperately across at Gwaine, who was grinning broadly at him in turn.

He was always telling Merlin how beautiful he was, usually in the throes of sex, but still…

Merlin tried a tentative, appalled smile, and Gwaine’s proud smirk widened as he raised his goblet in salute. Merlin held his eyes for a desperate second, then turned back to Gwen.

“I… um… I… well… thank you for your flattery. Your Majesty,” he squeaked at last.

Gwen’s gave a wide, eye-rolling grin and Merlin, avoiding Arthur’s gaze, turned quickly back to Myrthryn; the best, for him, of three terrible options.

He was totally out of his depth and still flushed painfully with mortification.

“My… Lord Ambassador…”

“Please,” the man smiled. “It’s Myrthryn. And I think the queen has confirmed that flattery had nothing to do with it.” He inclined his head indulgently, “Sir Gwaine is indeed the most fortunate of men.” And that was delivered in a voice as resonant as the one in which the previous compliment had been delivered.

Merlin wondered if his eyes had bugged. He didn’t dare turn to look at Gwaine, but he could almost feel the steel weight of Arthur’s stare upon him. He wondered if this startling, indiscreet honesty passed for diplomacy in Rheged, and he wondered if Arthur was still as disapproving of his union with Gwaine as he had been before their union had been completed.

Trust, at least, was no longer an issue.

He raised his eyes as if compelled, and met Arthur’s intense blue gaze once more, but again, he couldn’t begin to try to understand what he saw there.

Merlin couldn’t hold that gaze for long though. Instead he forced himself to focus on Myrthryn and his companions properly, asking about magic, about the structure of Rheged's court, magic’s place in the kingdom, and Myrthryn, who had magic himself, seemed delighted to discuss it with him, even as he gently probed Merlin as to the extent of his own abilities. If it was indeed true that he could slow time, call down the elements, defeat the great sorceress Nimueh, destroy the mighty and terrifying Morgause and thwart Morgana Pendragon, all with little more than a thought.

It seemed his reputation truly had spread, and grown massively in the telling.
He didn’t know how much Arthur was listening to, didn’t know if he worried about him hearing or not.

Did he fear Arthur would become nervous of his strength, of his status among other magic users? Or did he pray his king would be proud of his powers, proud to be bound in destiny with a creature like him? Both. Both.

When Arthur and Gwen finally rose to leave though, Merlin found he was genuinely startled. He’d sunk so deeply into the conversation that he’d managed to put his own turmoil aside, and he was immeasurably grateful for that.

Surely, he thought desperately, it could never be this bad again?

This had to have been the worst ordeal… the first public event afterward; the first sight of Gwen and Arthur so unshakeably united. Even the obvious fact that they were leaving early, probably eager as ever for time together alone, couldn’t do too much to dampen his enormous relief.

Merlin stood with everyone else, and watched as the king and queen graciously bade goodnight to Myrthryn and the other Rhegedians, and, nodding at the company, began to move toward the side door in the chamber. Neither of them looked directly at Merlin, yet still he watched them go; Gwen’s slender strength, Arthur’s broad back, feeling again that strange dyspeptic mess of relief and regret and jealousy.

He sighed lightly, but he was aware of Myrthryn at his side, still fascinated by him; intent on his every move. And he realised that Arthur hadn’t addressed one word to him all evening.

He felt his chest tighten, the insane emotion of the day, suddenly all there, in the lump lodged in his throat. It was... the anticlimax of it... that the acknowledgement of their link, the tie they’d formed, should have brought them no closer at all, possibly even driven them further apart...

It felt no different, that was the thing. There was no mysterious binding of minds; no sudden magical ability to read Arthur’s thoughts or emotions, no tangible reward at all, for the thing that they’d done. The only difference was Merlin’s own acceptance of how he truly felt, and that … that was no gift.

When a hand pressed against his back and he heard Gwaine’s soft voice against his ear breathing, “I share their enthusiasm to get to a bed,” he couldn’t begin to understand his emotions.

Gratitude was pre-eminent though, that he had someone he loved too.

He turned slightly and let one side of his mouth lift in an acknowledging smile. But compulsively he took one last look at the door and the king and queen disappearing through it to be alone. He found he needed that image to brace him; force himself back to normality and the future he had to begin with Gwaine.

When he looked though, it was to find that Arthur had stopped at the door, and was looking back at him. At them. He was frowning again, brows down, his full, wide mouth held in another of his assesing pouts.

Merlin’s breath caught. He held Arthur’s burning stare helplessly for what felt like hours, but knew was just moments. Then Arthur blinked, and turned away; disappeared at last from sight, out the door.

Merlin took a deep breath, but it was too late for his peace of mind now.
He managed to function well enough to disentangle himself from the Rheged delegation with a promise to talk again at some point the next day, and to leave with Gwaine for his bedchamber.

But beyond that, he was lost.

He had intended to do all he could to refocus on Gwaine, shake off his newly acknowledged feelings for Arthur as pointless and destructive; push himself instead toward a partnership that he knew made him happy, that he could trust in, that would cause no havoc or destruction.

He’d intended to wrestle his joining with Arthur to the back of his mind, make it as irrelevant to his everyday behaviour as it clearly was to Arthur. And Arthur had helped him – by ignoring him, by focussing so naturally and completely on Gwen, so clearly the person he wanted to devote his attention to, and spend his nights with.

But then at that last moment, he’d turned, and sought out Merlin, and looked at his unity with Gwaine the way he always had before, with that brooding discontent.

And Merlin was caught again. Just by those seconds of attention. Interest.

It was pathetic.

He didn’t try to stop Gwaine coming to his chambers. He let him undress him and slide into bed with him. He lay with him naked. But when Gwaine reached to have him, he pulled back, even though he knew Gwaine would believe the slickness in him was still his own spending.

Because... he couldn’t help it. Because much as he despised himself for it, he couldn’t bear to have Arthur’s seed supplanted. Not even by Gwaine, whom he loved. Not yet. Not until all of it was gone. Absorbed into him.

Not until he was just Merlin again, not the Merlin Arthur had wanted even for that short time. So, he let Gwaine stroke him and worship him, listened numbly to his whispered words.

“He’s right. You’re so beautiful. And I’m the luckiest bastard in Albion and beyond. Let me...just let me...”

And Merlin did let Gwaine move him into one of the positions he’d learned on his travels; head to toe, each sucking at the other; ecstasy reached together.

He tried, did all he could, never to think of blond hair and broad shoulders and a full, soft mouth and a long, pink-gold cock.

When he fell asleep, exhausted and huddled against Gwaine’s wiry, muscular body he knew he hadn’t succeeded, but maybe he’d taken the first steps to healing.

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Gwaine was gone before sunrise; not because their relationship was any secret, or because Bran minded, having been brought up in the Old Religion himself, but because Gwaine knew Merlin still felt apprehensive about it all – that everyone now knew both about his magic and his love for a man.

Merlin had lived under camouflage for so long, he always felt more comfortable with discretion.
But from the moment he opened his eyes with a jolt of panic, as memory set in, as he recognised that it had been real and not some fever dream, Merlin’s thoughts were focussed obsessively. Not on his lover who’d held him so tenderly the night before, but on the man for whom he’d lived his life since coming to Camelot.

The man to whom he was now irrevocably bound in some unknown, arcane way; the man to whom he’d apparently always been tied.

But then Kilgarrah had never lied about the most important things, had he?

He hadn’t let himself think too much on it the night before, obsessed instead by the human guilt of the act they’d performed. But now he focussed there with a kind of dazed greed - the aspect Arthur had seemed to feel made the union between them impossible to avoid.

According to the Old Religion, they were now tied together even beyond death. For eternity.

No escape.

Yet strangely that was the part that frightened Merlin least.

In this life, Arthur would never be his, but he knew that he would never truly want to be separated from him for long; couldn’t imagine any more a life or an afterlife where Arthur wouldn’t be welcome, the focus of his being.

It was the now that terrified him.

He had to get over it, had to forget and leave it alone as Arthur was doing. Their tie was completed now; he had a link to Arthur no other being had, and he should be glad of it. But he had to leave the rest behind.

The problem though was doing it, not just wishing it.

His reflection, as he shaved, looked wan and hollow. His eyes, he thought, looked shocked, like a man fresh from the battlefield. And yet no one else seemed to have seen anything amiss the night before, and after a while he managed to calm the frantic grinding of his thoughts again.

He climbed into the bath Bran had prepared for him, without allowing himself to think on it, all that he was washing away with the hot, blissful water. And when he finally left his chambers, dressed in his white tunic and a blue jacket, he felt almost detached, ready for the day and the beginning of forgetting.

When he came to the corridor that led to Gaius’s rooms though, he almost succumbed. It was so tempting to do what he used to do; go to his oldest friend and tell him everything; look for answers and absolution. But he resisted the temptation. No one else should know. No one else would ever know.

It was between Arthur and him; their guilty misdeed. Their murky secret.

He headed instead for the library, aiming to continue the project he’d had to stop when Arthur sent him on his embassy to the Druids. There were so many books now no longer forbidden, locked away through Uther’s years and Arthur’s early reign for fear they would fan the flame of sorcery, and yet too valuable to destroy just in case the defence of knowledge was ever needed against the Pendragons’ magical foes.

And there were the ones too, unknown to everyone, all that time, in the concealed room in which
Merlin had once unleashed a goblin. Now they were open to Merlin; this, one of the many wonderful new freedoms of Arthur’s now enlightened reign. There was so much to learn; so much to understand. For all his own personal losses and turmoil, it felt like the dawning of the new age of which he’d dreamed and for which he’d fought and sacrificed for so long. And Merlin could lose himself in that joy.

He worked for an hour or so under Geoffrey’s half suspicious, half fascinated eye, then he couldn’t stand the less than subtle scrutiny a moment longer. Geoffrey was one of the many who still looked at Merlin as if a doddering old lady had turned into a battle-hardened warrior in front of their eyes.

They had an image of him forged through years of his cheerful, bumbling presence and now… now they were still struggling to accept that he was a powerful sorceror; powerful enough to be appointed to the king’s Council. And all their fevered picturings of warlocks and mages had been turned on their heads.

Merlin knew that when it came down to it, he was bit of a disappointment in the fear and trembling stakes.

Yet he also knew people were frightened of him; servants he once used to pass the time of day with, now bowed their heads and scuttled by him. But people in Camelot had been schooled to fear and detest magic for so long, conditioned to lash out at it just to survive. It was a lot to ask to expect to be treated as an old friend, even if he hadn’t also become ‘Sire’, with his own room and his own manservant. He often felt lonelier now than he had when he’d been hiding who he was, every day.

He sighed and decided to head for the practice fields to see if Gwaine or Percival or Leon were still there. Gaius, he decided regretfully, was still out of bounds if he wanted to focus on getting back to normal and not obsessing over…things.

He moved quickly through the bright, blue-gold-green of the summer morning until he reached the wide expanse of grass set aside for the training of knights and squires and archers, hearing the old, familiar sounds of metal crashing on metal, and shouts of encouragement and instruction and effort. He headed at once for Sir Leon’s sturdy figure once he spotted it, standing well back from the action on the field.

“Lazing about?” he called cheekily, and smiled broadly as the man turned to him, nodding in solemn greeting.

“Absolutely,” Leon deadpanned and, clearly registering Merlin’s startled reaction to his battered appearance, “As you can see.”

“Let me guess. You tripped?”

Leon’s face finally cracked into a painful looking grin. “Arthur’s in ferocious form,” he said. “He took Percival down in less than three minutes.”

Merlin turned automatically toward the action on the field, insides back to their queasy churning, all his fear and dread and unwelcome excitement focused on the field. Arthur didn’t train every single day now, just most of them; but today, there he was, standing tall and golden at the centre, sword in hand, poised and circling.

It was only then that Merlin registered that his opponent was Gwaine, and something told Merlin, some tiny, ridiculous, barely noticeable flicker of the eye told him, that Arthur had seen him
watching. Impatiently he dismissed the thought as ludicrous, the product of a traumatised imagination.

He stood beside Leon and tried to show no emotion, no expression, as he watched his lover and his king circle each other carefully, weighing each other up, readying for attack. Merlin’s apprehension mushroomed.

Arthur rarely used Excalibur for training but that didn’t lessen his continuing superiority over his knights; king or not he was still the best warrior in Camelot and the kingdoms beyond. Everyone knew it. At times though, Gwaine with his unconventional style came close to rivalling him, as Lancelot once had.

Arthur swung his heavy sword easily in a circle with his wrist as he moved, loosening his body, the sheer strength and grace of it breathtaking. Merlin had seen just that movement countless times as Arthur readied for battle, but he had never once allowed himself to be consciously affected by it before, never allowed himself to feel this awed, admiring rush of desire. The shame that followed at once, like a conscientious servant, was drenching, swamping, and his guilt vied dizzyingly with his despair.

He focused desperately on Gwaine, moving still, readying himself for assault, and Merlin could see now with a horrible swoop in his stomach, the cut already on his sharp cheekbone, the sweat gleaming on his skin.

Then with no visible warning, Arthur went for him. Gwaine tried to twist, to turn away, but Arthur seemed magical this morning, like the knight of legend he had become throughout Albion, all strength and speed and power, and within half a minute he had beaten his knight to the ground.

Merlin had never seen him like that before; Gwaine and Arthur were usually not so ill-matched. Their fighting styles were very different, though Arthur was stronger and broader and usually faster. But today, it had been like watching a man fighting a boy.

Arthur stood over Gwaine now with his sword tip to his chest, the picture of dominance and conquest, then he said something Merlin couldn’t hear and reached out a hand to help him up. He wasn’t smiling.

The moment Gwaine was upright Arthur released him and walked off, and Merlin darted over to Gwaine anxiously, eyes on Arthur’s back as he stalked over to William for water to gulp, and a cloth with which to wipe himself.

“Fuck!” Gwaine panted ruefully, “What’s got into the Princess’ panties? He’s a maniac today!”

Merlin bit his lip as he looked for a cloth to wipe the blood from Gwaine’s cheek, hands shaky with misery and worry.

He thought he had a fair idea, after all, what was probably driving Arthur to beat his emotions out on the knights.

What was he feeling after his necessary fuck with Merlin and his night of love with Gwen?


Arthur didn’t turn until Merlin had finished wiping Gwaine’s face clean of blood and sweat, hand to his swollen, bruised cheekbone. But when he did, his eyes went to them unerringly. He looked at them icily, then he walked straight to them, looking as always, like a disheveled god in his chainmail.
“Merlin. You can join the queen and I in taking the Rhegedians for a ride outside the city.”

Merlin, who’d flushed with embarrassment and anxiety the instant Arthur addressed him, blurted, alarmed, “Not just us?”

“No, Merlin.” Arthur said dangerously, that old, familiar, almost forgotten lacing of disdain. “Not just us.” He turned and walked off then, tossing over his shoulder, “Go and get ready. And don’t keep everyone waiting.”

Arthur, he realised with a jolt of shock, hadn’t talked to him like that in public since his days as manservant. And at least then he’d known Arthur only half meant it, and there were moments of friendship to leaven the amused and not so amused contempt.

At that second, Merlin wanted to cry.

What had they done to their relationship?

“What the fuck?” Gwaine glowered at Arthur’s retreating back. “He’s had it in for me for months and he’s been ignorin’ you… But today it’s like… “ He shook his head. “I dunno. Maybe they had a proper fight like real people. It had to happen eventually. Even a saint like Gwen’d get fuckin’ fed up of him. Or it’s her time of the month and he didn’t realise women had them.”

“Gwaine!” Merlin was torn between his private despair and shocked amusement. He elbowed the other man ruefully. “You’re obsessed. Sex. Just because it’s all you think about doesn’t mean…”

“Oh no. You don’t get to pretend …”

Merlin shoved his finger hard against Gwaine’s open mouth and Gwaine obediently stopped talking, but he licked Merlin’s finger and caught it between his teeth.

”MERLIN!” It was a roar across the training ground. Startled, he spun round to see Arthur standing, hands on his hips, flanked by William and Leon, and glaring at himself and Gwaine. “I said get ready!”

Merlin glowered, but for all his shaken uneasiness, still enraged by Arthur’s behaviour.

“You get ready,” he muttered ridiculously, subversively, under his breath. But still, Merlin scampered after him, knowing of old that there was nothing to do but ride out Arthur’s bad mood and eventually it would ease. This though… this was new territory.

He fell automatically into old ways, trotting a step or two behind with William, as Arthur strode from the training field with Leon and into the castle. It felt, bizarrely, as if no time had passed at all since he’d done exactly this everyday. But when Leon bowed and peeled off as they passed the hallway toward his rooms, Arthur snapped, “Come on, Merlin!” still striding onward, impatience in human form. Merlin caught up with him, half-running anxiously, until they were almost level, because that seemed to be what Arthur wanted, keeping up appearances at least with his Court Sorcerer. And so they marched silently and swiftly through the corridors, William at their heels, servants and nobility bowing their heads as the young king passed.

All Merlin wanted was to reach his rooms, so he could end that silent, hostile progress.

But suddenly, and with no warning, Arthur sidestepped smoothly out of the main corridor, and just as he did, his hand snapped up, grabbed Merlin’s upper arm and hauled him with him.

The manoeuvre was so swift it took Merlin whole seconds to understand what had happened; to
adapt to the stillness after such blind hurry. Then he registered that they were standing in a short stone corridor, with a closed door at the end, and William wasn’t with them. He had apparently understood much more than Merlin, and dutifully walked on as if nothing had happened.

The change of pace, the suddenness of it, was paralysing, and Merlin let himself be manhandled, bewildered, against a stone wall with no resistance at all.

He found himself staring into Arthur’s frowning, intent face and his own mouth felt parchment-dry with unacknowledged, visceral fear.

"Wh… " he began. He licked his lips for moisture, “Arthur… What?” Then, grimacing, “I mean…”

Arthur’s jaw clenched visibly, fighting for calm.

“I explained everything,” he said and his voice was cold; all stiff, starched formality, “…to the queen.”

For just a second Merlin blessedly didn’t understand. And then came realisation.

His heart was a tiny, clenching pebble of disbelieving shock in his chest.

“Explained...?” he began. He knew he must be mistaken. Of course he was! “To the queen? To… Gwen?” Then, all out panic, “What?”

“What d’you think, Merlin?” Arthur spat, still crowding him against the wall; but he looked away from him now, to the side, and Merlin could see his jaw muscles working, his unease as clear as glass.

“You…” Merlin was gaping still, unable to credit such stupidity … surely he must have got it wrong? This bit at least? “Did you …you didn’t actually tell her …how we…?”

“I didn’t hold anything back from her. She deserved to know,” Arthur returned defiantly.

“Why?” Merlin howled, fear and horror and shame pumping through him now like fast poison.

“She’s my wife! I don’t keep secrets from her.”

You do! You do when it suits you! You do all the time! Merlin thought with a kind of stunned resentment. But Arthur's hypocrisy was the least of it. He raked his hands through his hair, appalled beyond belief.

“Oh God! She hates me now doesn’t she? No….wait. Its Gwen! You said you explained … so she knows it was a kind of a… a destiny thing... and we had to do it that way… it was just a ceremony… and it was only once... And she’s so forgiving she’ll understand…” He looked desperately at Arthur’s blank expression, and felt selfish hope incinerate. “She doesn’t understand does she? God, WHY? Why did you have to…? She was better not knowing! There was no need!”

“Yes! There was! I must’ve been infected by your idiocy to go along for a second with your insane judgment. Its impossible!”

“No!” Merlin yelled. “No. God, Arthur – you’re a king! Kings have to keep secrets sometimes!!”

“I bloody well know that, Merlin! But this is Guinevere! I’m not going to deceive her.”

“But it was once .. she would never have needed to feel the pain of knowing any…”
But Arthur, it seemed, had had quite enough of being lectured.

He put his finger to his own lips sharply, furiously, his old signal to shut up now or face the consequences, that Merlin had reached and passed his boundary of tolerance. His mouth was a tight line of rage behind that warning finger; his eyes wide with threat.

Merlin stopped, but he was furious himself, and disbelieving, and seethingly resentful, face screwed up with terrible frustration and rage. He looked away, grimacing leftward, toward the main corridor, because he had to, or else he’d try to punch the king.

He felt Arthur glaring at him a moment longer, then the other man turned to walk sharply back to the main hallway.

But just before he left he barked sharply over his shoulder, “Courtyard, Merlin! You have ten minutes!” and he disappeared round the corner.

Merlin was left in his tenuous haven, shaking with emotion and all of it negative. And he thought – spat – in his head, Happy you pursued your destiny now, Arthur? with a kind of vicious, despairing rage at the horrible unfairness of it all. That Arthur would force the issue, and then somehow punish Merlin for it; that he should lose his friend completely - both his friends - over it

Gwen! God-- what was Gwen thinking of him?

She had the purest of hearts, but how could she forgive him for bedding with her husband? Joining with him in this... what the hell was it?

A marriage of souls?

Oh fuck! He made a tiny, moaning sound of distress, still leaning, poleaxed and weak-kneed against the wall.

That’s how it would seem to her if she’d listened to the romanticising of the tale of the king of Rheged and the sorcerer he’d love for eternity. And Merlin blanched, imagining how betrayed she must feel; her happiness stolen and dirtied by her old friend.

Somehow he made it back to his chambers and managed to change into riding clothes; sturdy britches, a fine leather jacket. Then, still moving almost by rote, he hurried to the courtyard, dreading with every step what he would find.

Dreading facing Gwen, dreading meeting her eyes.

When he arrived, the group was already mostly mounted in the courtyard; the Rhegedians and Gwen seated on their horses; Arthur, wearing his chainmail and Pendragon red cloak, swinging up onto the back of his huge chestnut stallion, effortlessly graceful and straight-backed.

Merlin’s saddled horse was waiting for him, the faithful dark mare that Arthur had given him years before, because he said she was a tame enough mount even for what he considered to be Merlin’s limited abilities; like riding a moving armchair. Merlin loved her.

They moved out slowly, Gwen looking straight ahead as Arthur talked to Myrthryn on his other side, Bors and Leon behind them, and Merlin and the Rhegedian who’d served as translator now and then, behind them, all their entourages behind that. Gwaine was apparently not required.

In fact Merlin was grateful for the silence, exchanging only short, dazed pleasantries with the Rhegedian, fixed obsessively as he was on Gwen and her behaviour.
As the ride went on though, it seemed to him that she was as engaged with Arthur as ever, laughing softly, looking at him proudly, grasping the hand he held out toward her.

Only a close friend like Merlin who knew her so well, would see the tiny lines of tension in her, the moments she looked away to the side of the road when Arthur’s attention was turned from her.

But for all that, she seemed to be coping brilliantly; vintage Gwen, always able to continue valiantly however great the challenge. So often, Merlin thought she was so perfect that she didn’t seem human; so good, so without flaw. The only person he’d found to come close to that unfailing, faultless goodness was Lancelot. The rest of them muddled along with all their human failings and tiny uglinesses.

As he watched, Merlin felt only a kind of vast relief at first, because his imaginings had been so much more vicious. But Gwen, far from turning on him with reproach, had apparently failed to register he was even there. He hadn’t been aware of how tightly clenched his muscles had been, until he felt them relax slowly. He had been so, so terrified of Gwen’s pain and her betrayal.

And yet, as he let his fear begin to drain away, as he rode behind his old friends, looking at Arthur and his true love joined in unshaken and unshakeable mutual unity, he realised, once that first panicked relief was past, that what he felt wasn’t simple, uncomplicated pleasure for their continued happiness and for his own narrow escape.

It was far more complicated than that.

It was a kind of sharp pain in his chest when they smiled at each other that way, when she reached out and took his hand. And he despised himself. Because it was jealousy; dirty and unworthy.

Even, in a strange, furtive way, disappointment.

As the party rode on slowly, Merlin felt his depression, his desperation building; his awareness of Arthur now, of his own feelings so great it was agonising; all his old, necessary self-delusion gone, melted away, like ice on a hotplate. All the parts he’d managed to guard and keep for himself had lost their defences. Like an animal, defeated and worn down, his underbelly was bared and open to all the slashing pain of unwelcome, hopeless knowledge.

He knew what the night before had done to him, and he accepted that there was going to be nothing but pain in it.

Yet he couldn’t keep his eyes from Arthur, couldn’t stop looking at things he’d always seen, but somehow, mercifully managed to hide from.

That Arthur was so noble and so strong and so beautiful… That Gwen so loved her king that she couldn’t stop looking proudly at him, and he loved her equally back.

And he knew that, even if somehow Gwen managed to forget what he’d done with Arthur, and forgive him, as she seemed to have forgiven Arthur, Merlin would have to fight every day for the rest of his sad life to stop remembering that one shocking, glorious evening. Stop himself taking it out and huddling over it like a miser’s hoard.

And that, destiny or not, Arthur or not, he needed to get away from Camelot.

Somehow, some last vestige of self-preservation forced his compulsive stare away from the couple in front of him.

He resurfaced to reality instead, plodding along in the warm sunlight on his docile horse, meeting
the amused eyes of the Rhegedian at his side.

The knowingness in that look made the blood rush to his head so hard that he knew his ever betraying ears would be beacon red. But after the first rush of paranoia, he forced calm on himself.

He hadn’t been doing anything, had he? Just looking at his king and queen. The man couldn’t read his mind.

He darted another look at his companion - handsome, dark haired, thin-faced and bearded, not much older than Merlin really, with pale skin and light grey eyes, shining with a kind of bright intelligence. Merlin had been introduced to him when he met Myrthryn, but his name had slipped away in the pressure of the evening. He felt incredibly awkward about that now.

He smiled tentatively though, and the man smiled back.

“Brychusa, my lord,” he said quietly, voice only faintly accented, and Merlin’s flush, which had been fading, flared up again at once. Yes, he really was that obvious.

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“Umm… Yes… that’s… Ummm…..” He decided to stop.

Brychusa’s smile widened to a grin and he bowed his head confidingly.

“I don’t have much of a memory for names either, my Lord Emrys.” Then as he caught the look on Merlin’s face, he said hastily, “I mean Merlin.”

They looked at each other blankly for a second, then, simultaneously, let out barks of mirth that had heads turning back toward them; among them, Merlin was unnerved to see, Arthur’s. Myrthryn too, turned and smiled; Arthur’s glare though, was anything but encouraging.

Merlin swallowed, the moment of levity bursting like a bubble on hot ground. He looked down and fixed his eyes there, as if his hands on the reins of his horse were the most fascinating sight in the world. His stomach felt like stone.

“The king has claimed you at last,” Brychusa said softly, a simple observation.

Merlin pulled in a glass-sharp breath.

He couldn’t believe what he’d heard for a second, then he lifted his eyes again to stare in total shock at his companion.

Brychusa wasn’t looking at him, though. He was staring instead, casually, straight ahead, and he looked perfectly relaxed, as if he hadn’t just dropped a boulder into Merlin’s life.

Merlin tried instinctively for denial. “I… really don’t know what…”

“My Lord Emrys…”

“My Lord Emrys…” Merlin said automatically, resisting that name now with all he was.

“My Lord Emrys…” Brychusa parroted obediently, “We all…all in the embassy… have knowledge of magic, and the old ways. It may be as a child’s talent compared with your greatness…”

Merlin, still cold with horror, nevertheless found it in himself to shake his head, to instinctively deny that; knowing, knowing that there must be more talented, surer, cleverer sorcerors than he, popping out of every ditch and hedgerow in Rheged. That he had decided he could not be, did not want to be this person the Old Religion had been awaiting from the beginning.
Not when he was, in reality, this confused, yearning, guilt-riddled mess, who couldn’t even manage his own life without disaster.

Brythusa continued though, as if Merlin had merely been politely diplomatic.

“We sensed the union,” he finished simply. And Merlin just didn’t have it in him to argue or lie any more. He felt hot with embarrassment though, knowing Brychusa would be well aware of exactly what ‘claiming’ involved.

Merlin said desperately, dismissively, “It’s not important,” and looked down again at his hands, clenched on the reins.

“It’s the union we came to celebrate...” Brychusa countered and Merlin could feel his serene eyes, calmly watching his mortification, his discomfort. “The union of Emrys and the Once And Future king. … together, your destiny holds hope for many, my lord. In more than this life.”

It sounded like a prophecy; just as Arthur had said, and it was more than Merlin could, or wanted to, comprehend or believe.

He looked straight ahead and caught Gwen’s strained profile as she listened to some remark of Myrthryn’s across Arthur’s body.

“Personally…” Merlin spat resentfully, “I’m sick of destiny!”

He turned his head to glare at Brychusa, and he wasn’t trying any more to be Camelot’s Court Sorceror, to be smooth or adult or sophisticated, to impress these men for Arthur.

He was what he was: a young man sick with useless love and guilt and rejection and fear; tired of lies and betrayals and loss. Tired of fighting for a future he didn’t even know he wanted to be part of any more.

“Why can’t we just ... ignore it?” he hissed “Just...avoid it?” And he thought of Mordred, and all he - Merlin - had done to avert Arthur’s prophesied fate at his hands; change, fight off destiny. “We can live the lives we want to live, instead of being imprisoned by prophecies and...”

He realised Brychusa was smiling indulgently, almost pleased.

“What?” Merlin snapped irritably, then reddened again at his own rudeness.

Brychusa’s smile widened.

“You and your king are very alike at heart. He asked Lord Myrthryn much the same thing.”

And stupidly, Merlin felt an insane stab of hurt at that. Arthur, it seemed, had stoically accepted all other aspects of his destiny without rebellion, just as he’d always accepted orders from above, but, as he’d said, he really had baulked at Merlin.

It reinforced Merlin’s own small revolution.

“I can only say to you what my lord said to your king. In the end, destiny will not be denied.” Brychusa continued with a shrug and a grin. “That’s why it’s destiny.”

“But...” Merlin insisted angrily, “Say I was told I was destined to murder someone... does that mean I just go out and do it? To get it over with, because destiny says I have to?”

“Being who you are, you would try to avoid it, try to run from it...but in the end it would happen,
and you would do it. Perhaps... the things you did to avoid it, would be the very things that made it happen."

Merlin flashed suddenly on an old memory... of Uther and Morgana and the deceiving vision of the Crystal Cave, that somehow he had actually served to bring about. But if he hadn't meddled, would the outcome have been the same? He shook his head violently, opened his mouth to argue, but Brychusa forestalled him.

"Or... if I told you someone you care for had a sad fate; you would try to wrap them in silks and wool to keep them from it, of course you would... but it would still come to pass, Merlin."

Merlin though, thought again of Mordred, and he knew in his soul that Brychusa had to be wrong. Destiny, cheated and deceived. He had experience of it.

"You can't know that! And anyway... our... destiny..." He lowered his voice automatically, "Mine and Arthur's... it wasn't spelled out like that....that clearly. Yeah, I was told we're 'two halves of a whole', but that could mean..."

"What else could it mean? That you were fated to be his friend? Or his bodyguard? Like Sir Leon perhaps? Perhaps he is your lord's other half?" Brychusa shook his head gently, "You know better, Merlin. You and your king were made for each other; created for each other. Arthur Pendragon cannot achieve his greatness without Emrys. Emrys cannot find his destiny without Arthur. You need each other. You need unity."

There was a short hushed silence, and all Merlin could hear was the slow clopping of horses’ hooves and the murmuring of polite conversation around them.

"What if I'm not Emrys?!" Merlin whispered and he heard the desperate, passionate wishing in it himself.

Because he was so weary of it, this poisoned gift which had been laid upon him before he was even born, which he was so very ill-equipped to wield.

Brychusa looked at him with what Merlin thought was a kind of pity.

"And... Arthur is not the Once And Future king?" Merlin looked away, eyes trained compulsively on Arthur's broad, straight back, on his soft, golden hair, flickering in the bright sunlight as it filtered through the leaves above them. It was such a beautiful day. "Emrys and Arthur... they can not be complete or truly at peace without each other."

"We could have tried," Merlin said desperately.

But he knew too well how Arthur would have reacted to hearing the suggestion that he should run from his destiny. Knew how he had reacted. Knew that the damage was done. All he could do was try to lessen it for all of them.

He felt despairing resignation threatening to descend upon his shoulders like a cloak, and then out of the blue, he felt a rush of courage, of clear-headed resentment and rebellion; subversive, cleansing, liberating.

Because - why should he listen to any of it? He’d blindly obeyed the dictates laid down to him by the Old Religion for far too long; the stark lines of his own destiny scored into his being by Kilgarrah from the start, like etchings on a sword. But his desperation now told him, it didn’t have to be. He didn’t have to believe them or submit to them.
He knew what he needed to do, very clearly, *destiny* or not.

He needed to leave Camelot. For a while.

A good while.

Give Gwen that at least; give himself the chance to scab over his wounds; take himself out of Arthur’s sight and away from his resentment and disgust. Run from that look in Arthur’s eyes.

Because he knew he couldn’t cope with it. The cold mistrust had been bad enough, even when he hadn’t accepted how he felt for Arthur, but now on top of losing that protective delusion, to have Arthur unfairly resenting him for the cruelty of a fate that bound him so tightly, beyond death, without escape, to a man he didn’t want, hurting his own true love in the process.

It was impossible.

He heard the call from a distance, for the procession to halt, his thoughts whirling like dust motes in the breeze; now that an escape had presented itself, plotting, planning. But somehow, he dismounted and replied to friendly remarks from Leon and Bors with enough normality to get by. They’d reached an escarpment at one edge of the woods looking out over a part of Camelot, one of Arthur's favourite spots for showing off the beauties and wealth of his kingdom to his visitors.

The king, the queen and Myrthryn seated themselves on a fallen tree trunk with the finest view before them, so Brychusa tugged lightly on Merlin’s sleeve and led him to the shade of a huge beech tree where they leaned together, watching servants hurrying to set out rugs and cushions and dishes on tree-shadowed grass - work Merlin would have been doing himself not so very long ago.

“I’ve come to rather like you....”

His jaw clenched hard. He felt again that desperate, sick longing for the past; for a time when it had been just them, Merlin and Arthur, prince and servant, almost friends, off on their stupid bloody adventures. And Arthur had used him like a pack-horse and a drudge, but now and then, cared enough to try to cheer him up in his bloody useless, emotionally incoherent way.

He became aware Brychusa was watching him, only when he felt a touch on his sleeve again, comforting.

“Heads of such intensity, tied by magic, they can be difficult at first,” he said softly. Merlin looked at the ground and he didn’t reply. He knew he should be pretending; hiding from the Rhegedians how much of a disaster this was proving to be, but he found he just couldn’t. He couldn’t find a thing to say to make what had happened with Arthur sound even remotely hopeful or right. “They…. drive all before them.”

Merlin grimaced, seeing again the memory of Arthur’s face that morning. The pure sword steel of his resentments. He met Brychusa’s eyes, let him see his own hopeless pain and bewilderment.

“Oh oh...” Brychusa went on carefully, “Often there are…casualties… It can be cruel to those...”

“My lord...” William was in front of them. Just …there... without Merlin even being aware he was approaching; as ever, obsequiously impossible to deny. “His Majesty requests you join him.”

Merlin felt his breath stutter with horror, but then William clarified and Merlin realised he was actually being ignored. “To help translate for Lord Myrthryn. If you would be so kind.”

He finished with a low bow, and waited, clearly unwilling to return without the prize he had been sent to fetch.
Brychusa nodded, but as he stood straight, he raised a significant eyebrow at Merlin, giving him a knowing smile. “And hard to control,” he finished meaningfully, and then bowed to Merlin and followed William across the glade to the fallen trunk on which the king and queen were seated with his countryman.

Merlin looked after him, frowning, his curiosity piqued by the silent message Brychusa had clearly been meaning to convey, but as his eyes followed the Rhegedian's retreating figure, he met Arthur’s hard gaze, pinning him across the clearing as Brychusa finally, dutifully sat down on the ground at Lord Myrthryn’s feet. Merlin helplessly looked back, his distress, he was horribly sure, quite obvious, until Arthur turned his eyes away when Gwen laid a hand on his sleeve and he looked down at her with a smile.

Merlin dragged his gaze away then himself, and walked over to Bors and Leon, since it seemed, thankfully, that Arthur realised Emrys’ pull with the Rhegedians was totally outweighed by the horrible awkwardness of any interaction on his part with Gwen.

But still, horribly logical as it was, that obvious, tactless exclusion hurt.

Why had he been ordered to come along at all?

He stayed with the knights through the impressive picnic, eating almost nothing, and rode on his own on the way back to the city, since Brychusa had apparently been commandeered to ride with Myrthryn and the royal couple. Merlin though, by then, was grateful for the chance to think and brood alone, and to perfect what he was going to say to Arthur.

When they dismounted at last, back in the castle courtyard, Merlin’s back and backside were aching again, still not recovered from the intense sexual activity of the night before after almost two months of abstinence, and a week of riding before that. And he was tired too, tired to his bones.

He felt ancient when he slid off his horse’s back and massively relieved that he could hand the reins to someone else to stable rather than having to care for his own and Arthur’s mounts, and even, occasionally, in his last years as manservant, Gwen’s horse as well.

That had been hard at times, he admitted shamefully, honestly, to himself at last - having to serve and bow to his old friend as she was elevated and loved, and he was left in the role of world’s worst manservant to cuff and laugh at and rely upon. He wondered exactly how long he’d been jealous of Gwen.

He chose his moment; waited until Arthur, Gwen and Myrthryn were already climbing the steps to the castle when he collared William.

“Er.... could you ask His Majesty for me… “ he began, with his customary uneasiness around a servant who had basically scared him for years, “…if I can see him this evening? Please tell him… I won’t keep him long, but it’s vitally important.”

William looked for a moment as if he were about to say something himself, but he seemed to change his mind, and his expression smoothed back to blankness. He nodded, bowed and hurried to follow his master.

At least the wheels are kind of… in motion, Merlin thought with pathetic hope.

Perhaps, soon, it would all be better.

He realised, with an almost numb kind of depression and embarrassment, that neither Arthur nor Gwen had acknowledged him at all through the entire ride and it had taken hours. And he
wondered if anyone else had noticed that; if Myrthryn for example, was puzzled why the great Emrys, Camelot’s Court Sorceror, was treated like some unimportant courtier, there to make up the numbers.

But then, going by Brychusa, he thought, drenched in gloom, the Rhegedians had a pretty good idea all wasn’t well.

When he reached his room, Merlin stripped tiredly and climbed into the bath Bran had filled, heating the water with a tiny wave of his hand, enormously grateful for the chance to unlock his knotted muscles. Thankfully there was no banquet that night; instead the Rhegedians were allowed to relax at last. Merlin was mightily glad of the reprieve in any case.

He’d already emerged and was standing, staring blankly at the wall in front of him, wrapped in a drying sheet, when a knock sounded at the door, and his stomach immediately went into the kind of nervous spasm that had him again fearing the runs. But as he waited, tense and very still, to discover if he was to get his confrontation after all, Bran turned, smiling, from the door after a murmured conversation, and informed him it had been Gwaine’s squire, inviting Merlin to join his master for dinner.

Merlin was cruelly tempted by the thought of the easy comfort he could find there, in contrast to the evening he was planning; the distraction and the warmth and the love Gwaine offered.

But he had asked for a meeting with the king, and although he knew Arthur was very likely to refuse that tonight, to choose a formal audience tomorrow instead, he had to be ready, just in case.

He told Bran to pass on the message that he was exhausted, but would drop by for a quick drink if he could, though he may just pass out instead, and he knew that Gwaine would understand, however horny he might be. That Gwaine would believe him.

He had already shaved and was struggling into a loose, dark blue tunic just a few minutes later, when the next knock sounded. This time Merlin was almost vibrating with tension as Bran stopped poking the fire and conducted another low voiced conversation with his visitor in the corridor, before the door closed again.

Bran was frowning slightly this time though, curiosity sharp in his dark eyes.

“The king has requested you meet him in his chambers after dinner, Sire,” he said correctly, and for all the ‘requested’ there was no arguing with that.

It was a summons.

Merlin nodded slowly and his insides immediately began their wild whirling again, nerves flittering and churning. But he knew he had appearances to keep up and he was always far too good at that, so he sat, outwardly calm and inwardly agonising, as Bran put his dinner in front of him and he proceeded to eat almost none of it as he rehearsed his lines in his head.

He knew exactly what he wanted to say, what he had to say, but …he would be seeing Arthur again, and they would be alone... His mind began to skitter with panic.

Still, he told himself bracingly, Arthur would have to listen; he couldn’t just ignore him and walk away. Or at least, Merlin thought ruefully, if he did, Merlin would have the privacy and freedom to
call him names.

He felt both very afraid at knowing he was about to be the sole focus of Arthur’s attention again, and treacherously thrilled. He also thought he may be about to be sick. He felt the way he’d felt before he went into battle with opponents he wasn’t sure how to defeat; before he faced odds that terrified him.

He knew … he knew he wouldn’t come back to these rooms happy, but he also knew Arthur would see the sense of what he was proposing; that the gains from his leaving would outweigh the loss of his powers to Camelot, while the kingdoms had some temporary respite at least from war. If he was needed urgently, if the Saxons or Morgana or even Mordred became an issue again, he could be summoned.

And maybe in time, Gwen would forgive, and Merlin and Arthur could begin to forget. And he could come home again.

Bubbling along beneath it all though, was the nagging guilt of Gwaine.

If Gwen knew, shouldn’t Gwaine?

And, yes, Merlin knew, yes of course he should, yet his instincts rejected the idea absolutely.

How could he risk the real chance of losing him, when Gwaine was all he had to save him from his disastrous feelings for Arthur? When Gwaine was his only hope for happiness?

When Gwaine loved him, and he loved Gwaine?

How could he hurt him, and all, in the end, for nothing? Some secrets were better kept.

Maybe once he’d persuaded Arthur to let him leave, he could also talk him into allowing Gwaine to go with him. Though in truth, Merlin knew Gwaine would do what he liked in the end, Arthur or not, Merlin or not.

He couldn’t eat another bite of his meal but he spent some more time dawdling and fiddling casually with papers on which he couldn’t concentrate. Then at last, he stood, clenched his jaw and left his room, heading through the maze of corridors and staircases to Arthur’s chambers.

William opened the door on the second knock and Merlin saw behind him a small fire blazing, and a flagon of wine on the table with two goblets placed beside it, but there was no sign of Arthur. He knew that the chamber had probably been set up for this meeting, since Arthur would likely be spending the night with Gwen as usual. Unless she was so upset she’d banished him for a time in punishment.

William ushered him in with a bow, and Merlin, grateful for the heat of a fire on his fear-chilled body, shuffled over to the mantlepiece and nodded tentatively in a way he hoped the other man would tolerate as fitting to his station.

“His Majesty is still dining with the queen, Sire, but he requested you wait for him here.”

Merlin gave another curt nod, jaw tense now as corded wire. He moved to sit cautiously at the opposite end of the table to the seat Arthur had customarily used on Merlin’s rare visits here and since William didn’t change expression, Merlin guessed he’d chosen correctly. He accepted wine for something to do with his hands.

He didn’t even attempt small-talk though; he knew better. But as he sat there awkwardly, watching
William go smoothly and precisely about the tasks he used to perform himself, Merlin wondered what the other man was thinking really.

When Merlin had been been the Crown Prince’s manservant, and William had been King Uther’s for more than a decade already, Merlin had always felt sensibly apprehensive of encounters with the older man. Because Merlin had always felt, simply from the freezing looks he received, that William viewed him as an affront to royal servants everywhere and simply couldn’t understand Arthur keeping him around at all, never mind including him in every aspect of his life.

They’d always been so utterly different - Merlin shambolic and easy going; William neat, disciplined and humourless.

But then, surely, from William’s point of view, it must have seemed as if, once Arthur became king, Merlin, a pretty poor servant in the greater scheme of things, had inexplicably supplanted him. Shoved him back into the ranks of ordinary minions, living off his past glories as manservant to the king.

And to top it all, out of nowhere, that inadequate, role-stealing servant was revealed to have been magic all along. But instead of being burned at the stake as William’s old master would have done in a heartbeat, he was rewarded - as William never would be, for all his impeccable service - with a court position. And given his own manservant. That, after William had already had to accept as his queen, the servant girl who’d worked beside him in caring for Uther in the days after Morgana had broken his health and his spirit.

Thought of like that, Merlin could see why William might be seethingly resentful, even if he had managed to get his old job back. Yet under that stern, emotionless mask, Merlin had never seen even the barest hint of anger at Arthur.

Instead, William seemed as drenched in absolute loyalty to the new king as he ever had been to the old one.

Merlin never made the mistake of the nobility though, believing somehow, that because the mass of servants were obediently silent and deferential and mind-my-own-business, they couldn’t see and hear.

He knew William must be well aware something was going on behind the scenes at the moment; after all, Merlin realised abruptly with a dry-hot flush of shocked mortification, he would have had to clean the covers of Arthur’s bed after Merlin came all over them.

*God. He must know … something* after that evening, he thought with feverish horror. And he’d certainly seen Arthur physically drag Merlin away in the corridor, and he was bound to have seen the king emerge from their short, hissed conversation, white with rage...

William was anything but stupid.

Yet Merlin tried to calm himself with the conviction that William, from what he knew of him, would never gossip, never flinch in his devotion to the king, whoever he may be.

It didn’t make sitting there any easier though, waiting for Arthur, wondering what William was thinking.

As time dragged on, he took to tapping the stem of his goblet compulsively, staring at the tiny waves of movement in the deep crimson wine inside and he couldn’t say how long he waited, but it was long enough for his tension to rachet up to unbearable knotting cramps in his abdomen. Then,
just as anticlimax was beginning to set in, just as he was starting, despite himself, to slowly begin to relax again... that, of course, was when the chamber door burst open and Arthur strode in.

Merlin started so violently he saved the goblet only at the last second from upending. William didn’t even flinch.

Arthur was dressed in a blue tunic and simple breeches. He looked both stern and discontented, an expression that deepened if anything when he laid eyes on Merlin seated at his table. Merlin swallowed hard.

Arthur slammed the door shut behind him, then stalked to his chair, nodding to William, who promptly poured wine into the empty goblet waiting on the table.

“That’s all for now, William,” Arthur said shortly as he threw himself down into the seat. “I won’t be requiring you any more this evening.”

William bowed and left without a word, even though Merlin knew he slept each night in the servant’s room off this one.

The huge gap between the servant William was, and the servant Merlin had been, had never been more obvious. Merlin knew he’d most probably have demanded to know when he could get to bed.

There it was again though - that surge of desperate nostalgia for the simplicity of those days when all Arthur had expected of him was loyalty, mild subversion, slave labour and grinning idiocy.

Now they sat at the same table, each not quite meeting the other’s eye.

“You have to tell him when he can come back to bed, you know,” Merlin ventured finally; exactly what Merlin would have said to Arthur at any time since they met. But now he felt as if he’d blurted it out to Uther.

Arthur didn’t deign to reply.

The emotional distance between them appalled Merlin, and he felt unhappily defensive, Arthur still staring at him with such an odd moody intensity, it felt almost like fury.

Perhaps, Merlin thought with a liquid rush of cowardice, now wasn’t the best time after all.

He said quickly, making to stand, “Look… I can go...”

But Arthur snapped angrily, “I haven’t given you leave. Sit down.”

Merlin subsided and waited, boiling with nerves and anger at Arthur’s attitude, and equal worry at what they had become, all congealing in his chest till he felt sick with it.

“There’s to be a council meeting tomorrow,” Arthur said at last into the icy quiet. “To discuss the alliance with Rheged. I expect you to be there. If there’s anything we should know about …any nasty surprises… I need to be told now.”

Merlin nodded once, though a part of him was wondering why Arthur had left it this late.

Did they think that because he was magic, only he could understand Rheged? Why not ask Gaius while Merlin was away, since he was on Arthur’s council too?

Merlin looked down at his right hand, clenched now convulsively around his goblet stem and forced himself to face up to the fact that he was actually thrilled ... that he was ferociously glad that...
Arthur still wanted his opinion.

The silence stretched again, Arthur, pouting and frowning heavily, playing with his goblet too.

Merlin gathered his courage and decided to cut to the chase, since Arthur clearly wasn’t going to ask him what he wanted. He swallowed hard and began, hating the tight thinness of his own voice.

“You had …you had dinner with Gwen…?” Arthur didn’t reply but his expression seemed to freeze. “Did it…” Merlin persevered, “Did she…? I mean … is she... is everything all right between you?” he finished in a rush.

Arthur’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “And… that is your business …why, exactly?”

Merlin gaped, and then, as he processed properly what Arthur had said, his nervousness blasted into indignation in an instant.

"My. Business?" he repeated incredulously, “It would be my business, since you decided to tell her what we did!”

“How my wife and I are …”

“I don’t care how your wife and you are,” Merlin shouted. Well that was a lie and they both knew it. “I just …” His voice lowered, rage dimming already before overwhelming apprehension, his emotions as volatile as he’d ever known them. “I need to know if she’s accepted... at all.. what … we did. Why we did it..."

Arthur met his eyes for a second, then he looked away. Merlin’s hopes plummeted.

“She hasn’t, has she?” he murmured despairingly.

Arthur’s mouth seemed to twist in a kind of involuntary grimace.

“Guinevere has a great heart, and she loves Camelot. She understands that we couldn’t avoid what was destined for us. For the good of all,” Arthur said stiffly, but he still wasn’t meeting Merlin’s eye.

“But...?” Merlin prompted nervously and Arthur’s gaze shot back to him.

“But, she’s a woman and she’s naturally… she needs time to adapt.”

Merlin slumped. “She hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” Arthur said scornfully as if he was talking to a child, exaggerating. Then, repeated, “She just needs time to adjust.”

And that, Merlin knew, was his cue.

“Well... Maybe I should go away again then,” he said, with very deliberate calm, striving to keep all his desperation for escape from colouring his tone. “It’ll give her time ...without seeing me around, Arthur.” He did his best to sound as reasonable and persuasive as possible, and he was sure he’d succeeded. He sounded very reasonable to himself.

But, “Running away again, Merlin?” Arthur sneered, and his voice was so woven through with a complexity of emotion that Merlin was lost. He wondered if he heard hope or dislike. He decided to go with hope.
“It’s not running away,” he argued firmly, steadily. “Its sensible. And better for Gwen. Look, there’s a patrol leaving for the West tomorrow for a few months... four …maybe even five! I could go along to...to help with protection. I could…”

“No.”

Merlin blinked, somehow shocked by such absolute rejection. But he’d prepared alternatives.

“Then, somewhere else. Another diplomatic mission! I could go to Rheged with the delegation when they leave! It’s just a few days until then, isn’t it? I mean it’d help cement an alliance…it’s bound to please them if you send Emrys there,” And he wasn’t above using even that shamelessly. His facade of soothing reason had disintegrated along the way and he was babbling now he knew, desperate to convince, but he was sure... “Its perfect, Arthur! It’d give everything a chance to...to cool down. Give us all a chance to forget. And maybe you’d let Gwaine come wi…”

“I said no!” Arthur slammed his goblet hard onto the table, tiny drops of wine splashing over the rim onto his smooth, tanned hand. He was glaring at Merlin and he looked furious.

Merlin stared back, stunned.

“Why?” he demanded desperately. “Why not? You know it would be best for everyone!”

“Because I said so!”

It was insane. Nonsensical! But he knew Arthur; he knew a pig-headed, immovable decision. He swallowed hard against the panic that was growing in him, rising up like bile to his throat.

“D’you want me to talk to her then?” he asked helplessly.

“That’s up to you,” Arthur snapped. “To both of you.”

And that, it seemed, was that; the extent of Arthur’s help for this disaster he’d done so much to create.

“Right,” Merlin said, and he could feel his mouth twisting with emotion, all of it negative.

Arthur looked down at his goblet again, wiped the back of his hand absently and there was another silence, stretching painfully as Arthur brooded into his drink and Merlin fought down all the ugly things he wanted to scream and yell at him.

In the end all he said was a stiff, coldly formal, “Have I leave to go then, Sire?”

Arthur looked up, and Merlin could see then that his eyes were seething with hostility. Boiling with it.

Merlin flinched, shocked, and despite himself, apprehensive; at a loss, in the face of Arthur’s rage. What right did he have to be angry?

“Did you bed with him?”

There was a short, gasping pause. Merlin stared, wide eyed.

“What?” he croaked, and all his astonishment was in his voice

“You heard me perfectly,” Arthur bit out.
Merlin blinked once, twice, still held by the power of the king's furious stare and he tried to process the question properly. Had he…? With Gwaine? Before he and Arthur had… done it? Or…?

“You mean…” He swallowed nervously. “…After…” He managed uncertainly.

“What d’you think?” Pure furious contempt.

Merlin could see that Arthur thought he was stalling, as if he’d done something wrong. And that he loathed even to be asking, resented Merlin for it.

And at last, that was it. All Merlin’s uncertainty and apprehension just coalesced in a second into indignation – the spark to the dry tinder of his own buried rage - and it was there, instant and massive, fuelled by such bitter resentment at his own treacherous feelings, and grief at Arthur’s, and there was no stopping it. He was finished with appeasement, with pussy-footing around.

“The answer is yes,” he snapped. Then, “It’s none of your business!” Then, “Why shouldn’t I?”

Arthur looked, Merlin thought distantly through his own anger, choleric, ready to ignite with temper.

“You know very well!!” he hissed.

“So… And… Wait…you think that makes me some sort of possession?” Merlin yelled back disbelievingly, “So you can decide what I do now in everything?” Arthur didn’t speak, didn’t break his waiting glare. “Did you bed with Gwen?”

He was so furious he forgot he was speaking to the king. He was out of control with the prat-- the supercilious, pompous, arrogant arsehole, as he never had been in all their years together.

Arthur’s jaw clenched dangerously. “Guinevere is my wife”

“You keep reminding me. So that makes it all right for you, but not for me does it? Well her being your wife didn’t seem to bother you much when you were shoving me on the bed…”

“Merlin. You really need to shut up now,” Arthur gritted out and the open rage in him matched Merlin’s.

Merlin’s hands grasped the arms of his chair, but instead of taking warning, his fury incredibly, ratcheted up another notch.

“Thought so!” he mocked recklessly, “All that banging on about The Truth, but you don’t like to hear it, do you?” And then as if someone had spoken in his ear, he thought he understood.

“You’re planning to tell him,” he said disbelievingly, Arthur raised a speakingly contemptuous eyebrow.

“I’d say that’s your job.”

It’s … “No! “ Weakly, feeling the ground of his life shifting and churning beneath him. His stomach dropped, and fear roared in.

“Gwen …” he asked through that sick panic, “Will she tell him?”

If she did…if she did, he could lose Gwaine in a few sentences - his future - all he had left against this insanity! But Arthur telling Gwen had pushed them all to such an impossible position.
“You can’t help it can you? Secrets and lies.” Arthur’s curled lip spoke clearly of his disdain, a look Merlin had seen directed his own way in various intensities so many times over the years. “Don’t you think he deserves to know?”

“So he can feel as unsure and betrayed as Gwen?” Merlin hissed, appalled, because he knew Arthur was right. And totally wrong. “And for… for nothing? It was once! For your fucking destiny! And now you want to spread the havoc you’ve already caused with your stupid need for perfect truth! If we had to do… that, we didn’t need to tell anyone!”

Merlin’s hand was lodged in the thickness of his own hair, pulling at it with sheer frustration, any urge to calm long, long gone, ragingly afraid of the damage Arthur’s newly obsessive pursuit of destiny and his naïve ideas of nobility were causing all of them.

Gwaine wanted to be with him. He loved him, trusted him, and until Arthur had pushed, he had every reason to.

But now, Merlin knew he was cornered.

“I should have known! You never wanted me with him from the start, did you?!” Yelling. Accusing. Bitter beyond belief.

Arthur leaned back in his chair, looking more and more the picture of aristocratic ease as Merlin’s panic and anger mounted and Merlin realised with a shock of shamed rage, he hadn’t even raised his voice. Now, Arthur elevated an eyebrow lazily and meaningfully, not even pretending to deny the charge; as if anyone sane, would know that of course he’d disapprove.

Merlin’s useless fury surged higher still, so hurt and angry now, he was almost crying with it.

Because he knew he was trapped, cornered by Arthur’s insane expectations, and the injustice of it all… to be punished and looked down on after all he’d done for him! All the pain and grief and guilt he’d borne; always putting Arthur first, believing in him, suffering for him, killing for him, loving him… and in return…

“Oh course not!” he spat, voice shaking with the bitterness he had never allowed his king to see before, “You couldn’t have one of Camelot’s glorious knights with a sorceror, could you? I’m only good for scaring your enemies with! A sorceror, a liar, never to be trusted…!”

Arthur was shaking his head wonderingly as Merlin ranted on, his mouth half raised in his old, lopsided sneer of amazed contempt. “Spot on with all three Merlin! But you forgot a really important one! Moron. You’re a bloody moron too!”

“Bastard! “ Merlin gave a disbelieving sob, all restraint melted to nothing. “So now you’ve trapped me in this …thing…” spat with disgust, “you think I’m supposed just to live to be your weapon? You claimed me, like your sword and that’s supposed to mean my life as a man is over? I’m supposed to forget I’m human? Just…exist alone, where you can control me…for your destiny? That’s all I’ve ever been to you…all I ever will be. A …a servant you look down on… to use and drop on a whim! What about…?”

“My god!!” In one strong, violent surge Arthur was up and right in front of Merlin, leaning over him threateningly, hands on the arms of his chair. Merlin shrank back, instinctively intimidated.

“You really are a cretin!!!” Arthur hissed unbelievingly. “Well Merlin… I don’t think even you’re going to be able to complain you’re alone. Since I’m going to fuck you every chance I get.”

Merlin, breath still hitching with distress, drew one last involuntary gasp of air and gaped up at the
other man, open mouthed. He felt for a second, as if shock had stopped his heart.

Arthur, he thought dazedly, looked slightly shocked himself once the words were out of his mouth, but he was never one to admit a disadvantage. He shook his head with huge impatience, grabbed the front of Merlin’s tunic and straightened up, hauling Merlin unwillingly up with him from the chair as easily as lifting a cushion.

“Close your mouth, Emrys. You look like a fish.” They stared at each other for a long, long second, Arthur still clearly furious, Merlin feeling as if he’d taken a blow to the head. “Or, on second thought…”

Arthur tightened his grip and hauled Merlin closer by the tunic, until they were face to face, then he snaked his other hand up to hold his chin steady and slammed his mouth down, shoving his tongue brutally between Merlin’s still open lips, and he began a kiss of such ferocity that Merlin’s mind went white.

It was just like the first time, just even more urgent, more desperate.

When Arthur wrenched his lips away he was already propelling Merlin toward the wall, one hand still holding his chin, slamming him against it as he took his mouth again.

“Myrthryn thinks you’re his,” Arthur hissed against his cheek when the kiss ended. Merlin stared at nothing, panting, stunned. Arthur pulled back until he was glaring into his wide, stunned eyes. “He fucking congratulated him. You’ve never been his. And if you think I’m going to let anyone else touch you after this… think again.”

“Arthur…”

“Did you let him have you?” Arthur’s voice was hoarse, threatening, accusing. Merlin gaped, voiceless. Arthur’s hand released his tunic and snaked down behind him to his arse, gripping possessively. “Did you? After me?”

“No. No.” Merlin replied automatically, desperately trying to placate that hard anger, still trying to make sense of what was happening, the suddenness of the change. And then Arthur kissed him again, hard, possessing, until Merlin’s knees started to give and his thoughts were a blur of nothing but rightness. Joy.

Arthur pulled away again, breathing heavily, and he buried his face against the side of Merlin’s throat, mouthed there, “I thought about it... all night... Couldn’t bloody sleep... Him on you, having you. Spending his seed in you.” He made a harsh, angry sound and bit down hard on the base of Merlin’s long neck, sucked on the teeth marks as Merlin yelped and squirmed, marked him hard. “I can’t believe I even considered your stupid...’It’s just once. No one needs to know because it’s spiritual’. ” He parodied viciously. ”Fuck! Idiot!”

Merlin somehow found the distant thought that perhaps he’d been wrong that morning in his explanation for Arthur’s foul temper, but then that was lost too in sensation.

His skin sang with the excitement of Arthur’s touch... and he understood that this wasn’t just for a ceremony; just an unfortunate means to a necessary end. There was no higher purpose to excuse it.

Incredibly, somehow, Arthur, his glorious, gorgeous prince, actually desired him - Merlin, who’d trailed after him all these years, his gawky, big eared, endlessly mocked and patronised servant cum friend.

His... male servant.
Out of the blue, awareness struck home, hauling him cruelly back to his senses. Waiting then to slither in and sneer at him for believing even for an instant that this could be real.

Despising him totally for wanting it to be real.

Because Arthur desired women. He idealised women; he loved Gwen.

He tried to force himself to think, think rationally even as Arthur pulled back and began to mouth hungrily up his neck to his ear, tongue moving liquidly against his skin. He groaned, “Merlin,” and Merlin felt as if his whole body was leaning into it, screaming soundlessly with want and delight.

God... He had to focus…

Truth. Reality.

Arthur loved Gwen. He had for years.

Everyone knew that married men were rarely faithful, and men of the nobility had lovers as a matter of course; they weren’t even required to swear fidelity when they wed, unlike women. It was just the way of things.

But Arthur had never seemed driven by his passions before, though he’d been driven by love. And he’d waited so long to be with Gwen, he shouldn’t want anyone else, man or woman, should he?

Because, this was Arthur, true and steadfast and noble and always there for Gwen through all they’d endured; it was, Merlin had always thought, how he’d won her devotion when Lancelot kept disappearing. Gwen knew she had Arthur’s heart.

And Merlin …Merlin had been, at best, his friend, very gradually more respected, until Arthur learned of his necessary lies. But never treasured. Never protected and valued and cared for and longed for. Even though Merlin was now humiliatedly convinced that Arthur must have known that his servant felt too much for him; was there probably for the taking.

He flashed brutally again on that gloomy afternoon in Arthur’s chambers, readying him for what seemed certain death. And he knew it must have been eating away at him for years, quietly, beneath his awareness. Arthur’s uneasy acknowledgement of Merlin’s devotion; his own rough, embarrassed affection in return, warning him not to care.

So much less. All he could give to someone like Merlin.

‘If I die… It’s what I tell all my young knights…No man is worth your tears…’

Merlin clenched his eyes shut, the pain of it all eviscerating him, shredding his heart.

Because this, Arthur’s mad desire, truly was from nowhere. It was like...

Like a spell.

It had to be the spell he had spoken himself!

An enchantment, like the other times he’d seen Arthur ruled and driven by passion - with Sophia, or with Vivian… false, dirty, the cruelest mind control.

“Arthur. No! No, please!”

He pulled at Arthur’s thick blond hair with the hand he had free and wrenched his neck away from
Arthur’s soft, hungry lips, and he wanted to weep with want.

He wondered again in his grief, at how efficiently he’d buried what he truly felt for so long, until he’d had no knowledge left of what he truly wanted, what his instincts had drawn him toward from his first day in Camelot. And now, now a huge part of him was screaming to accept even this false coin if it meant he could pretend he had Arthur at long last.

“This isn’t…it’s not real, Arthur! It’s what we did! The spell!”

Arthur stilled at last, and pulled back far enough to look at Merlin. His eyes looked huge in his flushed face, pupils lust-blown, black velvet; young and desperate.

They stared at each other frantically, emotions staining the air, thickening it. And it was going nowhere.

“What?” Arthur snapped, at the end of his short patience.

Merlin swallowed hard. He had to stop this, properly this time.

“Think! You never wanted this! Ever! Whatever you feel for me…it’s always been friendship at best. This…this must be part of the binding spell. An enchantment.”

Arthur was really glaring at him now; he looked furious again, homicidal with frustration.

“It was your spell.”

Merlin gaped at him, stunned. “You’re blaming me?”

“You said the words, so if anyone’s enchanted us, it’s you.”

Merlin stared at him wordlessly, beyond distress. How could he counter that? Deny that?

“For god’s sake, Merlin!” Arthur exploded, “If it’s an effect of the…the ceremony, then it is.” He narrowed his eyes, “But how do you explain the fact I’d more or less made up my mind to do it while you were still out of Camelot? That I wasn’t totally…resistant…” And now he looked momentarily awkward at last, “…even before any spell was used?” His temper seemed to be shortening with every word, resenting, so clearly, having to say them. “You can call it an enchantment if you like. But if you can carry any reason in that pea brain of yours, you’d be accepting it’s what was meant for us... It’s meant.”

Merlin looked at him helplessly, unable to argue, to think anything out logically or rationally with Arthur standing there, mouth bruised and swollen… hair disordered from Merlin’s hands.

“I don’t … I don’t understand!” he pleaded. “You’re so noble it hurts!! You’d never put your own wants first like this when other people will be damaged. You’ve... you’ve suddenly decided you want to fuck me, so Gwen and Gwaine have to have their hearts broken? What’s happened to you?”

And Arthur all but gaped at him. “What’s happened?” he hissed furiously, “You ask that? You were made for me.”

There was a short, stunned silence, broken only by the sound of their heavy, distressed breaths.

Merlin closed his eyes. The sheer brute, irrational possessiveness of it was terrifying, as frantically, beautifully arousing as any words he had ever heard. And it was totally unlike the Arthur he knew, the Arthur who let passion know him and control him only at the very heart of battle.
His heart was agony, his cock was stone-hard and leaking with need in his breeches, but Merlin knew for sure that he could not let this happen again. This time he couldn't allow himself to fail. This time he had to protect all of them. And most of all he had to protect Arthur.

He took a shaking breath and looked again into the other man’s hard, furious eyes; fought for coherence, past the need in his own blood.

“But we don’t have to do...that!” he managed at last. He knew he had to find some way to reach the rational part of Arthur, the part untainted by enchantment, ”I’m not some kind of ...thing you have to use because it was specially tailored!”

Arthur stared at him for a moment longer, as if he didn’t quite understand, and then all the seething, dangerous emotion in his eyes seemed to blank into a kind of astonishment.

He threw his hands up helplessly and the atmosphere changed in an instant.

“See? You’re ridiculous!”

“Arthur, I’m not! I’m trying to…”

“If you weren’t so determined to cower away from everything difficult…”

Merlin boggled again at that injustice, instantly sidetracked by Arthur’s unique ability to madden him beyond reason, to probe at his open wounds.

“I don’t! You know I don’t!”

Because Arthur knew about almost all of it: all the blood on his hands, the weight on his conscience… all to keep Arthur safe from his treacherous family, from the enemies his father had honed in fire and blood. All for him, everything for him, even though Merlin had seen so clearly that Arthur would have chosen Morgana or Agravaine or Mordred over him, the man who had never let him down, without a moment’s thought or hesitation, until their treachery had finally been forced in his face.

And Arthur, as ever, now wasn’t even trying to understand.

“Yes, Merlin you bloody do! On things like this ... the things that aren’t black and white, you do! You’re doing it now! Leaving it all to me as usual, while you hide! “

Arthur sounded furious again, ready to burst with frustration, and also, Merlin suddenly realised, almost wounded; but then Merlin knew all too well that, underneath that thick, thick armour of arrogance and certainty, there was a soft core of self-doubt in his own attractiveness; his own worth.

He knew too how little Arthur was equipped to cope with all this; neither of them could ever really talk about emotion. Fury was easy.

“Arthur,” Merlin tried gently, seeking desperately to force some focus through his own tangled emotions, his own desire and pain. He said again, “Think. You’re a man for women. You said it yourself. You don’t want me.”

“That’s beyond stupid even for you Merlin!” Arthur spat.

“You told me..."
“What does it matter what I usually want, you imbecile? At this precise moment I very obviously do... want you.”

“But... why? Aren’t you asking yourself that? It has to be the spell! The things men do together... that... that Gwaine does because he wants them... you don’t. Because it’s not who you are. It’s not...”

“What Gwaine does?” Arthur glowered and Merlin realised, with a jolt of horror, that of course, he could hardly have said anything worse. “And what... exactly... does Gwaine do?”

“I...”

“You lied again, didn’t you?” Arthur accused, silkily threatening, “You let him have you.”

And just like that, everything shifted, right back to Arthur’s feral possessiveness.

Perhaps Merlin’s panic showed on his face because Arthur suddenly pushed forward and shoved him back against the wall; took his mouth again in a savage, brain-melting kiss. And Merlin knew he was staking his claim.

When he pulled back, Merlin could feel every gust of Arthur’s hot breath, as he snarled against his mouth, “What did you do with him?”

Merlin heart was thundering, the adrenaline pulse of arousal and fear thumping in his ears. He fought not to go under to it again, to find something to hold on to, and as ever with Arthur he reached for anger; found as well, shame and resentment, all alongside his bone-melting need.

“Why does it matter?” he gasped. “You were with Gwen, remember?”

“Why? Why do you think? You’re tied to me now!”

“Oh, you bloody hypocrite! So you think you can...!” he began furiously, but he stopped himself, knowing instinctively he couldn’t go near the subject of Gwen right then, too raw and guilty for it, knowing how very willing he had been to shelve his regret and come apart under Arthur, with barely a touch.

Instead, “I gave him my mouth,” he said vengefully, and he was ready to slash at it now as far and deep as he needed, if it brought escape. “Happy?”

But Arthur looked anything but. His eyes went at once to Merlin’s mouth and remained trained there as if he could barely believe it had ever been involved in any activity as lewd as the one to which Merlin had just confessed.

And Merlin, driven by that disgusted, mesmerised stare, raised his chin and added defiantly, “And he gave me his.”

Arthur’s gaze snapped up, that startled, almost innocent disbelief and shock, even greater now, as if Merlin had just told him that he mated with pigs. It struck home to Merlin viciously then, how little Arthur knew of sex between men; how one dimensional it had been... what they’d done together.

He had played the woman for Arthur; as simple as that. And God help him, he’d loved it so much he didn’t think anything could ever compare again. The thought was so appalling, so depressing, that it made him want to weep.
“He does that for you?” Arthur blurted, all disconcerted amazement, and everything was confirmed for Merlin.

Despair stoked his anger higher again. Nothing was right about this.

Nothing.

There was no hope at all that good could come of it.

Gwen’s heart broken. Gwaine’s. Arthur’s abnormal lust, probably rooted in the magic of that spell, driving him on to a liaison not remotely natural for him, wanting Merlin only as some kind of...alternative girl. And Merlin, all discipline gone, sinking deeper and deeper into the swamp of need and adoration for Arthur that he’d skirted for so long.

“Yes,” he snapped vengefully, “At the same time, actually. It was sensational.” He glared into Arthur’s blazing eyes, watched his jaw harden brutally again. “But Gwaine… he loves sex. With men, as well as women. Not like you.”

He saw Arthur’s reaction very clearly, the blow taken; the implication that, to Merlin, he came a poor second as a lover to Gwaine.

He watched Arthur’s confusion flash to hurt, and then to hardness.

“And you?” Arthur said, and passion seemed to have frozen to contempt, “You’re so desperate to lie with men, are you? That’s who you are? How many before you landed him?”

Despite himself, despite all the strength and defiance he wanted to show, Merlin felt angry tears forming, proving in his head all Arthur must be thinking; that he was weak, a girlish man. A man who bent over, for other men to use. And after all those years of Arthur failing to understand who he really was; only seeing a loyal, inept, not very bright manservant, it was too much. Arthur’s respect meant far too much for him; even if Arthur’s trust seemed so out of reach now.

It was just... the unfairness of what was happening to them, when he... they... could have remained hidden from all this emotional chaos, and maybe even become friends again, slowly. Perhaps.

All these stupid, impossible, destructive feelings could have stayed buried in both of them, if only the delegation from Rheged had never ridden through Camelot’s gates.

But it was too late.

And the destruction was only beginning.

Merlin said quietly, “None!” not expecting belief, but it was true.

He’d seen it the night before when his nose had been forced into reality. He hadn’t even considered another man's love till Gwaine...or...no... he hadn’t found anyone else even remotely close to Arthur until then.

And then Gwaine had given him an outlet for his love at last; something close to his heart’s desire.

The truth was horrible. So much better buried and hidden from, but it was there now, out and flying.

Everything in his life, all his choices since he’d come to Camelot, centred on Arthur. The man who was looking at him now with a kind of frustrated, disgusted, wounded rage.
“He was your first...? And yet ... you want nothing else but to suck his cock?” Arthur sounded furious, and yes, disbelieving, contemptuous lips thinned.

“He taught me what it is to find true pleasure with an equal,” Merlin managed defensively, stung again by that contempt, “And yes! He views me as an equal even if he is a knight. We’re matched.”

He knew at once that he’d said again, exactly the wrong thing. Or maybe it was the right thing.

Something had closed down in Arthur’s eyes and he was glaring at Merlin with what looked close to hatred.

Betrayal, perhaps.

And suddenly Merlin couldn’t bear that. Not again. Not for anything.

He owed him truth.

He felt all his own frustrated outrage peak and crash, anger leaving him as quickly and certainly as water running down a drain. He let his breath go, a desperate, hopeless sound, and all he felt was empty and afraid.

“I love you,” he said.

And he hadn’t intended to say it like that, not at all.

They both froze, mirroring expressions of shock on their faces, and for just a second of pure terror, Merlin was ready to say anything at all, do anything, tell any lie, to deny it.

But it was true. Horribly, inevitably true, and it had come from his soul. The honesty Arthur kept howling for. There was no way back, not now. So Merlin forced himself on, to finish it, fulfil that honesty, prove his bravery.

“But you won’t ever love me.” And it was a truth just as inevitable.

He thought with hysterical humour, I sound pathetic, like an adolescent girl pining for a golden knight. And he’d said it, admitted it, to Arthur... Arthur of all people, when he’d spent all these years fighting to never show him weakness.

Yet in those moments of lacerating self-awareness he knew that, for all the other reasons this shouldn’t happen between them, this was the one that, shamefully, mattered to him the most.

He closed his eyes tight against what was to come.

Hiding again.

He forced them open.

Arthur hadn’t moved but he was staring blankly to the side, frowning. Perhaps he felt as nauseated as Merlin by the violent, jerking, push and pull of emotion to which they’d just subjected each other. But at least the look of hurt was gone, the look of betrayal.

Merlin had a second to think viciously, bitterly, that this was all he’d ever needed to do to hold Arthur off; use the simple magic of unwelcome feelings to drench whatever madness had inflamed his ardour.
He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes again, then somehow found the will to force them open. Arthur was a foot away from him now, and looking at him as if he’d just announced he was actually a goat.

Merlin really, really wished that he had.

Pathetic, he thought again, and he could hardly believe he’d just exposed emotions that were as unwelcome and embarrassing and strange to himself, as he knew without a doubt they’d be to Arthur. Just to save Arthur’s feelings.

Arthur swallowed hard and looked away and that was all the answer Merlin needed. He looked deeply uncomfortable and embarrassed, out of his depth with emotion or any mention of affection, as emotionally illiterate as he had been all the years that Merlin had known him until Gwen became the exception. He’d been brought up with no softness, no easy affection, only expectations. Merlin had often thought it was astonishing that he was as essentially kind and trusting as he was.

Once, not so very long ago though, Merlin knew he’d have laughed at him, enjoyed his discomfiture with human feelings. He really had hidden from himself completely.

He watched then, a tight band of humiliation squeezing his chest, as Arthur scrabbled to find the words that wouldn’t reject him outright. And for all Merlin had always known it, had deliberately hidden the hopeless depth of his love from himself for just this reason, actually seeing Arthur’s reaction was a stunning blow to his heart.

But Merlin knew Arthur wouldn’t lie; not about this. He wouldn’t pretend feelings he didn’t have. Since Gwen, love…being in love, was sacred to Arthur.

“I don’t…I’m…well of course I feel…I…”

Merlin couldn’t stand it any longer.

“It’s all right Arthur. Don’t!” He slithered out from his place against the wall, because now, he was free.

“You can’t…”

“I have to go.” He forced himself to look at Arthur, who had turned with him, to face him, looking lost, hand in his already disordered blond hair. Merlin could see him searching for the way to deal with the discovery that someone he’d apparently thought impervious and clear-eyed and unromantic, was anything but.

Merlin glanced desperately toward the door, then back at Arthur.

“Look…you know I’m no good at this kind of thing,” Arthur ventured, bluffly desperate.

“You are for Gwen.” It was blurted bitterly because Merlin simply couldn’t hold it back; the resentment, the hurt at his endless inferiority to someone who’d been able to step in so effortlessly, and win the devotion of the man he’d helped create. The prince beginning to open himself to friendship, to softness and respect, to the idea of servants and peasants as people like him. He hated himself for it, but he knew that resentment was there, solid, like bone, part of him. Because he was only human and, he was accepting now, long since over his head in love.

“Gwen’s a woman, for godsake!” Arthur snapped impatiently, so clearly hating this.

Merlin stared at him. “Right.” He said, “Thanks for that.”
There was a short silence and Arthur looked back at him frowning, thrown; uncertain, as so often before, where he’d blundered in his handling of Merlin, but knowing well enough that he had.

Merlin, for this one time, told him.

“That’s it for you, isn’t it? Men love women. They don’t love other men. Not like that. Not romantically. Not presents and picnics and sweet words and tenderness.” He was so upset he knew Arthur could see it, that he was melting with the pain of denying himself even the crumbs from Arthur’s table. “You love Gwen! You don’t love me.”

Arthur looked bemused, at a loss; as if old Geoffrey of Monmouth had suddenly turned on him for not giving him flowers.

But, Merlin recognised suddenly, that for all they’d been through together, all the blood and terror; as well as they knew each other on the surface, Arthur had actually never seen him like this before. That Merlin had spent so long holding his mask in place for him, that Arthur didn’t really know who he was at all.

Not like Gaius or Gwaine; the people to whom he could show his vulnerabilities and weaknesses and strengths and fears.

The people who really loved him for himself – for Merlin. Not the insubordinate, idiot manservant. Not Emrys. He knew Arthur; but Arthur had never really tried to know him, had always taken him at face value, had always seen... a servant.

What was he doing here?

“Well… you know I… I love Gwen,” Arthur tried cautiously, and all his lack of expertise with feelings showed in the awkwardness he simply couldn’t hide. “But I fail to see…”

“Of course you do,” Abruptly, Merlin felt very calm. He was the one in control, because he was sure now with every ounce of his being that this could not happen. “Well, let me explain. What we did… it was for a reason. But if we take it any further it’ll just be… rutting!” He saw Arthur’s expression shift, from careful watchfulness to outrage. “That’s all it’d be, and you…we can’t risk everything…real things like love, for some centuries old legends and a spell that’s driven you… us to want things we never wanted!”

“For gods sake Merlin…not that again! It’s...”

“Destiny. Inevitable. Fate… Yeah I know. Well, guess what? Even if it’s true, this time I’m ignoring all of them, and in your right mind you would too!”

“My right… and you don’t want it?” Arthur countered furiously, “You’re not affected by this all-powerful enchantment then?”

Merlin swallowed hard.

“We’re not doing this.”

It sounded like a vow, and it was. He had never meant anything more. Because for all he knew his heart and mind were enslaved by his treacherous feelings for Arthur, physical and emotional; all he actually wanted at that moment was distance, somewhere to hide, as far away as possible.

Arthur had unwittingly given him the key to resistance. He didn’t look very happy now.
“That’s ridiculous Merlin. You know we can’t…”

“Yes we can. We’re hurting people we love.”

“Oh, you love him too, do you?” Arthur spat disgustedly, and incredibly, the jealousy was back, as fresh and overwhelming as before, blazing in his eyes, apparently overcoming his awkward attempts at sensitivity about Merlin’s unwanted and unreturned feelings. Well. It was certainly a powerful enchantment.

Merlin didn’t hesitate.

“Yes. And he loves me. Just like you and Gwen.” His voice shook despite himself, “We have to leave it at this, Arthur. It was a mistake. We both know it.”

“The mistake was in expecting you to take some responsibility for what’s happening! To face up to it!”

“I am! There are consequences… horrible consequences for people we love!”

“What do you think I am, Merlin? I know there are consequences!”

“Then you know it has to end with this. This isn’t you, Arthur! Chasing…chasing sex … with a man… with anyone! And you have Gwen! Its insane! You’re hurting her…we’re hurting her!”

“But if I loved you …like Gwaine…” Arthur said nastily, “It would be worth hurting them then, would it?”

Merlin stared at him wordlessly, hating him and hating him and hating himself for the shameful truth of that.

He grimaced, and made for the door.

Arthur threw one last disgusted shot behind him. “And this way, you avoid telling him, isn’t that right, Merlin?”

Merlin turned at the door and looked back at the other man, standing furiously where he’d left him.

“Telling him what?” he asked sadly and began to slip out into the corridor.

“Merlin!”

Merlin stopped, eyes screwed shut.

“Arthur…” Pleading for reason. “This is insane. We …we have to talk... properly. This is...”

Words left him, because he didn’t know what it was. A dream and a nightmare entwined, until they couldn’t be seen apart.

He turned again slowly to face Arthur and somehow, something in the lost look he gave the other man, seemed to work. Arthur’s angry grimace slowly deflated, his jaw softened and he looked as helplessly far at sea as Merlin himself.

Merlin was dreading it - staying, talking, but somehow they had to come to some kind of peace.

Arthur though, looked suddenly almost shifty.

“Look, I have to… I have to…go back,” he said and he sounded, for Arthur, almost tentative,
apprehensive. He cleared his throat, “I promised Gwen …’

Merlin closed his eyes again. "Yeah. Of course."

"Merlin…"

“Arthur. You should be with Gwen.” And he meant it too, relief and guilt and jealousy and killing disappointment a curdled, disgusting mass in his gut.

Apart from anything else, Arthur should be creating heirs for Camelot with his queen, not wasting his time trying to make sense of this ...whatever this was with Merlin.

Arthur frowned tentatively, unsure. He looked very young again, and lost, and Merlin was reminded abruptly how few years he actually had; even though he was the king now; even though he commanded his kingdom and his knights and his people effortlessly; even though he’d fought and led his followers through every adversity so brilliantly kings and queens had fallen in behind him. Even though he’d often behaved around Merlin rather like an incredibly irritating, patronising, know-it-all older brother with a big touch of the bully - he was still little more than a boy himself really.

Just like Merlin.

He began to turn away again.

“What’ll you …? I mean... will..?” Arthur stopped, clearly furious with his own inability to ask straight.

He didn’t need to.

Merlin looked at him and shook his head, amazed that after everything, after all the emotional carnage of the past minutes, Arthur’s immediate concern was still this dogged determination that no one else should have what he’d had.

The spell, he thought tiredly. It must be the spell.

But he was in no condition to provoke Arthur any more.

‘I’m just going to bed,’ Merlin said wearily.

Arthur opened his mouth, closed it again, but he still looked uneasy. Jittery almost.

Merlin shook his head again. “You marked me, didn’t you?” he declared with a flat bitterness, “So I couldn’t go near him. I don’t know why you’re even asking.”

Arthur flushed visibly; for the first time since this began, looking embarrassed by his own behaviour.

He glanced to one side and down at the floor, awkward, and Merlin finally left, pulling the door closed behind him.

He dragged his feet back to his room and slumped onto his bed fully clothed. He was incredibly grateful that Bran had gone. And as he lay there, he did all he could to blank from his thoughts the absolute rejection and humiliation he felt; to turn away from memories of what he’d tacitly offered, ignoring his conscience and his good sense.

What he’d ended. All he was going to have to try to bury again. Forget.
But still he lay there, thinking; branded in every way, mind and body as Arthur’s property, even as Arthur was probably making love to his queen.
Chapter 3

Merlin woke the next morning with a mild astonishment that he’d actually been able to sleep, but he supposed that the stress of his embassy and the journey and the emotional turmoil on his return had finally combined to floor him.

He didn’t think about the night before when he washed and changed into a white undershirt, simple brown tunic and black trousers; or when he looked in the mirror at the spectacular bruise at the side of his throat and made it vanish with a fleeting brush of his fingers. He thought about a particular spell he’d seen used among the Druids as he took his breakfast. And he was still carefully not thinking about Arthur when he spotted him in the corridor, with a scribbling secretary beside him, walking briskly toward him, and all his not thinking crashed into a confused mess of humiliated emotion.

Looking at him, at his king, at the man he’d both refused and declared his hopeless love to, he felt as if all the blood in his body flooded toward his face and ears. He knew he must again as red again, as a lit beacon, but he couldn’t help it.

Until the glacial nod Arthur gave him as he passed, froze him.

He knew Arthur would have mulled it all over, brooded. He certainly wouldn’t forgive Merlin for the rejection, for the lecture, for the unwanted embarrassment.

Merlin scuttled to the library, knowing he was going to ground, hiding again, just as Arthur had accused. But he could pretend to believe his own excuses; that he needed to consult some of the older books that had been squirrelled away in the goblin’s secret chamber. He wanted to find out what he could about Rheged before the afternoon’s council meeting, and Geoffrey, without too much persuasion, allowed him to use a back room.

He camped in there for most of the morning, reading both the older texts and some of the newer ones; all really too out of date to give much useful information on the Rheged of today, but, he learned a bit, assuming Rheged had changed little since Uther took Camelot. Learned things he hadn’t quite felt it polite to ask the Rhegedians themselves directly, even though they’d volunteered some of it.

The kingdom, as Camelot had known of it before Uther began to pretend it didn’t exist, had been ruled and governed by magic; a kind of hereditary warrior kingship of Druid monarchs, all male, all powerful conduits of the Old Religion. Rheged was seen as its centre; its living wellspring now. Magic was commonplace there in everyday life, magical creatures existed unharrassed, and the Druids were revered. Rich and wildly prosperous as it was reputed to be, no neighbouring regime attacked it because they knew they could not win against the power Rheged could wield, yet Rheged stayed within its own borders too. It didn’t launch raids or invasions; it didn’t seek alliances. It traded as necessary but more or less kept itself to itself; thus it would have been of no interest to Uther beyond the vague demonization Merlin had heard once or twice in his time in Camelot, as if Rheged were a fairytale land riddled with evil and monsters.

He could find no evidence at all of expansionism, or any desire to grab more than Rheged already had; no desire to intervene in the affairs of others. No reason for the embassy to lie. He wasn’t sure whether that was a disappointment or not.
One thing was blindingly clear though: an embassy from Rheged’s king to another was unprecedented, not just within living memory, but long before that. And to seek out Camelot of all places, the kingdom that had all but eliminated magic…. Merlin’s heart was pounding with the implications of it all when he closed the final book.

He wondered if Arthur saw it as just another overture from a previously estranged land or if he realised how historic and extraordinary the visit actually was. How far the Rhegedians had come out of their traditions to pay homage to him.. Or if he actually realised all too well.

Either way, Merlin knew it was his duty to make sure the council knew how greatly Arthur had been honoured by the Old Religion.

It was late morning when he finished, still hours before the council meeting, but he knew he couldn’t face his semi-regular stroll to the training grounds to idly watch the knights. Not today. Instead, as he passed an engrossed Geoffrey in the corridor, he found his feet leading him to his old refuge after all. Back to the place and the person he’d always sought for comfort.

Gaius was still working from the same rooms, despite Arthur’s many offers to find him grander accommodations, but when Merlin opened the door to his erstwhile chambers, he discovered there was to be no respite.

At once he saw the old man was bending over the leg of a very bedraggled knight, one of Arthur’s newest recruits. And sitting nearby, eyes closed, head leaning against a wall, was Gwaine, shirtless, and sporting a dressing on his upper arm. Well.

“Arthur?” Merlin asked tightly.

Gwaine’s eyes snapped open at once, and he looked up at Merlin with an enormous welcoming grin.

“Merlin! At last …a reason to stay awake!”

Merlin gave him a warm, false smile, the kind that even people who knew him well would have described as cheerful.

“He’s still on the rampage then,” he said, and some of his anger was in his voice.

“Yes,” Gwaine said cheerfully, “I just need to up my game to match whatever’s propellin’ the Princess to new heights of effectiveness.”

He pulled himself upright, wincing theatrically as he eased his arm back and forth. “It can’t be a fight with Gwen though… they were pretty much smoochin’ in the corridor this mornin’. But whatever it is… he’s got somethin’ major lodged up his arse. He was like a fuckin’ maniac again today.’”

Merlin grinned widely again, stomach churning with sickness, hiding and hiding.

“Maybe you need me there to give you an edge.”

“Oh no. No, no sweetheart. The day I need you to nobble the opposition is the day I retire.”

Merlin smiled ruefully and turned to Gaius. “What’s the verdict?” he asked lightly.

Gaius helped the man he’d been treating, painfully to his feet. “The verdict is, stay away from Arthur until he gets whatever’s bothering him out of his system,” he said grumpily.
Gwaine, who’d slid his shirt back on, slipped underneath the man’s arm and helped shoulder his weight.

“Ah now, but that would be sensible, Gaius. And we all know I’m allergic to sensible,” Gwaine grinned widely again and with a wink at Merlin, he and his companion began to limp out. He turned his head at the last minute. “See you later,” he said to Merlin meaningfully, and then he was gone, the warmth and vigour of his presence echoing somehow in the silence he left behind.

“Whatever’s wrong with Arthur, he’d better sort it out before he cripples every knight he’s got,” Gaius humphed disgustedly. Then, seamlessly, “Welcome home, Merlin. I’ve missed you.”

Merlin let the false grin slide from his face, let the sparkle in his eyes disappear.

“He’s…” he began. And as ever with Gaius he let the mask slip easily. “It’s…” He looked up and met Gaius’ frowning gaze.

The old man sighed heavily, “Sit down, Merlin,” he said with weary knowledge.

They settled themselves on either side of the same old table at which they’d had so many meals and conversations; worked out so many plans, confessed so many sins. It occurred to Merlin that after Arthur had begun to focus increasingly on Gwen, and Gwen on Arthur, he’d fallen back more and more on Gaius’ support and companionship and wisdom himself. Gaius had become more than just a surrogate father and keeper of his secrets, constantly trying to hold him back from recklessness, keep him safe; he’d become his partner in crime, his co-conspirator. He’d filled the place of the friends Merlin had lost when Gwen and Arthur began to see nothing but each other, when Morgana made her choice, when everyone else seemed to be rising and finding their roles, and he was left behind.

He thought there was no one else in the world, save his mother, he could trust to love him, whatever he’d done. No one else to whom he could bear to unburden his soul now.

Gaius had placed two goblets on the table and was sitting looking at him patiently. Merlin took a delaying sip of his wine. Well watered wine, he discovered. And then he knew he had to speak.

“Did you hear about the Rhegedians…when they arrived? What they…uh…what they…”

“Yes, Merlin.” Gaius interrupted with that patented mix of total understanding and eye-rolling impatience, “Of course I did. I was there. It was the talk of the court.”

Merlin closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath.

“Right. So you know what they…what they said about…” He opened his eyes again and met Gaius’ concerned stare. “About a union of souls.”

Gaius eyes narrowed. “Between their king and his High Sorceror. Yes,” he said patiently. “And they arrived apparently thinking that was what they were going to find here.” He looked at Merlin, “The wording they used did sound a tad…familiar,” he finished dryly. His gaze was careful, frowning, his mouth pursed, and he made a tiny, prompting movement of his head.

“Yeah.” Merlin swallowed. “When I got back…I didn’t know anything about it, and I went to see Arthur, to report.”

Already he was aware, he was getting in his excuses.

He’d been ambushed. He couldn’t say no. None of it was his fault.
Gaius was still frowning in concentration. “So… no one told you, until you saw Arthur.”

Merlin bit his lip, but in truth that still irked him. Gwaine hadn’t warned him. Yet, even if Merlin had been told what had happened … would he really have expected what followed?

Gwaine would have seen the Rhegedian error as a moment of comedy to be imparted later when Merlin would be able to see the funny side; in his cups perhaps, all part of Gwaine’s adeptness at managing his moods.

The important thing for Gwaine, the thing he’d been desperate to impart to Merlin, had been the confirmation that a marriage of men was commonplace in the centre of Old Religion; his proposal that they do it.

In those circumstances, he wouldn’t have wanted Merlin distracted by the squirming embarrassment of that misunderstanding in front of the whole court.

Merlin gave a tiny, tight smile. “No. Gwaine had …other things on his mind.”

Gaius nodded doubtfully. “So... you didn’t know when you went to see him. But Arthur raised it…”

Merlin, despite himself, gave an almost hysterical grin. “You could say,” and in his mind the image flashed of Arthur very naked and very erect. He sobered instantly.

“He…” He swallowed hard again, “He’d decided that it was ...destiny. Inescapable. Whatever the Rhegedians said to him… he’d decided that we… him and me… we were destined to be bound. Just like their … king. Arthur... he remembered what Kilgarrah said… what I told him when I was trying to explain everything. The bit about… being …two sides of a coin…”

Gaius was frowning intently, gaze riveted on him and Merlin couldn’t read anything in his expression. He blundered on, dreading the old man’s disappointment in him, in what he’d allowed to happen. “He was so… resolute, Gaius. He said it was prophesied and ...he’d claimed Camelot and Excalibur, and now… he had to claim… me.”

He flushed painfully as Gaius’ ever-expressive eyebrow rose to its height. Just saying the words set off fluttering waves of arousal in his gut.

“So…” Gaius said carefully, “What did you…How did you…?”

Merlin clenched his jaw. “ I tried…truly, Gaius. I really did try to talk him out of it …but he was… he was…totally determined and…” He closed his eyes tight and said at last, “We did it.”

He opened them slowly to the other man’s frown.

“Did it,” Gaius repeated flatly.

Merlin grimaced and the words rushed from him.

“We completed the union.”

There was a long, painful silence as they looked at each other, Merlin agonised; Gaius stony-faced, and then the old man nodded very slowly.

“Well… I suppose it was inevitable once he knew about it,” he said tiredly.

Merlin stared at him.
Where was the shock? The condemnation?

“Gaius,” he asked carefully, “Do you know how the bond is set in place?”

Gaius gave him a speaking look, “Don’t be ridiculous, Merlin. Of course I do.”

“So you know…” Merlin felt his expression twisting with shame. “You know what we did.” He looked away from the other man’s wise gaze. “He’s Gwen’s! And… I love Gwaine!” And even as he said it he knew how little of his own truth he was revealing. He couldn’t admit it to Gaius; he could barely admit it to himself.

“It is how it is, Merlin,” Gaius said sadly.

“He told Gwen.”

Gaius blinked at that. “I see.”

“I thought at first…afterwards…I thought no one ever needed to know. It was just the once. For the binding. And no one else had to know about it… what we’d done. But…”

“Oh, Merlin…” Gaius sighed and shook his head slowly.

Merlin looked at him sharply, “But now Gwen knows and he wants me to tell Gwaine and he…he wanted to do it again, Gaius!” Merlin felt colour rushing to his face again, rich red. “Make…” But he couldn’t call it that, “Go to bed…” though he doubted a bed would have been involved that last time, “…together,” he finished lamely.

Gaius said nothing, simply lowered his head slightly and raised his eyebrows.

Merlin stumbled on. “It must be the spell! I just don’t understand… he has Gwen and he’s…he’s so in love with her. He has been for years! He never even glanced at me like… that! And they’re married and they’re so happy… but he wanted … I thought it could be a spiritual thing…!”

Gaius’ mild frown as he listened became slowly more incredulous.

“Merlin,” he was using the tone he used when Merlin had just done or said something he considered particularly moronic, “Why are you surprised? The bond was formed by sex magic. It’s the oldest, most powerful magic there is.”

Merlin blinked. Why hadn’t he thought of that?

“So…so he is bespelled!”

Gaius sighed heavily. “That kind of bond is enormously potent magic, but it’s not like an enchantment. In the Old Religion, sex isn’t viewed as shameful. It’s seen as the core of our link with the earth. I highly doubt the kind of bond you and Arthur formed was ever meant to be solely …spiritual. You were meant to be together. Two halves of a whole.”

Merlin tried to draw a deep breath but his chest was too tight to pull in air. He felt like a trapped animal, desperately looking for routes of escape.

“He can’t have known that. He’d never have willingly tied himself into something that’d… How do we break it?” Desperate.

Gaius looked at him for another long moment, then he shook his head gently. “You can’t break it, Merlin. That’s the point. Once it’s done… well… its done.”

Merlin shook his head. He could hardly breathe now.
“No. There has to be a way out.”

“Merlin…”

“It could destroy everything! I’m supposed to be the most powerful warlock ever, aren’t I? That has to be…”

“Merlin, no one can break it. It’s destiny.”

The word was enough. Merlin stood in a violent surge, stool crashing to the floor. Gaius winced.

“Destiny! I’m so bloody sick of destiny and we’re all just supposed to roll over and…and let our lives go where we don’t even want them to go because of some stupid prophecy…”

“Merlin. Calm down!”

“How can I? When we’re trapped in this…thing? The Rhegedians arrive and that’s it! Our lives are tossed around like … We never wanted it… Arthur never wanted it but since they came it’s like he’s…” He stillled and reached down to right the stool, then he slumped down onto it again. “He thinks his destiny is his duty, Gaius. That’s what got us here.”

Gaius sighed. “You must have known though, on some level. The Great Dragon didn’t exactly mask what you and Arthur are, did he?”

Merlin looked at him, stunned.

Gaius gave a small, impatient jerk of his head. “Two sides of a coin? Two halves of a whole?” he said as if reminding a fool of his own name. “Merlin… Kilgarrah told you Arthur needs you to complete him… and vice versa! What else do you think that means? He was hardly talking about friends, was he? Or master and servant?”

Merlin said slowly, incredulously, shock again shortening his breath “You knew?”

And Gaius looked back at him just as incredulously. “It was obvious to anyone who heard those words. The question is rather… how you didn’t know?”

Merlin opened his mouth, closed it again. He was already all too aware of how good he was at hiding from unbearable things; hiding, and hoping that hiding would make them cease to exist. He knew he’d ruthlessly crushed every shiver of attraction to Arthur because he’d seen for himself how impossible reciprocation would be.

Or…no…be honest…perhaps in the first months at Camelot, when he’d begun breaking through Arthur’s armoured shell to the human being beneath, perhaps then he’d allowed himself to feel some of that excitement. Because he was the only one who’d managed that in Arthur’s eighteen years, the only one for whom Arthur had seemed to feel any connection, beyond his ever-demanding father and Morgana, his sister-rival.

And with a sudden jolt of horrible, guilty memory, Merlin recalled where else he’d been told that Arthur was his other half.

Ealdor. His own mother. When he’d tried to leave Camelot in his first year to go home to help defend his village, and Morgana, Gwen and then Arthur had followed him to help. His mother had seen Merlin and Arthur together and called them…she’d called them two sides of the same coin. That same phrase.
He sat, frozen, at Gaius' table, and he could remember with perfect clarity the mindless, inexplicable jolt of pleasure that had taken him when she said it … that his mother also saw in them the connection of which the dragon had told him. But now, he wondered how he could ever have ignored the implications; just blithely took in her remark and moved on.

Why hadn’t he asked her then what she meant? What could she have seen, to call that image? That he and Arthur were alike, when they were so obviously very different? That they saw the world in the same way? Or complementary ways? When they certainly did not? Or ...that they were so tied to each other even then... that they needed each other so obviously, even his mother spotted it?

In hindsight, Merlin could see that at the beginning, to Arthur, he had been... something... unique.

But then Gwen had suddenly become Arthur’s focus of emotion and…and it was pointless now to pick over old bones.

He’d known even before Arthur had announced to him on one of their insane expeditions (to rescue her as it happened), that Gwen was everything to him, that romantic feelings for Arthur would break him.

So… he’d had no feelings for Arthur, save friendship, fondness, admiration, irritation, worry and loyalty.

But listening to Gaius now, as he’d studiously ignored Brychusa, he accepted at last their amazement that he’d been able to listen to Kilgarrah’s description of what he and Arthur were to be to each other, what they were to each other, and ignored the implications.

You cannot truly hate that which makes you whole.

He scrunched his eyes tight-closed.

No escape.

But …his mind scabbled for hope… Kilgarrah had also told him to seek Arthur’s true love to break an enchantment.

And the dragon had known she was female.

Gwen.

“Merlin?”

Merlin started and turned back to Gaius. He must have looked half mad.

“Sorry. I’m sorry. I’m just… “ He reached for just one thing in the chaos, one cold heart of guilt. “It’s just…Gwen.” He put one elbow on the scarred wood of the table and ran the palm of his hand over his face. “They were so happy, after waiting so long. They’d probably have been happy forever. And now… what if I’ve ruined it, Gaius?”

He heard Gaius’ heavy sigh. “You haven’t ruined it. Don’t make everything your fault. ”

“But it’s like…Brychusa, one of the Rhegedians …he said there are often… casualties of a tie like ours.” He glared angrily at the table “Like Gwen and her relationship with Arthur are just…bits of nothing to be tossed away. And Gwaine…”

“You’re aware it’s how the Old Religion works, Merlin… Your reading… your time among the
Druids must have shown you that?” Gaius raised an eyebrow again.

“I…” But Merlin could hardly deny it.

“The Old Religion can seem cruel… merciless. But it always seeks …balance. And our wants and needs… the plans of individuals… what we may see as…fair… they mean nothing at all, if they get in the way of that. You know it as well as any of us.”

Merlin closed his eyes. “Yeah.” He said bitterly. “Maybe Uther had a point.”

“Merlin,” Gaius chided gently. “You and Arthur … you know you’ve been prophesied in the Old Religion for centuries.”

Merlin turned his head to the side impatiently. They were going in circles. Going nowhere. He was no closer to any answers, just confirmation that they were trapped. Disastrously trapped.

“We don’t have to do everything every sodding prophecy says though, do we?” he blurted, infuriated, “But Arthur insisted. All he wants is to know he’s got the great Emrys by the tail, chained to Camelot. That’s all! He doesn’t…”

“What?” Gaius prompted gently

Merlin shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“He does care for you, Merlin. Its obvious.” Merlin looked at him sharply and flushed at the sympathy he saw in the old man’s eyes. “I know he hurt you… often, but you have to remember he let you in too, as a friend of sorts, when no one else ever got close. Risked his life for you often enough…”

“Yeah, for his idiot servant. If I did it for him first,” he snapped meanly. “For this… sort-of-friend he had to save from himself… That’s what chivalrous knights do, isn’t it? They protect the weak? But it’s nowhere near enough for this! For this great link we’re supposed to have. It’s supposed to last past death, the bond we made. For eternity! It’s… ridiculous! God, can you imagine? We’re close to murdering each other now… one lifetime!!” He took a huge breath trying to still the skittering, euphoric terror of that thought, then he seemed to just deflate, the brief surge of anger gone again like mist in the sun. “I thought it was only once Gaius. But now …I don’t know what he wants.”

“You, it would appear.” Dryly.

“But that’s not Arthur! He has Gwen!”

“Yes. As the King of Rheged has his wives.”

“But… It’s not the same! Gwen is his…his true love! He adores her.”

Gaius nodded, eyes hooded. “Yes. “

“And he’s been unfaithful to her with me.”

"In the Old Religion, as in the new age, men don't only sleep with their wives. You know that." He sighed, apparently at the mulish expression on Merlin's face, and went on didactically, "The Druids honour the union of men. Their society always has... warriors and priests. They came from the aristocracy, and they formed close bonds, men together. Women... were for childbearing and caring for the home. And only magic, or high birth if they were lucky, got them power or real
respect. And from the sounds of it… that’s how it still is in Rheged.”

“But not here,” Merlin snapped “And Arthur and Gwen are in love!”

“They love each other, yes. But… it’s possible to love more than one person, and in more than one way.”

Merlin turned away, that too close to the reality he now knew himself.

Gwaine.

Arthur.

But he and Gwaine had never aspired to the fairytale union of perfection that was Arthur and Gwen.

“They didn’t get married in the Old Religion, Gaius,” he persisted, “And all right… I know he didn’t promise to be faithful but… it was…” He bobbed his head determinedly. “It was strongly implied.”

Gaius made a wearily impatient sound. “Merlin, has it occurred to you, that it was running away from this in the first place, that got you both into this mess?”

Merlin blinked. He sounded exactly like Arthur.

“If you’d both seen it for what it was …. and to be fair to Arthur, you had a head start on that with the Great Dragon giving you anvil-sized hints… perhaps neither Gwen nor Gwaine would have had to be involved.” Merlin felt his eyes fix and glaze, even as he stared at the old man. He’d come for a plan, a way out, not this. He felt betrayed, even though he’d known perfectly well that Gaius, after the life he’d led, was a fatalist to the core. “I’ve told you many times … trying to slide away from destiny makes it worse. Messier and messier. We’ve both seen that prophecies can be self fulfilling… Remember your first encounter with the Crystal Cave? If you try to duck and weave around destiny…”

Merlin’s clenched his jaw on the words that wanted to escape. He didn’t know why he’d expected anything different, and yet he had. Gaius had told him so many times that meddling with what was laid down for anyone or anything, was perilous. Yet ‘meddling’ was what had saved Arthur more times than Merlin could count.

“If I hadn’t ducked and weaved after seeing what I saw, if I’d just let things happen because its destiny, Mordred would still be beside Arthur… “ he said bitterly. “And now he’s not.”

Gaius met his defiant glare for a long moment and Merlin thought he could see a brief internal struggle, but in the end the old man said quietly. “Then let’s hope that’s enough.” Gaius took a deep breath and released it as a sigh. “Some predictions can be unclear… distorting. Misleading. You know that well enough… that not all visions come to pass as you expect.” Merlin nodded cautiously, very happy to absorb that wisdom. “But when we’re talking of prophecies that are inescapably clear, Merlin… I still say that trying to run away from that kind of destiny can be dangerous, and not always just for you. For innocent bystanders.”

“Now you sound just like Brychusa,” Merlin said accusingly.

“He sounds a sensible man.”

“So what are you saying?” Merlin hissed, furious now at Gaius as he so rarely was. “Just… give in
to it? Just... just _sleep_ with him when he crooks his finger? Just for... lust? Break Gwen’s heart? And Gwaine’s?"

"*Merlin, you know* Arthur. You know self-indulgence isn’t his style. He’s a stoic. He can deny himself till he drops... and he usually has, for what he considers to be right, and for the good of Camelot. Gwen was the only exception with him. So you have to ask yourself why he isn’t denying himself now."

Merlin tried to calm himself, to bring himself back from this familiar roiling gallop of emotion, the insane slide and climb from anger to fear. "Why then?" he demanded.

“Don’t you have a theory?”

“He’s bewitched,” Merlin said stubbornly.

Gaius let loose another hard sigh. “All right, Merlin. If you say so. Funny you aren’t though,” he threw out shrewdly and rose from the table to begin work at one of his remedy tables, the conversation, from his point of view, clearly pointless now.

But Merlin sat there for a while longer, all they’d talked about whirling through his mind. And he wondered if he was bespelled by the deepest magic of all; had been since he clapped eyes on the blond prat bullying some poor unfortunate. Maybe that was why the completion spell hadn’t affected him the same way as Arthur. Because he was already in love. And he’d always known there was no point to it.

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The council meeting that afternoon was an unexpected restorative for Merlin, giving him some kind of return to normality for a few precious minutes, another glimpse of the future they could all be building for Camelot, for Albion, with equality and merit at its core.

Arthur included his knights in his council, peasant-born or not, along with a selection of his father’s old advisors. Gaius was there, and Geoffrey, and so was Gwen, as ever at Arthur’s left hand.

Merlin, almost vibrating with nerves, just has he had been at the first unveiling of the original Round Table, was beckoned to sit at his right, though Arthur barely threw him a glance.

The pride and joy Merlin had felt at that first gesture though, had not diminished, and though the discovery of his powers had changed their relationship forever, distanced it, Arthur had never shown a sign of a lack of trust in public since he’d finally accepted Merlin for who he truly was. For now, the difficulties between them might as well not have been for Merlin. The pride and joy still stood.

The council meeting went smoothly. Arthur asked Merlin for his opinion of the Rhegedian overtures and Merlin gave his view that they were genuine. There were some difficult moments when one of Uther’s old advisors asked why Rheged was seeking out Camelot and ignoring all other kingdoms, but Merlin answered truly. They were simply honouring Arthur, and their belief that he was going to be the great king prophesied for centuries. Everyone, he thought, looked suitably impressed. No one could know if the Rhegedians would be prepared to stand with Camelot in the inevitable battles ahead, but even benign neutrality would be a prize of sorts, he suggested. Rhegedian enmity could be very dangerous indeed.

When he finished, Arthur nodded slowly in recognition and asked for naysayers, but there were
none. Arthur announced that he’d chosen to hold a tournament in the Rhegedian’s honour, to send gifts home with the ambassadors, and organise a return embassy to show Camelot took their alliance seriously.

Then Gwen proposed that the king and queen themselves could travel to see the legendary kingdom, with an escort of selected knights and perhaps Geoffrey of Monmouth and even Gaius, if they could manage the journey, to learn what they could.

But she didn’t suggest Merlin accompany them, as he knew she certainly once would have, given his magic, and their friendship. It was quite a snub, in its own quiet way.

Even so, Arthur smiled gently at her, like a proud father, Merlin thought irritably, and agreed it was an excellent idea, as if the concept of a royal visit was an unprecedented piece of original thinking. The council nodded and agreed, with the respect they all now showed their strong, dignified queen.

Merlin sat in silence from that point as the meeting went on, desperately trying to fight down the bewildering force of bitterness he felt, because it was shameful to indulge it.

But it was as if the wellspring had been dammed for so long, that now the dam had been breached, it gushed out, however hard he tried to staunch it.

He’d always told himself it had just been their way; the dynamic between the three of them, Arthur and the two servants he pulled into his orbit. And he'd never resented it, or Gwen.

Yes, Arthur had always treated everything Gwen said or did as outstanding and awe-inspiring, but that was because he was in love with her. And yes, he dismissed Merlin’s often life-imperilling efforts on his behalf, as pretty much part of the manservant’s job. The most appreciation Merlin ever got from Arthur through all their adventures and near-death moments, for all those years, had been the odd awkward thank you, the occasional inarticulate grin and shoulder shove.

But that, he’d told himself, was Arthur, in all his awkwardness and solidly-drilled ideas of how men should be treated, because he seemed to believe they didn't need any gentleness, and simply did their duty as they should.

Still, Merlin had treasured and replayed those tiny, insignificant moments of recognition as surely as Gwen must have cooed over the endless words and gestures of love and praise and admiration Arthur showered upon her. Maybe they were even more precious to Merlin because they were so much rarer.

But as he sat in council then, listening to the ebb and flow of debate on the likely harvest for Camelot given the early and persistent heat of the summer so far, Merlin guiltily saw his feelings all too well for what they always had been, in truth. They danced wickedly in front of him now.

He’d resented both of them hadn’t he, deep, deep down? Both these friends, in whose love he’d been so invested.

Arthur, for his endless inability to see worth in Merlin beyond blind loyalty, amusement and a willingness to do absolutely anything for him; Gwen for how effortlessly by comparison, she’d won Arthur’s regard. All that Merlin did, rarely seen, seldom acknowledged, or simply noted in passing; all Gwen did, revered and praised and used to build the trust between herself and Arthur.

Merlin knew it was ridiculous, worse than childish to blame either of them. It wasn’t as if he’d allowed Arthur or Gwen the chance to see his true worth, after all. He told himself that now,
urgently and uselessly in his head, as the tally ticked up.

But destiny or not, Emrys or not, he was only human in the end. Young and human.

So as he sat there, staring hard at the polished wood of the table in front of him, he remembered.

One day in the castle, when Morgana was still trusted and feted and Merlin was losing sleep and risking his life, trying to work out ways to foil her vengeance. The memorable Princess Elena had just arrived as a potential royal bride and Merlin was struggling along behind Arthur, buried under more of her luggage than one man should carry. And they’d encountered Gwen going about her duties.

Merlin could still see it, still feel it as if he were there in the moment. Feel the weight on his back, feel his tired muscles stretched to the limit as Arthur strode on ahead, feel the jealousy automatically crushed and buried, a shameful corpse.

Its ghost was resurrected now though, prodding and pointing, reminding him how Arthur had been instantly bashful and courteous and respectful to Gwen as to the greatest lady, so obviously dazzled with admiration at her dignified restraint over Elena, even as he snapped and snarled at her fellow servant, bowed under everything behind him. And Merlin recalled clearly how that had felt, exhausted and worn down by fear as he was; how it spoke for their whole relationship, the three of them.

Merlin had carried the burden; Gwen reaped the reward of Arthur’s regard.

He’d laughed it off of course, as he always did, hiding from himself too, with insolence and rolling eyes.

But it had stuck in his head somewhere, waiting to spring out at him when he least needed more evidence of his real feelings.

In the end the brutal truth was that Gwen had risen from servitude because Arthur had found in her the qualities to love; Merlin rose, ultimately, not because of the boy and man he’d been all those years at Arthur’s side, but because he had powerful magic.

He wondered now if that deep down, carefully buried resentment was actually why he’d driven himself so far on their behalf, Arthur and Gwen. Why he’d pushed their romance so hard, urged Arthur endlessly never to give up on it; set up their rendezvous; prodded and nagged when she was sent into exile, even though Arthur had threatened him for it and he’d believed himself that she’d willingly betrayed the king with Lancelot’s shade. Why he’d risked all when Morgana took her.

Why he’d felt nothing but joy and wistfulness as Arthur acknowledged Gwen publicly after Morgana’s first defeat; why he’d been able to smile and laugh without a shadow on his heart at their wedding and Gwen’s coronation, as thrilled as if it were happening to himself.

Because he was so completely ashamed.

Because they were his friends, both of them. He loved both of them.

He’d convinced himself that his feelings were pure, uncomplicated, unsullied. But he felt as he had when he’d unleashed the goblin, let it out of its box.

With the shield of self deception ripped away, he was terrified by the sordid confusion of jealousy and resentment and guilt and friendship and absolute loyalty he felt toward Arthur and Gwen.
No wonder he wanted so badly to run away.

He said nothing more through the rest of the session but he noted everything carefully in his head because he cherished his position on the council and took it extremely seriously. When it ended though, he made sure he kept his eyes on the table in front of him when the king and queen rose to leave, quite sure neither of them would acknowledge him anyway.

He flinched with shock, as if he’d been struck, when he heard, “Merlin. A moment?” in Arthur’s unmistakable patrician tones.

There was no warmth in it, but Merlin barely noticed. He looked up to glance at the king with such trepidation he thought he probably looked like a terrified rabbit. Gwen, he noticed, had stopped with her husband, and Merlin felt a horrible, unfamiliar nervousness in her company.

Arthur though, was looking only in his general direction, his eyes focussed slightly above Merlin’s head, as if he couldn’t bear to look at his face through sheer embarrassment. Merlin didn’t much want to look at him either.

“Sire?” His voice was quiet but he was relieved to hear it hadn’t shaken.

Arthur cleared his throat. “Yes... Myrthryn has asked if you would put on some sort of ...display of magic for them. I thought...maybe at the tournament?”

Merlin did look at him then; in fact he stared in disbelief. “Display?”

Arthur appeared more uncomfortable by the second. He glanced at Merlin then flipped his gaze away again over his head. “Yes. They’d like to see your… powers,” he finished awkwardly.

Merlin was still staring at him, appalled. Was Arthur serious? But maybe...maybe it was part of what being a court sorceror was. And all he could think was, horrified, stunned ...a display??

He had no idea how to go about that. He’d never been any kind of entertainer, save perhaps that one bizarre and memorable evening he’d been forced to juggle for Queen Annis. He’d always been happier on the sidelines, never the centre of attention. And yet by tomorrow he was supposed to have come up with... what?

He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to throttle Arthur for dropping him in this, or just run away. Was this what real stage-fright felt like?

“You don’t have to,” Arthur blurted and Merlin, who’d glazed over with horror, suddenly focussed on him again, almost as shocked by this uncharacteristic leniency. “I mean...”, and he was looking properly at Merlin at last. “You aren’t required to comply. You’re not a performing bear. If you feel you... you don’t want to...”

Arthur stumbled to an embarrassed halt, but perversely, his offer of escape had steadied Merlin’s nerves as nothing else could. He’d always loathed admitting to Arthur that anything scared him enough not to do it, not least because Arthur had for so long mocked him unmercifully for his cowardice.

“I suppose it’s part of the job, isn’t it?” he said gamely and tried a small, forced grin.

Arthur met his eyes at last then as if compelled, and they stared at each other for long, silent moments. Merlin thought despairingly, God, he’s so bloody beautiful, and now he didn’t even try to bury that terrible, unwanted awareness.
“I’m quite sure... that Merlin won’t do anything he doesn’t want to.”

Merlin came back to himself with a short, sharp breath.

Unforgivable... for those seconds he’d forgotten that Gwen was even there. But the bitter edge to her voice...oh, he’d heard that all right, and while she looked as if she was trying to smile politely, the effort seemed more of a grimace. She’d always been terrible at masking her true emotions.

Arthur too seemed woken from a daze. “Right. Well. The tournament tomorrow then. We’ll...uh... look out for it,” and with a quick dismissive nod and unmistakable air of relief, he turned to leave, Gwen gracefully holding his arm.

Merlin stood still, watching them go until they were out of sight; tall, golden Arthur and slight, dark Guinevere by his side, perfectly matched. We’ll look out for it, Merlin snorted mentally, but though he tried desperately, as ever, to find humour in it all, to find humour in Arthur, there was none in him and the other man’s painful unease around him now was as far from funny as it was possible to be.

Gwen, too... the resentment in her voice, in the dark eyes that refused to even look at him.

It felt as if they truly were broken beyond repair, those old, true friendships.

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He left the council rooms and headed for the refuge of his chambers so quickly he was almost running. Yes, he was fully intending to hide again, and he didn’t care. But he’d barely left the council room corridor when he was waylaid by Brychusa, who seemed to have been hovering.

“My Lord Emrys,” he began, then, with a visible effort, “Merlin. My Lord Myrthryn begs that you attend him in his chambers.”

Merlin simply stared at him, trying to hide his horror.

“He would appreciate a chance to spend some short time with you.”

And there was little to be done other than nod. Thus Merlin’s headlong dash to his rooms became instead a gloomy trudge toward Myrthryn’s.

He really, really wasn’t in the mood for this.

In truth, he was still getting his head around their request for a display, feeling the first stirrings of a defensive outrage, to wrap his fear in. Was that really how they treated magic in Rheged? As a source of ...of party tricks?

By the time he knocked on the doors of Myrthryn’s quarters his mood was further from gracious host than he would ever have believed possible for a guest from Rheged.

But he pasted on his old, game face when the door was opened at once by Myrthryn’s servant and Myrthryn himself rose from a comfortable chair set by his cold fireplace as eagerly as a young man awaiting his love. As eagerly as Arthur greeted Gwen, Merlin’s mind threw at him evilly.

He grimaced inwardly, bowed, and Myrthryn bowed back.

Merlin smiled and swallowed hard, horribly ill at ease as ever in formal situations like these.

“My... uh... My lord. Brychusa said... suggested... that is...”

“I wondered if it would be possible to monopolise you for a time,” Myrthryn interjected smoothly.
They were apparently alone - Brychusa had removed himself discreetly - but Myrthryn’s linguistic abilities seemed perfectly adequate to Merlin without his interpreter’s skills. Merlin suspected diplomatic games had been played, but he couldn’t see the point.

He searched desperately for some flowery phrases, but he came up cold. So he settled for, “Yes. That’s what he said.”

Myrthryn smiled widely. “Please. Sit. We are alone.”

Merlin again smiled nervously back and he sat in a chair set close to Myrthryn’s. He twisted his hands together and waited.

“My Lord Merlin. I confess I begged your king if he would ask you… if we might be honoured with a small example of your magic.”

Merlin nodded. He tried to paste his smile back on. “Yes, he just told me.”

“I hope you don’t mind,” Myrthryn hurried on, all anxious deference, “We meant no disrespect. When he talked of a tournament of warrior skills I simply mentioned that the thing we most dreamed of witnessing was Emrys, come into his power. Our own lord often gifts us with such…”

“No I…it’s fine. Honestly,” Merlin insisted, subdued.

Myrthryn frowned slightly, the only lines Merlin could see on his old-young face. “Would you care for some refreshment?”

Merlin nodded, mind buzzing, simply to ease the moment, but when Myrthryn returned with two goblets of sweet wine, it felt as if he’d only delayed it. All he could think still was … a display!

There was a short silence as they both sipped their wine; Merlin totally distracted, mind racing with ideas for spells he could use, racking up and discounting them one by one. What could possibly be impressive enough for Rheged, that wouldn’t frighten the life out of Camelot?

“The binding … I believe it takes time to settle,” Myrthryn said gently into the absent silence. “Emotions will be high on both sides. But it’s said it’s always stronger in the one who planted his seed.”

Merlin, whose mind had been very much elsewhere for once, turned stunned eyes to him and drew a deep breath through his nose, a shocked sound. He wondered vaguely if Myrthryn could see the whites of his eyes.

What was he supposed to say to that? To do?

Deny he knew what Myrthryn was talking about? It would be pointless, but…his overwhelming instinct was to keep it all hidden and private. The thing they’d done was private. His pain was private.

Myrthryn frowned and said uncertainly, as if he didn’t understand Merlin’s frozen reaction, “The king was watchful of Brychusa. When we rode out.” Merlin stared at him, eyes still wide, appalled. “When you seemed to enjoy his company,” he clarified.

Merlin opened and closed his mouth again without managing to utter a sound, remembering only with stale anguish that Arthur and Gwen had ignored him from the start of the expedition to the end. He’d had far more warmth and notice when he was Arthur’s manservant. What the hell did the Rhegedians think they’d seen?
“Um…” he tried. Yes, Brychusa had been called away to interpret but… Merlin was abruptly and powerfully torn between the need for diplomacy and the urge to tell Myrthryn to shove off and keep his handsome nose out of the mess he’d created.

In fact Merlin was finding it hard enough not to blame Myrthryn for existing at all, and certainly for bringing his stupid customs to Camelot to lay at Arthur’s feet.

“I really don’t think … I mean…”

Myrthryn, he realised, was smiling at him as benignly as a conspiratorial girlfriend. And it struck him then, as it probably should have struck him before, that his and Arthur’s ‘union’ was going to be the talk of Rheged. And probably beyond.

He closed his eyes tight against the thought.

“Look… Please … please don’t …say anything about it. To anyone. Here or… I mean about… me and…” he swallowed and opened his eyes, “…the king?”

He looked into Myrthryn’s dark gaze pleadingly.

Myrthryn frowned cautiously back, but he looked bemused.

“If you wish it… my lord…” he said slowly, very clearly finding it hard to understand why Merlin wasn’t cock a hoop.

Merlin tried a bright, wide grin, fuelled in no small part by relief, but he noted with impotent unease that Mythryn had slipped again almost automatically into that address of deep respect to the great sorceror he thought Merlin must be. He wondered if the older man could sense it…his desperation.

He blurted suddenly, “It doesn’t feel any different!” And he really hadn’t known he was going to say it.

Myrthryn tried resentfully, seemed to realise that. His small smile was suddenly as indulgent and amused as if he were humouring a child.

“Really?”

The tone was polite but massively sceptical and Merlin, bridling, was forced to think of it, of all that had changed, the demons unleashed; all the jealousy and desire and love and fear that had been so neatly buried until…

He chewed his lip agitatedly.

“I… What’s it … supposed to feel like?”

Myrthryn’s smile faded, as if he realised that now they had stopped fencing.

“I can’t say for sure,” he began carefully, "Such connections are so very rare.” He shook his head slightly, a poignant, wistful movement. "But the one I have seen… My king and his consort are… whole. Happy."

“But what does that …mean?” Merlin asked desperately.

He certainly didn’t feel whole. Or happy.
“It means no other can ever hope to match the tie they have to each other. They’re drawn strongly together. Even before the bond was completed, that could be seen.”

Merlin drew a deep breath and felt the familiar tendrils of panic twining in his gut. That didn’t sound like him and Arthur at all, even remembering that first awareness; it sounded more like Arthur and Gwen.

“So they knew? They knew each other was… you know. Before the ceremony?”

Myrthryn smiled, half frowning as if he wondered if Merlin was teasing him.

“He knew at once that the other was…” He paused to choose his word; he seemed to settle for “…different. The …attraction was always there in some form even if it manifested itself in other ways. At first they didn’t know it for what it was… their relationship as boys was …” He smiled in private amusement. "Explosive, especially as both were drawn to …drawn to others,’ he finished softly. Merlin’s eyes widened but he remained silent, avid. “Their completion wasn’t inevitable in this life … but it proved powerful enough this time that they recognised it.”

“And…” Merlin ventured, mouth dry with apprehension, “They could have …denied it?”

“If they weren’t ready to accept it. Then they may have had to wait many lives to have the chance again.”

Merlin chewed at his lower lip and looked away, frowning heavily, trying to absorb the implications. He glanced up again, straight at Myrthryn.

“And all he was thinking was …if it wasn’t inevitable, wasn’t necessary, was just Arthur reacting to Myrthryn’s stories of destiny set in stone - couldn’t it still be contained, ignored?

Myrthryn blinked. He finally seemed to realise that Merlin was serious, not idly asking for comforting gossip, not having a few nerves.

“My lord.” His tone was almost alarmed, careful, as if he were trying to calm an overwrought child. “The link between you and Arthur Pendragon is very different. It’s been foretold for centuries. You were created for it. Both of you. And without each other, together as one, you cannot be complete; you can not fulfil your destinies, in this time and beyond. But you must know this."

Merlin drew a tight breath. He’d heard similar before of course, most notably from Kilgarrah… grand predictions of their great joint destiny, like characters in a book of legends. But he’d never felt so cornered by it.

“But,” he persisted doggedly, “Your king…”

“Is not the Once And Future King, my lord!” Myrthryn said urgently, still with that undertone of astonishment that he had to say this at all, “And his consort is not Emrys. Your time is now. Your beginning is now. Your path is different from all.”

“I understand…about the legends of the king. And that his sorceror is meant to help him. But,” he continued desperately, “We don’t need to be more than… king and sorceror. Do we? Friends …maybe…? Without the…complications”.
“But... you must have known from the beginning, when you met. You must have felt it. You were created to complete each other.”

“No.” Merlin snapped, “I thought he was an irredeemable prat.”

Myrthyrn blinked. “Indeed. But the connection was there intensely and immediately, was it not? The pull to each other in some way?”

Merlin looked at him and didn’t reply. He didn’t need to.

But… it had all been on his side, deeply hidden as it was. He knew that. Until the ceremony changed …*something* in Arthur. Forced feelings and desires on him that didn’t belong there.

Myrthyrn smiled suddenly as if he understood something; subtly compassionate.

“I’m aware that customs are different here, that the Old Religion has lost its hold. But the connection between Arthur Pendragon and Emrys …that could not have been denied, my lord. A link that powerful would have overwhelmed all else eventually, one way or another. And the longer denied, the more casualties caused.” The same story, Merlin thought hopelessly, even the same words. “Rheged is different.” Myrthryn continued softly, “We live still by the old ways, the way of the Druids and the Keltoi. We believe that men…warriors and priests... have always had their deepest connection with each other … and the magic in the world by which we live, and your old king would have denied… it acknowledges that. The bond is created with seed; one accepts life force from the other.”

Merlin blushed scarlet.

“But a man and woman could… Too?” Though he didn’t even know why he’d asked beyond that old hungry curiosity about all things magic.

“Of course. In even rarer cases. But the union of man and woman is primarily for creating life.”

There was a short silence as Myrthryn watched him carefully, and Merlin tried to absorb it all, tried to weigh it. But in the end the conclusion he came to was always the same.

“The price is too high, Myrthryn!” he blurted in despair, and he felt as if he was pleading for understanding, for some mercy. “You must see. Too many people are…”

“My lord,” Myrthryn broke in gently, “*Merlin*. I think I understand. I know it is … difficult. Adjustment can be …difficult. But your bond with the Once And Future King…that is set in time. And magic. Your future... all your futures, are together. You are essential to each other… to... the world's destiny. All else is…” He shook his head and made a graceful gesture with his hand that suggested …unimportance.

Merlin let his breath go, a slow acknowledgement of a defeat he’d dreaded, but known was inevitable.

He’d been scuttling this way and that, trying to find a way out for everyone, but had he really expected to find help here?

Had he really thought to find escape from a man who believed so completely in absolute destiny?

His head dropped and he looked helplessly at his hands twisted in his lap, and suddenly, again, bubbling up from the core of him, worse even than his confrontation with Arthur, stronger than his moments of rebellion in the forest - he felt such a huge surge of outrage, real, true rage, a shock of
power, and determination, like the lightning that had once raced and gathered through his body; that surge of rebellion in him again, roiling up like nausea in his belly.

This time, he thought furiously, *Destiny* had gone too far.

Why the *hell* did he have to listen to this anyway? Why did he have to sit passively and let himself become an instrument that threatened the happiness, the peace of the new Camelot? Why should he and Arthur be imprisoned by the superstitions of old men, passed from mouth to ear for centuries? Fuck, maybe one generation had misheard.

Maybe he wasn’t even the mage the Druids seemed to have built up in their magic-crazed faith.

Yes, their belief that he was some figure they’d been awaiting had helped him often enough in his fight against Arthur’s enemies; he could acknowledge that. But whoever they thought he and Arthur were… he’d known in his heart long since, the Old Religion had to be wrong.

What if he wasn’t some kind of legendary saviour, awaited for centuries? If he truly was this ‘Emrys’ as the Druids, Taliesin, The Fisher King, the Cailleach… all of them had claimed to believe, then *Emrys* was just a talented enough sorceror who still found his magic wanting too often - so far from all-powerful it was almost funny.

All he wanted, all he’d ever wanted, was to help his prince, his friend, his king. *That* was his – Merlin’s - *destiny*. And so far, it had proved quite remarkable enough for him to be getting on with.

He looked at Myrthryn’s concerned face and he thought bitterly, *He’s a fanatic*, and as with all fanatics, to him human debris was inevitable and unimportant; flotsam in the wake of fate.

But Merlin *knew* they hadn’t had to go through that ceremony for Arthur to fulfil his future promise as a great king.

Rebuilding Camelot in fairness and justice, returning magic to the land, that was Arthur’s *destiny*… what Merlin had fought for all these years, nothing more, and now the king was on the throne, he was fulfilling it already. As for …for saving the world or whatever those vague, threatening prophecies of the future seemed to suggest… he wasn’t going to let the fantasies of mad Druids ruin so many lives of people he loved.

They had to …*would* find a way to fix the damage the ceremony had done to all of them.

Maybe it had forced too many unwanted truths to the surface, made people behave…out of character… but they would forget it and all unpleasantness could be buried again with time, the sting of memory pulled. He knew well enough he could bury anything.

The bond had been made in magic, hadn’t it?

Then magic could break it.

He was *going* to find a way, and he knew exactly who was going to help him.

He felt a kind of mad, elated hope, relief surging through his veins like fast poison; sudden and total confidence that it would all be changed back again, as if the Rhegedians had never come.

Everything would be as it was, and fuck *destiny*!

“You’re wrong, you know.” he said, looking steadily and defiantly into Myrthryn’s dark eyes, “ Whatever you convinced Arthur of, I’m not some *legend*. I’m not this ultimate warlock you’re all
Myrthryn’s lips twitched and he sighed. “Then… who is, my lord?” he asked gently.

Merlin gritted his teeth and grimaced. He stood to go, fighting down the echoes of panic, still there despite his new hope; fluttering, huge again in his chest, at that pitying certainty.

“Not me,” he said firmly, head shaking in definite denial. “Not me.”

And in his head he thought viciously, *He doesn’t even exist.*

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Merlin left Myrthryn’s room with that iron core of certainty still steady inside him.

He went straight to the library and sat down with all the books on magical lore and custom he could find, but although there were occasional, awed references to the rare ceremony that bound two souls, intended for completion in each other, hunt as he might, he couldn’t find any spell to undo that completion. But that didn’t mean there wasn’t one.

He gave up after a few hours, disappointed but not downhearted. He knew it was there somewhere. He just had to find it... with a bit of guidance.

When he reached his chambers, still deep in contemplation, he found, to his surprise, Bran almost vibrating with impatience and a full bath waiting behind him.

“Where have you *been*, Sire?” Bran demanded reproachfully, “There’s a banquet!” And he hurled himself at Merlin, hands already plucking at the laces at the neck of his tunic.

“Oh! A banquet!” Merlin got out sarcastically as he tried to fend off his servant with his arm, “There’ll be another one tomorrow.” Merlin grumbled moodily. He obediently raised his arms at Bran’s urgings like a small child.

“It breaks the…” Merlins tunic was wrenched up and over his head with one ruthless tug. “…Monotony.”

The sensory memory as the material was wrenched over Merlin’s head cut into him ruthlessly - the dragging at his ears as Arthur violently hauled off his tunic...

He crushed the thought desperately, blurted, “Well when I was a servant, I absolutely loathed them. Extra work. Standing about watching other people having fun and eating too much. And drinking too much.”

Bran pursed his lips and unusually for him, said nothing, going on with the disrobing with efficient economy.

It wasn’t really surprising though, Merlin thought tiredly. He wouldn’t have said that, if he hadn’t been thrown.
Over his time in Merlin's service, Bran had made it very clear through silent reproach that he didn’t at all like these relaxed references to his master’s former status, even if Merlin had been the king’s manservant. He suspected in fact, that his man had quite a hard time of it sometimes in the Servants Hall. Merlin knew it wouldn’t be easy for him. There was the fact Bran’s master had magic. And then there were the after effects of the king’s discovery of that fact. But worst of all, Merlin knew... the servant thing.

The castle servants may have more or less forgotten by now that Gwen had been one of them once, especially given how completely she’d settled into the role of queen, but Merlin’s rise was still recent enough to raise more than a few ruffled feathers.

In truth of course, though Bran fought him every inch of the way, Merlin needed much less assistance than a normal lord because he could dress and undress himself and heat his own water with no effort at all. All Bran had to do really was fetch it or have it fetched at any time that was convenient. Bran had told Merlin once he was the envy of every squire and kitchen boy in the castle for all of that, but Merlin guessed envy was only one small part of it. Poor Bran, Merlin thought. He must have to stand on his dignity regularly. But he knew Bran wanted to be his servant and that meant alot.

He heated the water with a wave if a fingertip before he got into the bath, but as he let the warmth relax the tension in his back and shoulders, the nagging thoughts tugging at him refused to be suppressed any longer. He chose to focus though, on what, tellingly, was the least terrifying.

What was he going to do about the magical display?

At just the vaguest thought, his chest tightened instinctively, without even touching the likely reality with his imagination.

Part of him vengefully wanted his display to be as modest as possible – a little bit of fire and a few embarrassing bluebirds maybe, and off - just to show Myrthyn and his fellow ambassadors how completely wrong they’d got it about Emrys.

But another part knew it was important to shore up Arthur’s dignity as king; to show that his Court Sorceror wasn’t to be sneezed at.

And... a part of him wanted to show off himself, maybe a little bit, show Arthur again...show his friends again that he was worthy of respect.

He wasn’t sure which part of him should win.

He sighed and began to wash himself desultorily as Bran pottered about, trying to plan something...somewhere in the middle, and coming up with nothing exactly right. He knew his gut fear of standing there in front of all those people, all waiting to be awed, wasn’t exactly helping his concentration either.

He dressed slowly and absently with Bran hovering fussily, but Merlin was too used to doing things for himself to let him do this too. In the end he allowed him to tie the odd fastening, just to keep him happy, mainly because Bran had taken to batting away his fingers when he tried to do it on his own. But Bran was silent and frowning slightly, as he rarely was, reading his mood, it seemed, and Merlin felt immensely grateful for his near silent solidarity.

He took a book when he was ready, and sat at his table. He told himself he was working until the very last minute, but his knee was bouncing nervously, his fingernails tapping compulsively on the wood and he didn’t absorb a word.
Instead, he let himself think at last about his final exchange with Gaius just as he’d left the old man’s rooms, even more disconsolate and resentful than he’d arrived.

“Merlin…. What about Gwaine?”

“Gwaine?” Shocked. Ridiculously shocked.

“You haven’t told him.” It was a statement rather than a question.

Merlin merely stared at the other man wordlessly, marshalling his familiar arguments, but all that came out was, “No! There’s no point.” Guiltily defensive.

How did Gaius manage both sympathetic and reproving in one frowning glance? The older man sighed.

“Maybe we hid for too long, Merlin. We both know… it becomes easier and easier to convince ourselves it’s best to conceal the truth for other people’s sake, when really … it’s for our own. Gwen knows now…”

“If Arthur hadn’t gone and told…”

“But he did. And now you know you should do the same.”

“It was just once, Gaius!” Pleading.

“Whether or not that’s the case…” he raised a quelling eyebrow to stop Merlin’s outraged protest in its tracks, “… the bond between you and Arthur is in place now and Gwen knows of it. Merlin, you can’t keep Gwaine in the dark.”

An agonised pause, then, “Yeah.” Defeated. Cornered. “I know.”

Merlin closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands, elbows propped up on the table. He felt hundreds of years old, cold with fear of loss. But at least he could tell Gwaine it was all over.

The… thing with Arthur. It had happened, but it was done.

When the time came he and Bran walked slowly to the banqueting hall but they were well on time, and when they arrived people were still being seated. The king and queen were yet to appear.

Merlin dodged the steward, who he feared may try to direct him toward the Rhegedians, and instead skulked round the back with Bran until he could sidle up to the usual grouping of familiar knights. His friends. And his lover.

Gwaine greeted him with a huge grin and a wallop on the back; the others seemed equally happy to see him, so he stood and chatted to them and hid his unease and nervousness behind the same happy grin he’d used through all those years of dissembling and fear.

He found he didn’t want to look at Arthur and Gwen when they arrived, superstitiously afraid that somehow it might undermine his confidence that a line had been drawn under the whole affair. He simply couldn’t get his eyes to raise to them, that familiar racing fear unmanning him.

When he sat down, still looking at the table in front of him, he positioned his chair behind Gwaine’s again, out of the line of vision of the twin thrones. And ashamed as he was of that cowardice, he told himself that he needed time, time to steady his nerves and his determination. That was all.
He didn’t eat much; in fact he realised absently that he’d hadn’t really eaten at all since the disastrous night he returned from his embassy. But then, he thought, with a tiny surge of spite, he wasn’t like Arthur who could generally wolf down anything, at any time. It took total bloody catastrophe to slow Arthur’s appetite.

He stood on the thought and concentrated on faking cheerfulness and bonhomie and he had enough practice in that to satisfy anyone. He drank just enough wine to genuinely raise his spirits and kept his eyes firmly on his companions, never tempted to peek around them at the display of uxorious adoration he knew would be taking place at the head of the table, or at the quiet, watchful Rhegedians, waiting expectantly for something that would never come.

So Merlin endured through the banquet, by sharing with the others his apprehension of the ordeal he had ahead of him the next day, but even as hollowly depressed as he was, he couldn’t help sniggering along at the many suggestions the knights made for his display.

Most involved turning Arthur into something or other… generally along the lines of a toad or a warthog, though Percival produced the unusually imaginative suggestion (and Merlin’s personal favourite) of transforming Arthur into a tiny, white, fluffy dog with a pink bow on its head. Clearly the young king’s extra vigorous displays at training were wearing thin with his knights.

Merlin suspected their group’s raucous guffaws as they howled at each new suggestion would have to draw attention, but he refused to look, and thankfully there was no summons to the head of the table. So he revelled in the minutes of freedom his friends were giving him.

He even kept his eyes down when they all stood respectfully at the end of the meal and entertainment (athletic dancers and a superb juggler), for the exit of the royal couple. And he managed an open grin when Gwaine murmured the predictable request to come to Merlin’s chambers.

And then it was time again to face the music.

Bran followed Merlin to his rooms, stoked the fire, left a flagon of wine and two goblets, bowed and withdrew, without uttering a word out of place, yet still somehow leaving the impression of enthusiastic collusion in Merlin’s love life.

He was shaking with nerves, an icy dread settling in his core.

The discreet tap on the door that followed swiftly on Bran’s departure wasn’t really a request for entry, more an announcement, and Gwaine slipped inside without waiting for a summons. They were that comfortable with each other by now; that sure.

Gwaine grinned at Merlin and went straight over to him, pulling him to him into a huge, appreciative hug which very quickly became enthusiastic neck kissing, and only when Merlin was sniggering helplessly at the tickling brush of Gwaine’s beard, did the other man pull back and smile at him smugly.

“About time. If I saw one more of those fake smiles …”

Merlin felt a jolt of panic. “What fake smiles?” he protested, outraged.

“C’mon, Merlin! Anyone could see you’re shittin’ bricks.” He widened his eyes and wagged his fingers in what Merlin realised with a jolt of relief, was meant to be a mime for sorcery. “Tomorrow,” he said meaningfully.

Merlin shook his head in an attempt at reproof, but he couldn’t help the helpless and genuine grin
that followed. Gwaine had always been able to make him cope better with the bad stuff.

“Alright. I’m not exactly looking forward to it,” he conceded with a pretence of ill grace. Gwaine snorted and made to reach for him again. “Let’s…”

There seemed to be a stone in Merlin’s stomach. Fear.

He gestured to the table, the wine - his props- and slid out of Gwaine’s loose grip.

Gwaine was frowning slightly in puzzlement when Merlin turned back to him, already at the table and beside his chair, but he came over obediently and sat, while Merlin poured wine, before sitting down himself.

And then there was no more excuse, nothing else to use for delay.

“Gwaine…” he was breathing too quickly, “There’s something…” He stopped and braced himself. He’d done harder things, hadn’t he? Said harder things? “Something… happened. And I have to tell you.”

Gwaine’s dark eyes narrowed curiously and Merlin could see sudden caution there. They didn’t move from Merlin’s face.

“Go on,” he prompted.

“Right.” Merlin tried a poor smile, “You know what the Rhegedians said the day they came.” Gwaine’s eyes never left his. “About…a kind of…bond.” And as Gwaine’s intent expression lightened at once, Merlin realised with horror that he thought he was talking about the bond he himself had offered Merlin; the bond between two ordinary men. Merlin could hardly bear it; the excitement he saw suddenly breaking through Gwaine’s careful cynicism. “The bond between their king and his sorceror,” he clarified quickly.

He could see Gwaine visibly reining in his optimism, disappointment now tinging his curiosity.

“Yeah,” Gwaine replied roughly, then “Who told ya? I was puttin’ it off. I didn’t think anyone else’d have the nerve.”

Merlin huffed a bitter laugh. “Yeah. Thanks for that.”

Gwaine looked insincerely apologetic. “Ah well… we all knew you’d strop.”

“Strop???” Merlin repeated, outraged. But of course he would have, given the chance. He’d have been beyond embarrassed, he’d have been raging, because it all cut too close to his own buried truths. He clenched his jaw.

“Arthur told me.”

And that got a real reaction. “Arthur?” Gwaine sounded astonished then gleeful. “What did he say? He looked as if he’d like to cut down the whole delegation on the spot. I can’t believe he actually told ya! He was all ‘this is my beloved queen’, and they were all,’but where’s Merlin?”’ He gave a whoop of laughter, “Ah, it was grand.”

“Gwaine…”

Gwaine clicked his tongue disapprovingly. “See, that’s why I didn’t tell ya. I knew you wouldn’t laugh. Even Gwen laughed.”
Merlin closed his eyes. “He told me because… because somehow the Rhegedians convinced him that… he should… what they’d expected… the…bonding. Between him and …me. Well… Emrys.” He swallowed uncomfortably. “That it was part of his destiny. Our destiny.” He forced open his eyes again. “Together,” he finished weakly.

The laughter drained from Gwaine’s face with almost comic speed, if Merlin had felt even remotely inclined to amusement.

“What?”

“They told him…”

“Arthur… wants a bond with you?” Gwaine looked, Merlin thought, pale with shock. Merlin had half expected he’d laugh, mock, but he seemed to have believed it a lot more quickly than Merlin had himself when Arthur told him. Gwaine swallowed too, visibly hard, and then he asked the obvious question, “So, what did you say to him?”

And how to answer that one? Merlin’s automatic response was defensiveness, to at least show Gwaine he’d tried to fight it.

“I told him he was insane! He loves Gwen!”

Gwaine narrowed his eyes and grimaced. “But…”

“But he’s Arthur,” He said bitterly, “You know what he’s like when he’s got an idea in his head. Since he found out about his destiny.”

“So…” Softly. “He still wants it?”

Merlin flinched. “…it’s not that… “ He took a deep gulp of air but it did little to calm him. “Look, the night I came back…remember? I had to go and see him.” Gwaine was staring at him now. “That was when. And…” He could hear how breathless he sounded himself as his nerve began to go. “He was so sure it was the right thing, Gwaine. Myrthryn told him it had been prophesied for centuries…him and me. Emrys” He said the word so bitterly. “And… The Once And Future King. Two… halves of…” he trailed off.

Gwaine’s jaw was clenched as if he expected a blow.

“You didn’t tell me. After that night.”

Merlin drew a shallow breath. “No.”

“Why?”

“Because… because I was afraid to.”

“Afraid? When has that ever stopped you Merlin?”

“Gwaine…”

“That bond Myrthryn was talkin’ about. It wasn’t the same as a marriage bond. Like the one …” He stopped, clenched his jaw.

“No,” Merlin said cautiously, feeling a glimmer of hope. Sometimes Gwaine saw things from the side, where other men could only see face on. Maybe he would be able to focus on destiny as Arthur had, rather than… other things.
“He talked about it like it was… like it was everything,” Gwaine went on tensely, “Forever, he said. Death wouldn’t break it.”

And the tiny hope died. Gwaine, as ever, saw straight to the core.

“Arthur thinks that’s what you and he are then? Two halves of …the whole?”

That phrase again! Merlin loathed it with all his being. But he nodded miserably. He could feel tears on his face and he wiped them roughly away with the back of his hand, but they kept coming, spilling hot and bitter.

Gwaine drew a hard breath through his nose and let out out again.

“And what do you think?”

No one had really asked him that before. Except Arthur, and he’d refused to accept the answer.

“I think … I think it’s… rubbish!” His voice was low and full of the passion of resentment. “The Great Dragon kept saying it…two halves of a whole! But I’m not Emrys! And he’s married to Gwen. He doesn’t love me! He loves Gwen!”

There was a short, speaking silence.

“So you keep sayin’,” Gwaine, softly. Then, he grimaced again. “What are you goin’ to do?”

Merlin took a sobbing breath. He still hadn’t told him. All of this and he was still circling it like a scared child.

“We did it,” he forced out. “That evening. We formed the bond.”

Gwaine was staring at him again and Merlin desperately tried to hold his gaze, his own pleading for understanding, but in the end he had to look away. When he looked back, driven by silence, Gwaine’s eyes were fixed on the table. He looked nauseated, defeated.

“Gwaine…?”

“The union they talked about,” he repeated thickly, “They said it was eternal.”

“I don’t know…”

The feeling of the magic taking them… re-joining two parts into a whole. Merlin closed his eyes, hating the memory now, shoving it away.

“How did you do it?” Gwaine demanded, harshly, “They said it was magic. You had to do it. Tell me.” And his tone said, don’t dare try to lie.

Merlin pulled his palm over his face, wiping away tears and snot. It was getting worse and worse.

He wanted to blame Arthur, but he couldn’t. Because in the end Arthur had been right, and Gwaine saw it too…Merlin could have stopped it any time. If, in his heart, he’d wanted to badly enough.

“It’s... done through…through sex magic,” he gritted, and that was as veiled as it could be, in truth.

But Gwaine had never been a man for platitudes. He’d always wanted everything in the wide open; if he had to have wounds, he wanted ones that bled everywhere.
“Right…” Gwaine sniffed hard, a brutally hurt sound. “He fucked you. And you did the magic that tied your souls.”

All that could be heard was Merlin’s shaky breath.

“So… you’d been with me, bedded with me…” Gwaine said softly, as if he were trying to get a sequence of events straight in his head. He was still looking at the table. “And I asked you to wed me, and you said…” He looked up straight at Merlin, “And then you go to him. An’ he finally decides he wants you, an’ he clicks his fingers. And you let him fuck you…. what… minutes after me? And you bond with him?”

“Gwaine! I’m… sorry. It wasn’t…”

“What? It wasn’t like it seems?”

Merlin made another hiccupping sound, helpless to control his grief and guilt. “I didn’t …want it.”

“What?”

“I didn’t …I mean I hadn’t …known.”

Gwaine hung his head, his long, luxuriant hair falling down to hide his face. Merlin could see though that his expression was twisted, full of pain. He couldn’t stand it.

“It’s never going to happen again!” Merlin said urgently, desperately. “It was once. Just once, to form the bond!”

Gwaine raised his eyes, head still slightly lowered. Merlin could see that he was close to tears, angry tears and now incredulous.

“An’ is that supposed to make it all better? Just …once. To make you his for good.”

Merlin stared. His for good.

No. No.

“I’m not,” he said shakily. “I’m not his, any more than he’s mine. He…”

“Yeah…I know, Merlin. He loves Gwen,” Gwaine said savagely and stood. The noise of the chair scraping along the stone floor, so loud and unexpected, made Merlin flinch as if a blow had been aimed at him.

Gwaine had already begun striding toward the door.

“Gwaine! Please!” Merlin begged, “We have to…”

“I need to think,” Gwaine said and he opened the door and was gone in an eyeblink.

Merlin sat alone, perfectly still for long minutes, tears spilling, unchecked, down his cheeks, an unstoppable, endless stream of grief. And then, as if he’d been prodded, he surged to his feet, driven by that pain and fury and loss and resentment, and he slammed out of the door, walked swiftly through the corridors and out of the castle, out eventually, at that relentless pace, of the city walls, until he came to the huge clearing he used.

The moon was almost full; the trees and grass around him looked clear and drained of colour, as ashen grey as his mood.
He stood there, breath still hitching slightly with the echoes of weeping and roared “Dra-gon!”, then the rest of the ancient words of summoning, flowing from him, liquid and powerful as his tears.

It felt like no more than seconds before he heard the swish of Kilgarrah’s wings and the Great Dragon was landing in front of him with improbable grace, bowing his head first in respect to Camelot’s last true dragonlord.

“You came,” Merlin said quietly, still in some part of him, surprised by that each time.

“As ever,” Kilgarrah agreed.

“Please, old friend,” Merlin blurted low voiced, “I need your help.”

“That also does not change.”

Merlin gave a tiny, humourless echo of a grin through the tears that stained his face, though they both knew that the days he had begged the dragon for advice or guidance were in the past. Until now. He began.

“You know that… thing you always said at the start. About me and Arthur. That we’re … two sides of a coin and… that.” The dragon blinked his large yellow eyes and waited, while Merlin tried to gather himself. “Some men came from Rheged...”

“Indeed?” Kilgarrah sounded benign, interested.

“They… they told Arthur that… he thought we had to create some kind of… union. For the sake of his… his destiny.”

“His. And yours.” Kilgarrah added serenely.

“You knew,” Merlin spat, but he could hardly call it a surprise.

“That you and the young Pendragon would eventually have to join? Of course.”

Eventually have to join. It sounded just as inevitable as Arthur and Gaius and Brychusa and Myrthryn had all said it had to be.

And he hated it more each time… the removal of choice, of free will; the feeling of the sheep being herded into it’s pen.

And the one he blamed most, was the messenger who hadn’t armed him against it… the first… the dragon.


“Say?” And now the dragon sounded offended, “I told you from the first day that Arthur was your completion, and you his. I could hardly have been clearer.”

“Oh yes! Believe me. You could! You told me… you told me when he was enchanted …by a love spell. You told me only his true love could break it. ‘She’ you said. And it was Gwen! Guinevere! The woman he married.”

“Yes,” the dragon said, unperturbed.

“Then if she’s his true love, how can I be his completion?” Merlin yelled furiously.
“He loved the blacksmith’s girl truly,” Kilgarrah agreed as if all this were self evident. “That is what broke the spell of false love.”

Merlin shook his head, trying to understand through his grief and fear and rage. “But…then… she is…”

“She is what?” the dragon demanded, finally, it seemed, out of patience. “She is not his completion, the other half of him. He loved her truly when the enchantment held him. And so, it broke.”

“And he still does! That’s the point! He doesn’t love me!”

“Love? You humans and your ‘love’…” Kilgarrah sneered, losing his hold on his own tenuous temper. “Fleeting! Ephemeral! This is why you have summoned me? Do you understand nothing of the forces at your command, the forces entwining you and Pendragon? We speak of eternity, of a world at your feet, and you whine about ‘true love’?”

Merlin stared, shaken, and as ever, despite himself, despite the desperation driving him, intimidated by the dragon’s anger. In truth, at the core, even though he was a Dragonlord, and, he’d been told, in command of his soul-brother, even though Kilgarrah had come to his aid many times over, kept him sane at times and Merlin had aided him in return, a part of him still didn’t quite know whether to trust the dragon completely or not; whether to view him as his kin… a friend of vast wisdom, or at heart, a creature of selfish and untrustworthy whim.

“But you stopped saying it,” he accused wildly. “You stopped… about the coin. And two halves of a whole. You kept saying my role was to protect him!”

“As it was, and is!”

“Protector! Not two halves of a whole! How was I supposed to...?”

“You were told many times. At the start of your path…what you are to Arthur Pendragon, and what he is to you. It was said to you. Do you need it repeated constantly, like an infant? That part of your destiny was in the future - the now. Your role as protector… guardian… was the urgent one, the one I have had cause to reinforce to you repeatedly over the years. Now, the time has arrived for completion between you. But you cannot say you were not told.”

It had been so long since Kilgarrah had spoken to him like this, with such harshness, with that old edge of contempt, and it cut like a sword slash at Merlin’s fragile control. But he knew that he had to control this encounter. That it was his last chance. He squared his stance, held himself tall.

“It doesn’t matter now anyway. The link we formed between us, Arthur and I. I have to break it.”

"Break it?” The dragon could hardly have sounded more incredulous. “Do you understand what you’re saying?”

“Yes! I do. We have to,” he said relentlessly. “It’s ruining everything! It’s like… a worm at the heart of us. It’ll destroy relationships, friendships, sour loyalties. And,” with sudden, desperate cunning, “if it was meant to make Arthur and me work together for our destiny… it’s ruined that too. We can’t even look at each other any more. If we can’t do this, I’ll have to leave. I’ll leave Camelot,” he threatened and it all flashed through his mind in that moment of desperation. Gwaine. God! Gwaine… Arthur, Gwen – their pain, their reproach. In that moment he meant it. “Please!”

“You talk like a squalling child, Merlin,” the dragon said with disbelieving contempt. “I thought you’d learned. There are things that cannot be undone.”
“I tried to help you and your kind!” And that was the deep wound between them; a wound they shared to the heart. “There has to be a way!” Merlin cried stubbornly. He was burning with the need to convince, to drag the secret from the dragon as he’d dragged so many before.

“There is no way.”

“I command it!” Merlin said relentlessly. “You must obey.”

There was a short, shocked silence.

“And again, you abuse your powers as a Dragonlord,” the dragon hissed, full of disgust. “You know you should not command me for selfish reasons, to do a thing I know to be mistaken.”

Merlin felt the truth of that right at his heart, the shame of it, to do this to his friend, his kin, just as he’d felt when he’d demanded the power to save Morgana from near death. But he knew now, as he’d known then, that he had no alternative left.

He’d regretted that decision many times, true, but he hadn’t been willing to take Morgana’s blood upon his hands for a second time. Had that been selfishness?

Yes, he thought now with desperate honesty, yes it had. He’d cloaked it in concern for other people, but in truth, hadn’t it been his own guilt that drove him?

But what he was doing now… that wasn’t selfish, was it?

It was for the people he loved. Gwaine. Gwen. Arthur.

“There is no choice. I have to. I command it.”

This time though, Kilgarrah did not reluctantly bow his head. He merely looked at Merlin with hard, contemptuous eyes.

“Even after all you’ve seen, you still have much to learn, young warlock. You may command as you will. It can not be done.”

Merlin blinked, his mouth opened. He could feel panic taking hold again. Trapped. They were trapped.

“But…it was fulfilled in magic. It was just a spell! An enchantment! Magic has to be able to reverse it! You must know a way! There’s always a way!”

“If you kill by magic, can magic pull back life from beyond death’s curtain?” Merlin stared at him, chest heaving with emotion. “Your bond to Arthur Pendragon will last now beyond this life and to eternity. It has come to pass as the prophecies foretold. It is no spell. No enchantment. It is completion of a destiny laid down for centuries. You cannot change it.”

Merlin drew a ragged breath in the quiet that followed. Another. “You’re lying,” he said quietly, hopelessly. He knew, he could hear, that he was snivelling.

“I have learned, as you must. Destiny cannot be denied,” the dragon intoned, “I have tried to warn you what’s to come… urged you, begged you to stop it… to kill the Druid Boy, Arthur’s Bane; to kill the Witch, but I see now, it was never to be. Do you see, Dragonlord? Even one such as I, has had to learn to bow the head to destiny. I used to think that there could be many futures, but now I know that they each lead to the destined end. No path can be taken that will lead events from their ultimate course.”
Merlin listened, face twisting with resentment. Each new declaration of destiny’s absolute power made him loathe it more. Rebel against it more, as he’d rebelled to save Arthur from Mordred, the snake at his breast.

“I could have avoided it! If I’d known!” The dragon merely blinked at him slowly again, and even that was pitying. “Or… if it had to happen… If we’d understood we wouldn’t have involved other people. We wouldn’t have…”

“How the end is reached is unimportant. Consequences cannot be escaped.”

The dragon sounded, Merlin thought suddenly, immensely sad. He felt a twinge of instinctive apprehension, stabbing at his chest, melting just as instinctively, into fear.

“What do you mean?” he asked, hushed.

The dragon didn’t reply. Then, “As I said.” He raised his head majestically. “I have tarried here too long. Accept what is, and what will be, young warlock.” He studied Merlin for a long second, and Merlin saw compassion there. “You cannot change it.”

“Wait!” Merlin called, desperate now that his old ally shouldn’t go without a word of hope left behind. “Tell me! Tell me what’s going to happen.”

The dragon looked at him, yellow eyes narrowed.

“I’m…I’m not commanding. I’m…asking,” And as he said the words, Merlin was indeed pleading, hollow, all fight gone. It was as close to an apology as he was capable of giving Kilgarrah at that moment.

“Then… I choose not to answer. Find some peace with your destiny, Merlin. Then, perhaps…”

The dragon turned slightly and stretched his great wings. With two powerful movements he was airborne and away.

Merlin watched his flight for as long as he could through the bright night sky, mind carefully emptied of thought. Then he trudged wearily back to the castle for a night with no rest or sleep.

He lay alone and tense in his bed through the long hours, eyes open, but blind to the moonlight pouring through his window, easing slowly as time ticked past, into dawn. He lay and thought about the escape he hadn’t found; the love and friendship he’d treasured and lost; the love he craved and feared and could never have. And he thought that as long as he lived now, alone was all he could be.
Chapter 4

When Bran knocked and briskly entered his rooms in the morning, Merlin had slid into a kind of exhausted doze. Not sleep, but a kind of fugue state where his fears and losses chased themselves around his mind, yet somehow he could detach himself enough to let the edge of them blunt a bit. Just enough to give him some semblance of rest after so long without.

It was nowhere near enough though, as he knew when he startled back to himself. He felt a thousand years old, drained and sad and exhausted.

“You didn’t close your curtains, Sire,” Bran remarked cheerfully. “You must have been tired to sleep through the light.” He didn’t quite waggle his eyebrows meaningfully, but Merlin knew he had drawn his own conclusions about the kind of night he and Gwaine would have enjoyed.

Merlin didn’t disabuse him; simply gave him a weary, strained grin. He got up to begin the process of bathing and dressing and getting ready for his big day at the tournament.

He found he felt so depressed, so lethargic, that even the thought of the magical display he was expected to produce didn’t create the terrified churning in his guts it had the previous day. Now the idea seemed distant and unimportant, as if it confronted a totally different person. He simply found, with an odd sort of distant gratitude, that he didn’t care.

Bran had heard of it though, and was full of excitement and a pride that touched Merlin despite himself, asking if he’d decided what he was going to do, if it was going to be something frightening or grand; when, during the events of the tournament, he was going to be called upon.

Merlin found he couldn’t really answer any of it, trying gamely to act like himself, but he supposed his litany of ‘Haven’t really decided yet.’ ‘Not too sure’; ‘No one’s told me’, with deep silences in between, was enough of a clue to Bran that Merlin wasn’t at his best.

Bran, as he could do when least expected, responded again to his master’s moods. He gave him a long look of narrow-eyed concern, but he also took his cue and kept quiet, going about his tasks in helping prepare Merlin, with a kind of silent, frowning solidarity that helped to soothe his master’s frayed nerves.

Finally, Merlin was ready, dressed in his night blue tunic, with a white shirt beneath.

When he glanced in the mirror, he thought he looked ludicrously young and out of his depth, for all he felt so very old.

He sent Bran in search of Colm, the steward, to find out when his contribution was expected, while he sat and leafed through spell books for ideas and tried to make his mind work; to make himself care.

A knock at his door though not only startled him, it woke him up, broke through his exhausted numbness. And there they were; the too familiar nerves skittering in his stomach, at the thought of who could be there.

Gwaine’s man?

Worse?

William?
He stared at the door wide-eyed and still, as if a knock were the strangest and most threatening sound in the world; as if he were facing an enemy sorceror, waiting for the unleashing of a lethal spell.

It was ridiculous.

It could be anyone.

Nothing to do with his… problems. He had to face people today anyway. All of Camelot in fact.

The knock came again. He breathed deeply, shook himself, forced himself to go and pull the door open.

A small fair-haired woman stood outside dressed in the garb of a maidservant. She was, he recognised, the temporary replacement for the principal maidservant to the court who had been generously granted leave to care for her ailing mother. Gwen’s maidservant.

His heart squeezed and shrank with dread.

“My lord,” she inclined her head respectfully and pleasantly, no animosity there at all, “The queen requests that you join her for a stroll in the gardens.”

Merlin stared at her, feeling his breath heavy and laboured his lungs.

He swallowed hard, managed, “When would she…?”

“She asked that you attend her as soon as you can, Sire, when you’re ready. Before the tournament begins.”

Merlin opened his mouth, then he nodded, forcing a polite smile. “Of course. Please tell her I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

The girl smiled in turn, and left, and Merlin went back into his chambers and tried to prepare himself.

It had been inevitable of course, but he realised that, of all the people he’d faced, all the encounters he’d had since he and Arthur had done what they’d done, this was the one he’d dreaded most; the one he knew with sick certainty, would be the worst.

He clenched his jaw and set off, moving swiftly through the busy corridors as Camelot prepared for the day’s activity. Servants were rushing everywhere, burdened and harassed, and Merlin envied them again with all his soul. Once he’d resented his lot; hated hiding his power and his gift. He remembered telling the boy sorceror Gilli about it; sharing his frustration and loneliness. Yet now he was finding more and more that he would give all to return to his days as the Prince’s manservant, more or less ignored; a boy who seemed to threaten no one.

He followed the sound of female voices when he reached the castle gardens, walking along scented paths bursting with colour and life. The sun was already hot, all the signs of another glorious day in this remarkable summer, symbolic of the golden King Arthur’s reign.

He rounded a corner into a small paved clearing surrounded by bushes and flowering shrubs, and there he found the queen with her maidservant. Gwen seemed to know of his arrival at once. She turned and found his eyes unerringly.

The smile she’d been wearing fixed and became the meaningless stretching of lips Merlin had seen
so often when she was unhappy or worried and pretending desperately not to be. They stood for a moment and looked at each other, the two old friends, until Gwen broke the tableau, handing over the small dog she’d been holding to her maid. She said something in a quiet voice and the woman curtseyed and left, passing Merlin on the path he’d taken, nodding and smiling in greeting. At last, he and Gwen were alone.

She looked incredibly pretty that morning he thought, in a low-cut pale yellow silk gown, with small yellow flowers set in a silver net containing her long dark curls. She wasn’t stunningly beautiful, or sensual, as Morgana had been, with her full, red lips and light languorous eyes and sharp, sharp wits; Merlin had been dazzled by Morgana, in his first year in Camelot.

But Gwen, lovely as she was, had a warmth and kindness and goodness ... an incredible attractiveness to her that caught at the heart.

Merlin bowed and said softly, “Majesty,” and for once he wasn’t playing. Gwen was the queen. Not his fellow servant. Not his old friend. The queen.

He felt his stomach roiling again, a surge of burning nausea. He only hoped he wasn’t going to be sick in one of these pretty flower beds. He kept his eyes lowered and waited for her to speak, as Merlin had learned you were supposed to do with royalty.

“Did you know... that I was more than a bit in love with you, when you first came to Camelot?”

Merlin’s gaze flew upwards, stunned.

Gwen gave one of her twisted, unhappy smiles. “You didn’t, did you? You didn’t notice anything like that. All you saw was Arthur.”

Merlin stared for one more second, then came to himself, shook his head because his instinctive denial of that was gut-sure.

“No! Gwen! That’s not true. I didn’t know but… I thought we were friends, and I didn’t ever think you would… I mean you were far too pretty to look at me! And Arthur was a complete arse! You know he was!”

Gwen looked at him for a second as if gauging his sincerity, then her face softened into a kind of helpless, lopsided smile, the one Merlin loved best, and there it was - the old complicity.

“I know he was,” she agreed. “But even then,” her thoughtful tone returned, and her dark gaze became searching, the smile fading. “Even then he was your focus, wasn’t he? Even when no one else saw it… you spent half your days in the stocks, but you risked your life over and over, saved him, drank poison for him. “

“But its not like you’re making it sound! We fought all the time. I didn’t even like him much!”

Gwen closed her eyes for a second and looked away. “Nor did I. Then.” She grimaced, her delicate features twisting. “But he changed. Everything began to change… after you came. Its funny how clear it all seems now, looking back.”

Merlin looked at her desperately, but he didn’t know what to say, what she was saying.

“Gwen…”

She met his eyes. “ I haven’t spoken to you before, because I didn’t think I could hold my temper. Not try to beat you bloody.” She sounded wry, half joking, but Merlin doubted that she was. Here
at last, was the open accusation he deserved.

He bowed his head.

“I’m sorry, Gwen. So sorry.”

“Are you?” she asked in a small voice. She was looking away now, to the side, as if she couldn’t bear to face him.

“Yes! Gwen you have to believe me… it wasn’t something I ever wanted… it wasn’t ever somet…”

“Oh Merlin!” she broke in glaring at him now, “Give me some credit! I know you!”

Merlin blanched, startled by her impatient tone after such calm. He nodded cautiously. “So you know it’s not something we ever considered… Gwen,” he went on eagerly, desperate to get his message across, prove his harmlessness to her, “Arthur adores you! You know that. And I love Gwaine… it’s not going to…”

“And Arthur,” Gwen interrupted angrily. “You love Arthur, Merlin. More than anything or anyone in your life. And you have since you came to Camelot.”

Merlin stared at her, stunned into silence, even though he knew, simply hadn’t wanted to admit, that was what she’d been saying since they began the conversation.

“That’s not true, Gwen,” he lied quickly. “He’s my friend and, yes, I care about him…”

“Don’t,” Gwen said and Merlin stopped, suddenly totally ashamed. They looked at each other, anguished. “You’ve always loved him. And on some level I’ve always known it.”

Merlin shook his head again, but he was denying something he knew was true.

She gave another of her grimacing smiles. “I should have known, really.” She looked away from Merlin again, eyes focussed on some memory. “One time, during my very first picnic with Arthur, remember? In the woods. Before Uther and Morgana arrived to stop it. He told me how much pressure he was under, how huge the expectations on him were,” Merlin looked at her cautiously, unsure where this was going.

But he put in quickly, “He’s never said anything like that to me. He’s never confided in me like that.” And it was true, and ridiculously, it burned. Because Arthur had never truly trusted him with his feelings like that; all he’d ever really told him was about how much he loved Gwen. All the rest of it, the things Merlin knew of Arthurs vulnerabilities, Arthur had never really admitted until he was at his lowest ebb, all his confidence gone. Then he’d turned to Merlin. Despite himself it stabbed at him that Arthur had lowered his defences with Gwen like that so easily, so casually, although he barely knew her then. Not really, not like he’d known Merlin. “He trusted you more even then,” he said softly.

Gwen huffed a tiny humourless laugh but she didn’t disagree. “He said he sometimes wanted to run away. Maybe run a farm.”

Merlin for all his tension, gaped incredulously.

“A farm?” he hooted, “Arthur?”

Gwen drew a deep breath and gave another reluctant, reminiscent smile. “That’s… pretty much
what I said. I think he was trying to picture a way we could be together then…an escape for us. I was so touched, so happy... but I couldn’t help teasing him.” Her smile was gone now, “You taught me that,” she added expressionlessly. “Showed me I should tease him. I said …I couldn’t picture him doing all that hard labour, and he just kind of…smirked and said, without even thinking about it, ‘Oh Merlin would be there, to do all the work.’”

She stopped and Merlin’s grin, which had returned at such typical Arthur, slowly died as he looked at her expression. He didn’t say anything, because he wasn’t sure what to say. He waited, puzzled and lost.

“I remembered that …after he told me. About… about what you’d done together... I couldn’t believe it hadn’t hit me at the time. How even when he was fantasising about running away with me, to some ridiculous new world… you had to be there. How in his head, even then, he couldn’t imagine a life without you with him. But I didn’t see that then. Not then. I thought it was funny.” She drew in a sobbing breath.

“Gwen,” Helplessly, then he tried,” Please. We didn’t know! I did everything I could to guide him to you, to help you both. All the time…even when you were in exile! And when you married him…I was so happy for you! I risked everything when you were in Morgana's power!”

“He didn’t know. Arthur.”

“Nor did I!”

“Not until the ambassador from Rheged… persuaded him.” Gwen continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “They talked for hours. Days. Once he’d planted the seed in Arthur’s mind. Once he’d suggested Arthur had to do it for destiny’s sake. In his head, that became for Camelot’s sake. For his people’s sake.”

“I know,” Merlin said softly

“That’s the only reason, Merlin. The only reason he’d go to you.”

The brutality of that truth, the cruelty, oddly, stunned him.

He’d expected anger, reproach, disappointment, repudiation, and he’d got them all. But even given the reality of what had happened – what he’d done with her adored husband - deliberate cruelty to him, from Gwen of all people, was so shocking he could only stare at her as if he’d never seen her before in his life.

At once, like some trained response, guilt flooded him.

He’d done this. He’d made this of Gwen. He’d done it by not rejecting Arthur’s sacrifice.

Her head was high and he saw no remorse in her eyes, no answering guilt. She’d always had the capacity to fight ruthlessly for what she wanted or believed in, always had that toughness. She shared that with Morgana.

“You blame me,” he said miserably. “Just me.”

“I know how long you’ve wanted him.” He shook his head and tried to protest again, but she ignored him completely. “Maybe… you just took your chance. Or maybe it was all planned out… the delegation from Rheged… all of it.”

Merlin stared at her. “You can’t believe that!”
“Why not? I’ve seen enough of how ruthless magic can be!”

Merlin gaped again, appalled by where this was going. “Not just magic! And I tried to stop it! Ask him!”

“Oh, come on, Merlin,” She gave a mocking kind of laugh that transformed into a glare. “If you wanted, you could have said no.”

“So could Arthur!”

“He thought he was doing it for Camelot! That it was his destiny!”

“And what did I think, Gwen? Since you seem to know!”

Gwen’s face twisted. “You thought. ‘This is the way I can have him’,” she said softly.

The words hooked somewhere deep inside him, somewhere soft and open and ready to bleed. The truth in them and the lack of truth. The hopelessness that she would ever understand or forgive what could not be forgiven.

“Do you understand what it was? Not just some…whim. Something Arthur was fooled into. A chance to fuck, for me,” he said harshly. He saw her flinch. “It was what Mrythryn said. We were born to complete each other, intended for it. And that’s why it formed.”

Gwen stared at him and her eyes looked wild.

“How does anyone know it’s real? Arthur could be …he could be enchanted to believe it. Just like he was with Lady Vivian. I know how powerful you are! I’ve felt for myself how enchantment can twist the soul!”

Merlin grimaced and the pain he felt was so huge, so huge on top of all the grief he was already bearing, that he knew he was going to cry. Humiliating and pathetic. Gwen had made him cry. But maybe it was her due. Maybe she deserved to see.

“I didn’t enchant him. I would never do that. I didn’t even try to use magic to stop it, though I should have.” Gwen stared at him, mouth trembling, chest heaving. “He wanted it, he pushed for it.”

“Why? Why would he do that? He loves me! He always has! And you can’t give him sons! Why would he risk everything over this? You were always there…always… But he never wanted you!”

Merlin felt the tears wet on his cheeks, hot and blinding as they slid over his lashes. He’d forgotten how unrelenting she could be, how hard she could fight, and he could see it was as bad as he’d feared; he was her enemy now.

“I know,” he said simply.

She stared at him again for a long, wild second.

“Then why?” she shouted. “ Why would he tie himself to you, touch you that way,” she grimaced with disgust, “If you or Mrythryn didn’t enchant him?”

And it struck him then like a blow in the face, what so many people, what Kilgarrah had tried to tell him; all Arthur himself had tried to say.

“Because... because he’s not a coward, like I am. Because he knew it had to be, and he didn’t try to
run from it like I did. He never runs, however hard the duty he faces may be.”

Gwen’s expression twisted and he could see suddenly that she had started to cry too now.

“If it’s just duty,” she said softly, brokenly, “then why does he seem… so…?” She stopped suddenly and shook her head impatiently. “It doesn’t matter. You’re by his side, Merlin, just as you always wanted.”

And he knew, that it was true.

“It was once, Gwen,” he said brokenly, heartsick, like a child begging forgiveness, “Just once. To fulfil the bond.”

She looked at him, and, “Liar,” she said softly, her huge, dark eyes, glittering with tears and reproach. “He said he couldn’t… wouldn’t even promise me that. When he told me.” She gasped a breathy, bitter laugh, “He was so sorry, but so determined. So…” She looked up at the sky, then closed her eyes, “So… Arthur! Ready to take his punishment like a true knight. He said … he should have told me before. Not asked me… he should have told me…” She gave a sharp sob. “As if there was no option. But he said, even after all Myrthryn told him, he wasn’t sure it was true until he saw you, heard it from you. And you… you convinced him,” she finished accusingly. She drew a deep shaky breath, and let it go slowly, whispered, heartbroken, “I can’t believe he didn’t ask me.”

Merlin shook his head hopelessly, tears still falling, grief-silent, running down his face like rain on glass, and he understood why Gwen had to believe Arthur had been bespelled, why it made it bearable.

He knew his face must be wrecked with tears and snot, whereas Gwen, he thought achingly, just looked more appealing.

How could he ever believe, even for a second, that Arthur would genuinely want him, when he had her.

How could he bear that Arthur wanting him even once, had done this to her?

He watched numbly as she regained control and pulled out a square of fine linen, wiped her eyes delicately. She took another deep, unsteady breath.

“If it isn’t an enchantment,” she said levelly, with all her old bravery, “Then… you and Arthur are… soul-bound. For more lives than this.”

Merlin bowed his head and looked at the ground through blurred eyes.

He heard her indrawn breath, sharp and hitched with distress.

“Go, Merlin,” she commanded softly. “Just… leave me.”

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He walked to his room in a daze, thankful to find Bran wasn’t there. He supposed that he’d be out looking for his master, fretting, desperate to tell him what was expected and when.

But he didn’t care about it. He didn’t care at all.
He washed his face with dazed efficiency and sat at his table to wait for Bran to find him. Then when he did, when Bran burst in to scold him and hustle him down to the tournament field, he simply went along with it. Bran could have been leading him anywhere and he’d have gone. He simply didn’t want to think.

He had enough will left to ignore Bran’s urging toward the seat reserved for him near the Rhegedian ambassadors and the king and queen, but beyond that, beyond finding himself a seat as far away from them as he could, he had no more self preservation in him. He simply sat in the hot sun, ignored Bran’s fussing and frantic urging to find shelter, and watched, and very carefully didn’t think.

The realisation of what he was actually watching, took a while to filter through his apathy; at first it was easy to ignore.

Archers, mace fights, battles with staves, the usual fare. He sat, and looked, and didn’t see anything, sat for hours blankly with the implacable heat beating down on him and noticed not a thing.

It wasn’t until the jousts were past and sword fights began, that Merlin slowly realised that the roaring of the crowd represented something.

Homage, love, hero worship, adoration.

He registered the red of the Pendragon crest, knew that armour like his own hand. Arthur was fighting, of course he would – he was no armchair king– and when he made himself look, he saw Gwen was sitting alone on the royal dais, crown on her head and a fixed smile on her face. The Rhegedians were arrayed at her side and beside the larger, empty throne on her right. Merlin hadn’t even noticed.

He looked back at the arena at once though, as if compelled, his interest alive despite himself. It was a sort of melee, he saw, to save time he assumed, given the variety of entertainments on show, and it was presumably one of the last events of the day, since the king was involved. Arthur had, unsurprisingly, already laid low most of the knights who’d taken him on, but as he battered gracefully away at the men nearest him, Merlin saw another knight cutting through his opposition with the same ruthless effectiveness.

The armour was just as recognisable; Merlin had polished it too, lovingly.

Gwaine was relentlessly effective; well he always was, but today… Today he was fighting like a devil and Merlin thought, with a vicious stab of agony, that he’d found what had upped Arthur’s game.

Merlin.

Merlin and the havoc he wrought, just by existing.

He noticed suddenly, with a start of pain, that Gwaine had a favour wrapped around his arm; the favour they’d joked about soon after they’d begun their relationship.

Gwaine had suggested laughingly that a knight should wear his lady’s emblem and grabbed one of his Merlin's old neckerchiefs. Merlin had threatened to eviscerate him if he so much as thought about wearing it; mainly, he supposed, when he thought about it now, because he was so instinctively determined to remain discreet. Not to provoke anyone, not to draw Arthur’s scrutiny to their relationship.

But Gwaine was wearing it now, that scrap of coarse red cloth, and there could be no doubt Arthur
would know what it was, that Gwen would know what it was, and what it was declaring.

He felt tears rise in his eyes again though he could have sworn he was wept dry, and he watched with desperate grief as they faced each other at last, all opposition dispatched in the urge to get to each other. Gwaine and Arthur, circling each other like alpha wolves about to fight for the pack.

The battle began at once and it was vicious and evenly matched. If Arthur had had the edge recently, propelled by whatever demons danced in his head because of Merlin, now, Gwaine seemed to have the same drive. They traded ringing blow after blow, hammering away at each other like sworn enemies rather than two knights putting on a display for entertainment. Gwaine fell first but instead of the contest ending as the rules required, he got up again at once and the fight raged on. Then Arthur fell and rolled and was up on his feet, and still they circled and fought and Merlin sobbed like his heart was shattered into shards.

_This_ was the result of the great bond between Emrys and Arthur Pendragon.

Friends hating friends, friends now enemies. He readied himself to stand, to step in before one killed the other, because he didn’t believe either was capable of surrendering; not now, with so much between them.

But...“My lords!” The queen’s voice rang out suddenly, clear and strong across the tournament field. She was standing. The fighters kept going as if they hadn’t heard, but then “My lords! Your Majesty! Sir Gwaine!” At last something seemed to get through to the two men, because they stopped and stepped back more or less simultaneously, swaying slightly with exhaustion and presumably the effects of the blows they’d each taken. “We’ll be here till nightfall!” Gwen announced lightly, playing so clearly to the crowd, and they duly laughed, seduced. “I think we can call a draw, don’t you?” She was smiling fixedly, but no one would notice that, Merlin thought. They would only see her loveliness and her humour. And he blessed her.

There was a short silence as the two knights looked up at her, then back at each other, as if they were considering just going at it again, come what may, but suddenly Arthur’s stance changed, relaxed, and he pulled off his helmet, revealing his disordered, sweat-matted golden head. He looked in truth as if battle-rage still held him, but his royal training in saving face was impeccable.

“You’re wise, my love,” he said lightly, and smiled ruefully at the crowd who cheered with sheer delight.

Gwen gave a tight smile and sat down again, and Gwaine bowed shortly to her too. Then he turned and stalked to the side, only then taking off his own helmet. Merlin caught a glimpse of his face, and he looked angrier and more out of control than he’d ever seen him.

Arthur, meanwhile, was allowing William to loosen parts of his armour while edging back toward the dias, and he looked furious too.

Merlin sat and watched as the archers were called again for the final part of their competition; eight of them shooting at targets at the other end of the grounds. Sat in his seat in the brutal sun, watching again and not seeing, and thinking now, “What if I didn’t exist?”

“My lord,” he heard from a long distance. Then sharply, “Sire!” he turned his head to find Bran hovering beside him and he could see that the other man looked horrified, shocked. “Sire? Are you well?” he asked tentatively.

Merlin looked at him blankly.
“You,” Bran nodded his head meaningfully at him, then he said quietly, almost timidly, “You’re weeping.”

Merlin stared at him for a second or two longer and then he understood. “Oh,” he murmured and raised his hand to try to wipe the tears away. He felt as if he’d cried more in these days than any time since his father had died. The last true Dragonlord. But one.

“It’s... it’s time for your display, Sire,” Bran said gently, clearly out of his depth, but then as if he’d remembered who he was, he declared, with his old, bossy firmness. “But you’re not up to it. Look at your skin! It’s going to be bright red in the morning! I’ll tell Colm and Ewyn you’re not well....Sitting in this sun unprotected…” he muttered.

Merlin could see frantic worry beneath the fussing, and felt oddly and desperately grateful for his concern.

“No,” he said, “It’s fine. I’ll do it.”

“But you’re not well!”

“I’m fine, Bran. I can’t disappoint the crowd, can I? Or the king?”

Bran bit his lip. That was a low blow, Merlin knew. Bran worshipped the king.

“Right.” he said slowly, doubtfully. “Well... after this then. The last two archers. You’re on last. Saved the best,” he tried to joke but both of them were frowning.

Merlin stood and tried to find his balance against the dizziness that struck him. Maybe, he thought vaguely, Bran had been right about the sun. But he followed his manservant to the side of the ground and obediently sipped some water while he waited for the last arrow to hit home on the targets at the other end of the ground.

When the cheering for the victor died away, the tournament steward, Colm’s deputy, Ewyn, marched to the centre of the ground to announce the next attraction, in the grand, echoing voice he used, like a caller at the fair, Merlin had always thought.

All he said though was, “The King’s Sorceror, Lord Merlin of Ealdor”.

No boasts, no raised expectations. Merlin wondered distantly if he could thank Arthur for that.

He drew a deep breath and let it go again in a heavy sigh, then he walked to the end of the field. The hubbub had died completely; the crowd had fallen now to a strange silence, eerie among so many people. Magic had been banned for so long though, that any display of it, especially one in front of the king, by the king’s own sorceror…

Merlin supposed vaguely that the crowd didn’t know whether to flee, enjoy it, or stone him.

He looked down at the dusty ground beneath his feet, then as if compelled, to the royal dais.

Arthur, still sweaty and dishevelled, had retaken his seat beside Gwen, Myrthryn on his other side, but Merlin didn’t look at the ambassador. Instead he focussed on Arthur and Gwen, Arthur’s hand laid over hers, his expression as he looked in Merlin’s direction, haughty and detached.

Merlin felt his mouth move into an approximation of a smile, the smallest, upward curve of his lips.
What to do? he wondered vaguely. He supposed he should do something first, just to show that magic could be... pretty.

His eyes trailed over the intricate Pendragon crest on the hangings behind the royal party, and without any real decision he turned his hand. Dust began to rise from the ground in front of him, swirling in a tiny storm until it formed obligingly into a perfect rendition of Arthur's symbol. He heard the gasps from a long way off but he thought critically, It's not very pretty though, and with a frown the dust dragon took on blazing colour - Pendragon red and gold - as it bowed its head to Arthur.

The crowd gasped again and began to applaud wildly and Merlin ventured another glance at the royal couple.

Arthur was smiling, eyes wide and amazed and thrilled, like a small boy shown an amazing treat, and Merlin’s heart clenched in his chest as if a hand had reached in and squeezed it. He’d dreamed of that look for so long; that Arthur should look on him, on his magic like that, with real admiration and pleasure. And now at last, he’d seen it.

Arthur underlined the impression of a small boy, by shifting in his seat and turning to Gwen to share the moment, as if checking she was seeing it too, and perhaps that dimmed the joy slightly for Merlin, because Arthur didn’t look his way first even then. But he knew it was for the best.

He turned his gaze to the emblem made of dust and dispelled it with a wave, then he thought, something for Gwen. And again, Something pretty, before what was to come.

He turned his eyes to the dais and he felt their glow of golden power, then rapidly, briars began to grow up the dias poles and along the ground, leaves sprouting lavish and healthy green and then... yellow he decided, yellow roses began to appear, to bud and flower, as numerous as flies on a midsummer evening. Within a half a minute the dais was bedecked with blooms that matched the colour of Gwen’s gown exactly, and the crowd was again applauding wildly with something Merlin knew was close to relief.

Beautiful magic, not lethal magic.

Gwen was half smiling, a kind of unwilling, uncertain pleasure, as if she wasn’t sure she should be feeling it. It warmed Merlin’s heart. He watched Arthur reach forward, looking wholly delighted, to pluck a bloom and hand it to her with a huge white grin. There was more cheering from the crowd.

And when he heard Mrythyrn say in a stunned voice, "They are real, grown from seed to flower. They have a scent!", he pretended he hadn’t heard the suppressed excitement in it.

But he thought savagely, Enjoy the next bit, men of Rheged.

What would be his epitaph?

A sorceror who overreached himself?

A young man out of his depth?

He looked at the ground and waited for the sounds of pleasure to die down, tried to let everything flow from him, all emotion, all sadness, all gratification, all grief.

When he heard expectant silence again, he looked up and across at the men lounging at the other end of the ground, watching the show like everyone else.
“Majesty,” his voice carried effortlessly.

Arthur, who had been listening to Mrythryn talking intensely in his ear, looked startled to have been addressed.

Merlin met his eyes steadily though, patiently, and he saw something shift in Arthur’s expression. As if something had warned him. Maybe, Merlin thought wryly, maybe there was something in that bond after all.

“I beg you, Sire.” Public grovelling at last, Arthur. “Ask your archers to fire.”

He saw Arthur’s expression freeze, and beside him, Gwen stiffen. Myrthryn seemed to sit straighter, and Merlin wondered, Has he guessed yet?

“To fire where?” Arthur jested and the crowd tittered, but Arthur’s smile died quickly. He already knew.

“At the targets, Sire.” Merlin returned calmly, obviously. He’d positioned himself carefully. From the start, some part of him had been planning exactly.

The crowd gasped and began to murmur, even though they must have expected it.

Maybe… this part wasn’t going to be so pretty. But Merlin didn’t look away from Arthur.

Their eyes met and held and Merlin tried to say everything with that gaze: his sorrys, his regrets, his pain, his weariness and guilt, his huge, huge love. But, he thought wryly, how could Arthur of all people, hope to understand all that. He smiled slightly and looked away toward the archers who were standing half at attention, unsure what to do. Then he glanced back at the king.

Arthur looked chalk-white, he thought. Frozen. Gwen, Merlin noticed, was clutching his arm, looking up at him, her lips moving, urgently saying something, some words of warning perhaps, but that was all peripheral.

All Merlin saw, all he wanted to see at this moment, was Arthur.

In the end it came down to that. They’d all been right - Gwen and all of them.

It had always been Arthur, and in every life, if any more were indeed granted to him, it always would be.

He knew Arthur didn’t have a choice, that he had to concur; he couldn’t undermine his Court Sorceror by refusing. He’d be as well dismissing him on the spot and throwing him out of Camelot, along with any chance of an alliance with Rheged. But Merlin regretted it had to be his voice that gave the order.

Their eyes met again, Arthur’s full of a kind of muffled horror. Merlin gave him a bright, wide grin - the kind that Arthur had always announced made him look half-witted - and he fixed the image of his young, golden king in his mind.

He looked down and waited, patiently.

At last he heard, “Archers! Take aim!”

Merlin looked up at the blue sky.

Then, a choked voice, “Fire!”
He saw them coming, silver needles against the clear azure, arching up in a beautiful arc, then swooping down to meet him, to meet the targets less than a foot behind him. He could hear their sound, a kind of high pitched whoosh of displaced air, and he had time to think, *It'll be quick*, and finally, inevitably, *Arthur*.

It was a perfect, waiting, whistling quiet.

But into it, shocking in the peace, he heard, "*Merlin!*"

A huge, desperate bellow of anguish. A male voice.

*Arthur?*

No.

*Balinor?*

It couldn’t be.

Who then? *Gwaine? Gaius?* It *could* be Gaius!

He thought suddenly, stupidly, ‘*How do I have the time to work it out?*’

And his rational mind caught up with the instinct in him that had responded to that howl of grief, the part that had thought quietly, ‘*No,*’ and stilled the arrows’ flight in the air; strange fruits caught in aspic.

He hadn’t moved a muscle in his body, not a finger, not an eyelid. He was still staring straight ahead, at the arrow tips inches from his eyes, waiting patiently to pierce his brain. He heard the screams, the gasps and shouts, of shock and fear, and he was still there, still there to hear them.

And he thought again “*No!*” But this time, screamed and echoed inside his head. This time it was despair, fury at his own cowardice, at the will that had defeated him, preserved him, and stopped him from lancing the boil.

He grimaced horribly, drew in a deep breath, another.

And then, at last, he bowed to it, in his head.

*Destiny.*

He backed up a pace, away from the frozen arrows and turned to begin his tired walk toward the dais.

He felt exhausted, empty, ridiculous; all that emotion and drama, that final, true acceptance of death. To end like this… all dressed up and nowhere to go. He felt sure Kilgarrah, somewhere, would be laughing.

He looked up at the people on the platform, framed by those lush yellow roses. None of them were seated any longer. Gwen was staring at him, still holding her hand over her mouth, eyes wide with horror, as if she’d seen it happen, the arrows taking him. Myrthryn was openmouthed, grasping Brychusa’s arm. And Arthur was fixed on him too, with the look of stunned shock Merlin had seen on men fresh from the battlefield, but never, he realised, even after carnage, on Arthur. He supposed it was new, having someone attempt suicide by magic in front of you, as part of a display for visiting diplomats.
He’d never felt so exposed, so ripped open for others to see.

It was all out there now for those who cared to look: his power, his weakness. He’d never felt so low, never felt so cornered and compromised that death was all he wanted. He’d never felt so miserably alive.

Everything seemed unnaturally bright to him, faces, colours, and he could hear, with a kind of preternatural clarity, the shocked murmurs of the crowd. “God I thought he was dead! I can’t believe it.” “Oh.. I couldn’t look. What happened?” “He was a servant under Good King Uther’s nose! I remember him!” “The arrows! Oh, preserve us, they’re still there!”

Merlin was still walking slowly, reluctantly, toward the dais, gaze skittering hazily from figure to figure. Then, abruptly, The arrows? registered sluggishly, and he saw that Brychusa’s attention, of all the people standing around Arthur and Gwen, was fixed, disbelievingly, on a point behind him.

Because the arrows, he remembered at last, with a shock of liquid hot embarrassment, were indeed still there, as he had left them, caught in time and space by his will; incriminating remnants of the Court Sorceror’s first ‘display’.

He scrunched his face up in an involuntary grimace of utter mortification and raised his forefinger as he walked, an unnecessary conceit he supposed now, but he felt safer for it.

His eyes flared and he thought wistfully, Fly.

He heard the instant, ugly sounds behind him as arrows thud, thud, thudded with unchecked force into their targets, the squeals of sudden shock and horror all around the crowd, saw Gwen’s eyes flinching closed, Arthur’s unbroken, frozen stare still fixed on him, seeing everything.

He wasn’t sure how much more damage he’d done.

Everyone was looking at him as if they were watching a walking ghost. Or perhaps, a monster.

It seemed as if he’d been walking for a long time before he finally came to a halt in front of the king and queen, but he knew well that his exhaustion was playing tricks on him. He still felt hollowed out, consumed by guilt and grief, and he knew there was to be no easy, unworthy escape.

He bowed though, as he knew he probably should, as if he’d just performed a neat juggling act, rather than terrified half of Camelot.

The absolute quiet of the crowd again, so many people, was strange and perfect as they waited, breath-held, for the king to react, to give them their cue.

What were they expecting, Merlin wondered? A quick burning at the stake to round off the day? Maybe they were thinking that old King Uther had had a point. That Arthur would see that now.

Arthur, though, after long seconds still staring at Merlin, seemed to gather himself from his dazed state and nodded curtly back.

He said stiffly, “Very… impressive. Don’t you think, Lord Myrthryn? But you must see many such displays in Rheged.”

His voice sounded a bit strange, Merlin thought, looking down at his dusty boots. Rusty. But he could understand with gratitude what Arthur was trying to do. Normalise it somehow, make it… what other people saw as a matter of habit.
Myrthryn, though, didn’t seem inclined to play along.

There was a silence where a diplomatic reply should have been; horribly awkward.

Merlin glanced up again, curiously. He found Myrthryn’s eyes fixed solidly on him, waiting, he realised, for his attention, and he looked, Merlin thought stupidly, as if he were staring at the sun.

“I think…” Myrthryn said clearly and loudly at last, eyes still fixed on Merlin’s, “that my lord … Merlin can control life. That he can make it grow and bloom to perfection, at his will. That time is as nothing to him. He stops it with a thought and restarts it with the flick of his finger. Emrys is come. And I am honoured to have seen, and to bow before him.”

He did then exactly as he said, lowered himself to one knee and bowed his head in obeisance, and as if they’d known it was coming, Brychusa and his companions on the other side of Gwen, did exactly the same thing.

The silence in the ground, in that unreal moment, seemed to intensify even further, grow heavier, ever more oppressive, and everyone watched, stunned and uneasy, as the ambassadors of Rheged bowed their knees before Merlin of Ealdor. Out of nowhere Merlin flashed on a moment … it felt like centuries before… a moment when a powerful sorceror had foreshadowed just this, and bowed to a scared, out of his depth boy. Merlin recalled with perfect clarity what he’d felt in those first shocked seconds. The mesmerised, frightened embarrassment; the knowledge that, whatever Alator expected of Merlin, he was more than likely to disappoint him. And woven through it all - a kind of furtive, flattered delight; the huge rarity of being thanked, the even greater rarity of being respected and honoured.

Now, standing in front of all of Camelot, that respect was there for all to see, and Merlin couldn’t bear it.

He stood there for horrified, disbelieving seconds, then mortification brought him at last to life.

He hissed urgently, “No. Please. Myrthryn. All of you. Stand up!”

He looked wildly at Arthur for aid, and found him staring back, gaze enigmatic; then Merlin glanced involuntarily at Gwen who just looked... frozen, upset.

But he realised with sweet relief that the Rhegedians had risen to their feet again, even if they were all still looking at him with something nauseatingly close to awe.

Myrthryn though, thankfully, had the diplomatic nous to turn to Arthur at last, and bow still lower.

“She will rejoice,” he said meaningfully, and leaned forward to murmur something to the king.

“Rheged will rejoice,” he said meaningfully, and leaned forward to murmur something to the king.

Arthur frowned but managed a gracious nod, as if he had in fact planned the whole thing. Myrthryn seemed prepared to believe that he had. He looked at Arthur gravely, meeting and holding his eyes. “Rheged will rejoice,” he said meaningfully, and leaned forward to murmur something to the king.

Merlin stood uncertainly in the dust in front of the dais, waiting, desperate only to escape from the thousands of eyes upon him, judging and deciding. But Arthur hadn’t dismissed him, and he seemed deep in conversation as if he’d forgotten Merlin was still there.

And then with a shock of clarity Merlin understood the vital importance of this moment, after the events of the afternoon.
The people had to see this.

He stood still, and tried to radiate humility, and waited, just like any other subject hoping for the indulgence and mercy of his king. And finally Arthur, after a short exchange with Myrthryn and a murmur or two to Gwen, turned his attention back to Merlin and nodded a regal dismissal.

It had been at most a minute, but it had felt to Merlin like hours, and a valuable point had been made.

Whatever Merlin’s astonishing powers, legendary sorceror or not, the people had seen that Arthur commanded him. He was Arthur’s creature.

He turned at last, free to go, feeling the burden of days and nights of anguish, of the drama he’d just delivered, all weighing down on him like boulders of iron, and all he wanted to do was go to ground. Collapse, and sleep, concealed from everyone, for years and years.

There was a gap, he saw with a surge of relief, in the excited, buzzing crowd and he made for it, aiming to battle his way out as he had in, but as he reached the edge of it, he realised abruptly that people were already beginning to melt away before him as if he had a dragon clearing the way. Or he had some illness they could catch with a touch.

They were bowing, he saw with horror, respectful and full of awe. “My lord,” they were murmuring, and he saw people he’d exchanged cheery greetings with for years, people who’d happily hurled rotting vegetables at him in the stocks and patted him on the head as they went past.

“Please,” he said and he wanted to weep at the sight of that opening path through the people, and all it meant. He didn’t move forward, instead he began to protest, insist he really was just like them, not a god or a monster, just a person.

But as he spoke, and slow as his reactions were in the coils of his exhaustion, he was still able to register, puzzled, a few of the deferential faces in front of him changing expression to intense alarm, just before he felt a brutal grip on his upper arm.

He heard gasps of horror in the crowd, presumably that anyone would dare, and he was hauled around to face his attacker.

“What the fuck was that?”

Gwaine was standing there glaring at him with such furious rage he looked as if he was about to levitate off the ground with it, his skin and hair filthy and smeared with sweat and dirt, his face red with temper.

“A …display of magic”? Merlin tried, tentatively.

“A disp…? It was fuckin’ madness, that’s what it was!” Gwaine bellowed back, incandescent.

The crowd around them were silent, he realised, watching the exchange with avid apprehension, and over Gwaine’s shoulder he saw Leon and Percival were hovering anxiously, with Gaius frowning and strained by their side.

And like a sleepwalker brutally wrenched from his dream, reality hit him and a huge surge of terror took his knees from him so that he faltered, almost fell. How close he’d come, how close he’d come to stumbling, by insane instinct, to destruction. How had he ever thought his friends would welcome watching him die by his own hand, even friends he’d wronged?
“You were going to let it happen, weren’t you?” Gwaine said, voice low and relentless and shaking. It wasn’t a question.

Merlin met his eyes. There was no protest, no attempt to save face by denial. He knew all of them were well aware of it.

Gwaine’s mouth twisted. “Stupid…! You stupid bastard! You try anythin’ like that again and I’ll skewer you myself.”

Merlin weakly tried a distracting, suggestive grin, knew it failed pitifully. “That a promise?”

Gwaine shook his head slowly, his eyes narrowed and wet with emotion.

“Fuck. Merlin…” he muttered and hauled him close, arm hooked round his neck, face buried in his shoulder.

Merlin held him tightly in return, hugged and squeezed back as hard as he could manage around his armour and mail, feeling the unwilling tremors of shock still running along the strong body in his arms. And he whispered, “Sorry, Gwaine. I’m so sorry,” over and over again into his hot skin and sweat-tangled hair.

Over Gwaine’s shoulder he saw his friends waiting, emotion – deep relief, indulgence, worry - marking their faces too.

And in the middle distance, on the royal dais, Gwen was stoically handing out rewards and prizes to the winners of various trials, and Arthur was sitting, head turned to stare unblinking at Merlin and Gwaine’s embrace, his mouth tight, eyes expressionless. Merlin held his gaze just as blankly, because he didn’t know any more what they had left to feel or say.

Eventually Gwaine loosened his hold and pulled back. He held Merlin by the upper arms and looked into his face, then let him go and hauled his hand through his own hair, pushing the now grimy mass back off his forehead. Merlin knew the gesture for what it was with Gwaine: embarrassment, an attempt to defuse emotion.

“Right,” he said briskly. “You’re goin’ with Gaius. Gaius!” He didn’t move his eyes from Merlin’s and called the older man in much the same peremptory tone as he might have called his own young squire, but the old man came forward promptly without so much as a raised eyebrow.

Merlin frowned and opened his mouth to protest that he was actually going to his own chambers, but Gwaine silenced him with a ferocious glare.

“Gaius here… is gonna knock you out, so you can’t do any more damage. Aren’t ya, Gaius?”

Gaius smiled meaningfully. “I most certainly am,” he agreed serenely.

“And just in case, Percival is goin’ to escort you there, aren’t ya, Percival?”

Percival stepped forward and gave a rueful little smile, eyebrows raised.

Merlin looked at them all, open mouthed and outraged, then in a breath, his resistance burst and disappeared like a soap bubble landing on hard ground. He looked at their faces and saw anxiety and fear and care behind the daft posturing, and his throat closed on a lump of emotion, such gratitude and love for them. To them he was just Merlin. Just Merlin.

“What about you?” he managed.
“Ah well… I have to go an’ get my prize,” Gwaine said, smiling boastfully, but his eyes, Merlin realised, showed no humour or warmth. He bowed mockingly. “Me and the princess. Holdin’ hands.”

He winked and backed away a couple of steps. “Gaius,” he prompted as if he was passing over his charge, then “I’ll see you after you get some sleep,” and he walked away back toward the dais, Bors falling in supportively beside him.

Merlin realised only then that Gwaine still had that strip of red cloth tied around his arm. That he was going to go and get his shared prize from Guinevere with Arthur beside him, still wearing Merlin’s old neckerchief as a favour.

Merlin decided he really didn’t want to watch that, and Gaius in any case didn’t seem inclined to let him tarry.

“Merlin?” he said firmly and took his arm to lead him through the crowds, Percival protectively at their heels.

Again the crowds parted, but Merlin couldn’t help thinking that the awe must have been diluted significantly by that little scene.

‘Back to normal, really,’ he thought dryly. ‘Merlin getting bossed around.’

He let himself be guided to Gaius rooms and right to his own old bedchamber, watching dopily as Gaius cleared dried herbs and papers off his bed and threw a sheet over the straw-stuffed mattress. He sat down on it when he was prompted and obediently shed his tunic and trousers while Gaius rummaged in the outer chamber for a sleeping draught. When he returned with a small bottle of clear blue liquid, Merlin drank it without protest, rubbed in the salve Gaius gave him, with much tutting, for his sunburned skin, and lay back against his familiar pillows, waiting and hoping for oblivion to claim him.

Gaius sat on the side of the bed and looked at him, an odd sort of frowning smile on his face, as if he couldn’t decide which mood to go with.

“Whatever possessed you, Merlin?” he asked at last. There was such hopeless worry in it, that Merlin reached out and took his hand penitently.

“I … I don’t know. Gaius. I’m sorry. It just seemed… the only thing. I just felt so desperate. I know it was stupid.”

“Stupid?” Gaius exclaimed, eyebrow elevated to its full, expressive height, “Stupid doesn’t begin to cover it! All those years, hiding in Uther’s plain sight, battling some of the most powerful sorcerors in the land, and just when you reach some point of safety and respect for your magic, you decide to off yourself in a public display of deliberate incompetence.”

Merlin grimaced. “I’m…”

“Yes, I know Merlin. But really… what could be that bad?” he pleaded.

Merlin looked down at the old rough cover Gaius had flung over him, gripped it between nervous fingers. “You know what,” he said softly. “It’s such a mess, Gaius. I’ve hurt everyone…ruined everything! Gwaine and Gwen… Gwen…”

Gaius reared back as if he’d been struck, and that deliberate physician’s calm of his evaporated into the closest thing to anger Merlin had seen in him.
“And that would have made things better, would it? Slaughtering yourself in front of all of them? And what about me, Merlin? Did it occur to you what it would have done to me?”

Merlin stared at him for a second, two - shocked by his fury, and he felt a wash of pure remorse because, no, he hadn’t thought of it; not at all. All he’d thought of was escape from the guilt and despair and worry that had been eating him alive.

But he made himself think of it now. Gaius, the closest he had to a father, Gaius who loved him as deeply as any parent, made to watch the arrows driving into his skull.

“Gaius! I’m sorry! Im so...so sorry!” He sat up and reached for the old man instinctively, appalled by his own staggering selfishness, and Gaius leaned forward into him until they were locked in a desperate hug, even though such physical affection was rare between them. Merlin needed it badly though, and so, he realised at that moment, did Gaius.

Eventually they both pulled back, emotions still raw, but the violence of terror seemed to have eased.

Gaius sighed and shook his head then, a movement full of sorrow.

“I told you Merlin, but you won’t listen. You’ve always blamed yourself for everything... but you can't take the responsibility for this on yourself... These have always been forces outside your control..”

Merlin huffed a soft breath, but he felt calmer somehow. He lay down again, looking up at the old man sitting on his bed. “That’s not what Gwen thinks...” he sighed. "She said... I could have stopped it, but... I’d always wanted him... And now... I’ve got what I wanted."

Gaius gave him a sad smile. “I see. Other women might rant and rave, but you expect Gwen to always forgive, is that it? You place Gwen on a pedestal as much as Arthur does... as much as Lancelot did."

Merlin frowned at his bedcover as he considered that. Then his eyes shot up to meet Gaius’, caught by the insight, because, yes, he realised sinkingly, he had expected that. He expected Gwen to behave as no one else did, save perhaps Lancelot; remembering her response when Uther’s relentless vengeance had killed her father. When had she ever behaved less than nobly and compassionately, except under enchantment? And yet... instead, he’d found the condemnation he would have expected from any ordinary woman.

“Yeah…I suppose you’re right,” he said slowly, “But something like this… its goes too far even for Gwen.”

Gaius sighed again. “We both know Gwen has that rarest of things... a pure heart. She’s a truly good person, and yes, she'll always choose the simplest, purest path. But you can’t expect her to understand what's made you who you are .... because she can’t know.... Yes she's tortured herself for the evil things she did under Morgana’s control but she knows in her heart those thing were not her fault. She’s never had to hide who she is... she's never faced the things you have, or made the terrible choices you’ve had to make for Camelot. For Arthur. Choices that would have broken a person many times your age. Your guilt is ruling you, Merlin. Guilt for all the things you’ve done, that had to be done... For a great destiny that’s... cost... too many people. You take it all and pile it all on top of you... like a beast that'll never be brought to its knees by the weight of it. But you can’t go on like that.” He and Gaius stared at each other for long silent moments. “You are Emrys,” Gaius said simply, “And Arthur... is Arthur. You can’t change that. You can’t escape it. Even for Gwen.”
Merlin bowed his head. He felt so weary and so ashamed. Because never, in all his years of stress and worry and pain, had he even considered seeking death as an easy escape. What he’d sought to do had been... childish... a childish instinct to flee consequences; to make everything simple. Madness. It had been... madness.

“This part of it though... the tangle of... of relationships. It’ll sort itself out, you know.” Gaius smiled the smile Merlin recognised as the one he used when he wanted to lighten a dismal mood. "In the end. Really. Love. Sex. I know it seems like the end of the world when you’re young… but it’s really not worth dying for. Not after everything you’ve been through.”

It was such a simplistic, throwaway statement, joking, facile – and yet Merlin suddenly thought, stupidly, ‘Maybe he’s right.’ In time people adapted didn't they? Every human grief faded.

Perhaps Gaius saw the moment of revelation on his face because he asked suddenly and sternly, “Have you been sleeping?”

Merlin, startled, shook his head sheepishly.

“How’ve you been sleeping?”

“Um...no...not so...much...”

“And that... with the emotional stress you’ve been under… lack of sleep especially can make the mind play all kinds of tricks. Make everything seem so much more desperate than it is.”

Merlin looked up at him and nodded meekly, wanting to grab at the excuse, his heart aching with love for the old man. “I’ll be asleep soon,” he said, “I can feel it coming.”

“And I’ll watch over you,” Gaius said gently.

They smiled at each other tenderly and with absolute trust; friends, conspirators; surrogate father and surrogate son.

A light tap, followed by the creaking of the bedroom door shocked them both from the moment and they turned startled eyes toward it as it slowly inched open.

Gwen was standing there uncertainly, still dressed in her radiant yellow dress, looking like a nymph of summer in the dreariness of the poor chamber.

Gaius stood at once, the court physician to his bones, deferential but also protective.

"Highness,” he bowed his head respectfully, as if he’d never had the closest of friendships with a maidservant called Gwen. “Can I be of some assistance?”

Gwen swallowed, visibly nervous. “I came... to see Merlin,” she said, though she still hadn’t looked toward the bed.

“I’m afraid Merlin isn’t up to visitors at the moment, my lady. He’s consumed a sleeping draught of some strength…”

“Gaius,” Merlin said, “Its alright.” Though in truth he was feeling the effects quite strongly by then, thoughts beginning to drift away.

Gaius turned and looked at him sternly, then lifted an expressive eyebrow and went to the door. “I’ll be just outside,” he said meaningfully, and then to Gwen, huffily, “He really is almost
unconscious.”

He pulled the door closed behind him and left them alone.

Merlin tried to get up but Gwen waved him back immediately and they were silent for long excruciating seconds, Merlin looking up uncertainly at Gwen; Gwen gazing agitatedly to her side. He noticed that she’d taken off her crown.

She suddenly gave that old endearing grimace, the one she made to express extreme impatience with herself, as if she imagined no one else could see. He hadn’t seen that expression for a long time; not, he realised, since she’d gained the confidence of Arthur’s enduring love, but it reminded Merlin powerfully of the awkward girl he’d known and instantly loved when he came to Camelot, his friend who’d stood loyally beside him through so many adventures, and ultimately, when Arthur turned his back on him and his magic.

“I came to see you’re all right,” she said at last. Merlin opened his mouth to reply, but she hurried on, “and to say… I’m sorry. For the things I said…”

“Gwen…”

“I didn’t mean them. I mean… I don’t really think you… ensorcelled him.”


Gwen nodded too, still so obviously agitated, but she didn’t leave and she didn’t speak for a moment. She seemed to be struggling with herself.

“I thought…” she began at last, “I really thought you were going to let it happen. We all did. “ She took a deep breath and looked upwards, closed her eyes again and gave a kind of frustrated sob. She finally met his gaze, her own tortured and desperate. ”I saw your eyes and I knew. Just the instant before you stopped the arrows, you were going to die. Just stand there and …let it happen, because that's what you do. You sacrifice yourself for other people. Like Arthur. And I realised…” she took another sobbing breath, “he'd… he’d go on. Keep going on… because that's his… duty. But he’d… wither inside. Get cold and hard. The way he was withering inside before you came.”

Merlin stared at her, eyes wide, pulse hammering in his ears and he found the power of his emotions was fighting off the sleeping draught, as powerfully as buckets of ice water over his head.

“I don’t know what to do, Merlin!” she said desperately, her delicate features, twisted with despair. “I know it’s supposed to be… destiny.” And she very clearly loathed the word as much as he. “But I don’t understand how you could have done it! Why you wouldn’t turn away from it, when you knew he was married to me, however much you may have wanted it!”

Merlin flinched, because he knew she was right; that he should have had the strength to resist it, as Gwen would have resisted it. Knowing he’d never been that strong.

“What you did… it goes against everything I believe about … love. About true love! I don’t know if I can step aside now… even for Camelot!” She looked at him wildly. “Everything tells me it’s bad for him. That I should win him back to me. Just to me. Do you understand?”

Merlin nodded painfully.

“But… I know that’s not what he wants. He needs me to … share.”

And Merlin asked at last, so tentatively, “Could you?”
They stared at each other tensely for whole seconds, breath held, and then Gwen let loose a kind of sobbing laugh. “I don’t ...know! Part of me thinks he’s just being greedy. Selfish... the way he was before he... changed,” she gave another humourless gulping sound. “Why does he have to... with you? If it was destiny, wouldn’t you have been created a woman?”

Merlin flushed, oddly stung. “Would that be better?” Then, he sighed quietly, “I don’t know. Maybe... it was never meant to be that easy.” For no real reason he flashed suddenly, clearly, on Kilgarrah, and that last, oblique warning. “Maybe destiny has a story all written out,” he said bitterly. Gwen shook her head, frowning, as if she was trying to understand but simply couldn’t. “Maybe...” he tried, “Maybe its just part of what humans need to tie us tight... if someone... completes us. I don’t know about him... I just know that I was drawn to him... bloody infuriated by him, attracted to him, obsessed by him from the start, in a way I never had been before. I just ... hid it really well.

Gwen huffed a bitter laugh. “You hid it really badly, actually.”

Merlin flushed, still mortified by that idea, that others saw what he felt, when he hadn’t himself. “Well I hid it from myself brilliantly,” he snapped. “I don’t know about Arthur,” he repeated doggedly, “I think you were all he ever saw.”

“I broke the enchantment,” she said doggedly. “To Lady Vivian. You told me that meant I was his true love.”

“Yes.” He looked away from her soft, reminiscent gaze.

“You always supported us...together. Helped me believe it could really happen. Encouraged us,” She smiled wistfully. “I didn’t even let myself think of him that way until you came. And he changed.”

Merlin didn’t say anything. They both knew it was true.

“I tried to help you... when I found out about your magic... I always thought you were our friend. Our true friend.”

He jerked his gaze back to her, horrified. “I am!”

“But you’re not just that, are you? I may be his wife, but you’re... you’re his other half! He can’t be complete without you.” She repeated, bitterly, “Two sides of a coin. Two halves of a whole! So what does that make me, Merlin? A brood mare for Camelot, who hasn’t even conceived?”

“Gwen! You’re the queen! A brilliant queen! And he loves you,” Merlin insisted but he felt totally out of his depth, terrified he was saying all the wrong things, ruining it for Arthur.

Gwen gulped a huge breath, and let it go again on a sob. Her outburst of anger however, seemed to be over.

“You know he loves you!” Merlin repeated intensely, desperate that she believe, “ I know that. I don’t have a clue what he feels for me.”


Merlin stared at her, astonished by the admission, and she stared back. She looked exhausted, defeated.
“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” she asked softly. “We were friends, weren’t we, always? I thought we trusted each other with everything at one time. But Arthur says... the Great Dragon told you when you came to Camelot first. You knew before any of us! If you’d said... if I’d known...”

“Gwen... there were all kinds of reasons I couldn’t say I met the dragon! I was terrified someone would find out what I was... Only Gaius knew! Then Lancelot.” She looked up at him quickly, startled and shocked. “He saw me,” Merlin explained sheepishly, “But he protected me.” She looked away again, staring fixedly at the bed cover as if she could read answers there. “And what the dragon said... I didn’t realise what it meant! I thought I was created to protect Arthur, that’s all! Keep him safe so he could take the throne and unite Albion.”

Gwen looked up and met his eyes again.

“Two sides of a coin, Merlin?” Accusingly, disbelievingly “Two halves to complete a whole? How could you not realise?”

Merlin winced. “I don’t know! I don’t know! I just… I just hid from it I suppose because I didn’t believe it, not really. I knew Arthur would never view me as... his other half! How could we ever be... be complete together?”

She held his pleading eyes for a long moment, then she closed her own tightly and turned her head away, lips pressed tight together, fighting emotion.

“Gwen...”

She turned her whole body suddenly and walked to the door. As she lifted the latch, she said, “Sleep. You need it. I’m sorry for disturbing you.” She looked over her shoulder at him and gave one more strained smile, a stretching of the lips, no more, and she was gone.

Gaius came bustling in anxiously before Gwen could have made it to the corridor, and Merlin couldn’t help but smile wanly at his protectiveness. When it came down to it, he loved Merlin best. Unworthily, that meant the world to Merlin at that moment.

“Well?” Gaius demanded.

But when Merlin tried to tell him what the visit had been about, he realised he didn’t really know himself. Had they made peace? He didn’t have a clue, but something told him they never quite would. Would never be, as they had been.

Gaius listened in silence, seated again on the edge of Merlin’s narrow bed as Merlin spoke, trying to to stay calm, to remember the revelation he’d had - that this, painful as it was, wasn’t the end of the world. And yet, the guilt felt as ingrained as it ever had, even deeper perhaps because of Gwen’s noble attempt at magnanimity.

He felt his face twisting into a mask of distress.

“What?” Gaius prompted gently.

“I feel... I feel as if I’ve dirtied something special. Something I fought so hard to create myself. Like I’ve sullied both of them.”

Gaius frowned and pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“Do you remember, you asked me once, years ago, if you should meddle in Arthur’s plans for marriage? Because you had decided Arthur and Gwen were fated to be together?”
Merlin nodded listlessly. He’d never forget. He’d been at his wits end, watching Arthur, rigid with the hurt of Gwen’s apparent betrayal, wooing a foreign princess for a political alliance. Merlin had been so sure then…so sure Arthur and Gwen were meant to be. And maybe…well, he’d faced those demons already, and conceded his own less than pure motivations.

“I said, if it was meant to happen it would, without your interference” Gaius went on significantly. “Though of course you totally ignored me and went ahead and interfered anyway.” He gave Merlin a tired look. “I said that, because it’s a human destiny we were talking about, Merlin… the kind of destiny most of us follow, queen and servant alike. Gwen probably could have been happy with you too, if you hadn’t had magic, and she definitely would have been with Lancelot… just as much as with Arthur. Probably more so. She’d have been just as devoted; never even looked at anyone else. Gwen’s link to Arthur is a human one, an ordinary one, the same link everyone finds who’s lucky enough to fall in love and have it last for a while, peasant or lady. It’s just …a romance… Merlin, like any other. Like… my own was with Alice, or yours with Gwaine, just as prey to uncertainty and feelings and events in this life. It’s not like your link with Arthur. You were created for a vital purpose… as … well … as two halves of a whole.”

Merlin stared up at him blearily, feeling himself slowly sliding down into the embrace of drug-stifled sluggishness. He fought to focus.

“But… true love…” he said almost plaintively after a second. “That matters, doesn’t it?”

Gaius rolled his eyes. “If you’ll listen to an old man Merlin … I can testify that people are certainly able to love more than one person truly in their lives. In different ways… in the same way… Sometimes, unfortunately,” he added meaningfully, “at the same time. Believing there can be only one real love for each person… that’s an idea for small children.”

“I should have resisted though, just like she says” Merlin mumbled wanly. “Gwen would have resisted, because it was the wrong thing to do.”

Gaius sighed again.

“Yes. Doubtless she would. But as I was trying to make you see, I doubt it would have occurred to her to even be truly tempted. If things had been different and she’d had an understanding with you at the start, I don’t believe she would have let herself look at Lancelot romantically; if she’d been with Lancelot, she wouldn’t have considered Arthur. I don’t believe Gwen would ever want or love anyone enough to consider betraying her principles, or who she is at the core. That’s why all of us should have known she was enchanted when she seemed to turn back to Lancelot all those years ago,” he finished thoughtfully.

Merlin felt as if the potion was numbing his reason. Finally he demanded thickly, in frustration, “I don’t… What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that in my view, Gwen doesn’t truly understand… passion, I suppose “ Gaius said musingly, “At least, the kind of mad, ruling passion that can drive ordinary men and women to do wonderful…and terrible things… the messiness of it… the compulsion. She can try to forgive it, but how can she really… when she’ll never be caught by the throat by it, herself? Great… goodness is not at the mercy of passion.”

Merlin shook his head slowly on the pillow, eyes closed now. He found he could hold on to only one thing, one concept to take with him into sleep. “It’s just me she blames, Gaius. Just me.”

Gaius sighed. “Well, it’s easier I suppose. At her heart… Arthur will always be her king.. And it must be hard to realise that the most… the most dazzling choice,” he said carefully, “may not have
been the one destined for the most happiness. Arthur was always going to disappoint her at some point, because… well, we both know that, noble and magnificent as he may be, he’s as flawed and complicated as… as you are Merlin. And personally, I’m glad of it…that’s what’ll make him a great king.” Gaius sounded brisk as he stood up and began to pull the covers up to Merlin’s chin, like an adult with a child. “I always thought that in the end Lancelot was the only man I ever met who matched Gwen’s nature effortlessly. They were perfectly suited in that way.”

Merlin eyelids were far too heavy to fight. “I miss him,” he said blearily. “I really miss him.”

He felt Gaius’ hand smoothing back his hair, and then he slept.

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He woke to Gaius’ hand shaking his shoulder. For a moment he couldn’t work out where he was, and then the day before and all its events came flooding back in one horrifying, depressing gush of embarrassment and worry and regret.

He decided to keep his eyes closed until he could adjust to the horrible truth that he hadn’t been dreaming after eating too many apples late at night; everything had actually happened.

“Merlin!” Gaius’ voice became more impatient and the shaking rougher, ”You have to get up!”


He cracked open his eyes and saw Gaius was still in his sleeping gown and - he peeked blearily at the window – the light outside seemed more like the coolness of dawn than full morning sun.

“You’ve been summoned. Bran brought some riding clothes for you.”

“Riding clothes?” Merlin repeated, dazed.

“Up, Merlin!” Merlin pushed himself upright to sit in the bed simply from the urgency in Gaius voice. “Arthur expects you at the stables in less than ten minutes.”

“Arthur? ” Stupidly. ”The stables?”

“Up!” Gaius all but shouted. “That’s all I know, so there’s no point lollygagging around asking questions.” And he bustled out.

Merlin propelled himself upwards and blindly began dressing in the clothes Gaius had dropped on the end of the bed; no time to do more than wipe himself down with a wet cloth, shave quickly and scrub his teeth with mint and willow bark. When he looked in the mirror, his skin looked a bit pink with the aftereffects of sunburn but Gaius’ salve had worked miracles.

As he blundered about he found himself wondering hysterically why he should worry about being late for Arthur now; he’d made a career of it as his manservant. But it didn’t slow his pace.

He darted out into the main chamber to find Bran, waiting, wide eyed and anxious, with Gaius, to all but thrust his new dark leather riding-jacket at him as he passed. He grabbed it with a nod of thanks and headed for the door.

Gaius’ anxious “Merlin!” stopped him before he was out in the corridor though and he turned quickly.
Gaius looked worried but he was also trying for encouragement, Merlin realised, though he was clearly unwilling to say anything incriminating in front of Bran. Merlin managed a smile, though his innards were churning like butter under the paddle.

He slipped quickly through the corridors of the castle, passing servants already awake and working to prepare for their masters’ day. He didn’t meet anyone’s eye.

The morning was clear and pure and slightly chilled when he finally burst out of the castle into the dawn air, the dew twinkling on the grass, the sky still a deep, hazy lilac blue. He shouldered on his leather coat as he hurried onwards, trying not to think, not to brood on anything other than getting to the stables on time; getting that at least, right. Apprehension was keeping him going, burying his tiredness.

When he rushed into the stable courtyard though, it was to find Arthur already swinging himself with his lithe warrior’s grace onto the back of his brown gelding, the horse he used for casual outings. Merlin’s gentle dark mare was saddled, waiting beside Arthur’s horse, held by a stable hand.

Merlin instantly took in the realisation that there were just the two horses; that he and Arthur were apparently going to be riding alone for the first time in months and months. He’d thought perhaps, that the catharsis of the day before, the shock of how strong his desperation had become, might have freed him; given him, at least, perspective. But when he looked at Arthur, it was all the same. His stomach somersaulted up into his throat and back down to his boots. He felt sick with nerves.

Arthur looked up and noticed him as he gathered his reins. He was wearing, Merlin noticed, simple clothes from the old days, when Merlin used to dress him: a dark tunic, laced at the chest and the dark brown leather jerkin that made his shoulders look even broader, if possible. His hair was gleaming, tousled, in the pale light and he looked capable and beautiful; more beautiful than any man had the right to be. There was no denying it.

He looked at Merlin steadily, serious and frowning. There was no glimpse of the old humour, or tolerance or even that familiar exaggerated weariness with Merlin’s alleged failings. He was simply frowning, and he looked impatient and displeased and very stern. Merlin stared back at him, wide-eyed and stricken, and his stomach didn’t rise from his feet.

“Well?” Arthur snapped, “What are you waiting for? Get on that excuse for a horse, and let’s go!”

Merlin opened his mouth to speak and closed it again, because the days of answering back were gone.

He hurried to the saddle and mounted quickly, wheeling his horse to follow as Arthur began to canter out of the stable-yard, the clatter of their horses’ hooves on the cobblestones sounding startlingly loud to Merlin in the still hush of the early morning. He half expected outraged faces, popping up at the windows as they passed, but only the odd curious servant watched them go. Merlin urged his horse on without question, until the two of them burst out of the city gates and onto the road south.

Arthur didn’t slow at all to try to communicate in any way; on the contrary, he picked up the pace to a gallop and Merlin could only do the same, until they were racing through the slowly warming summer morning, Arthur in the lead.

It was exhilarating in its way, for all Merlin’s gut-twisting apprehension - the sheer uncomplicated joy of the speed and movement, the sweetness of the air whipping in his face, the familiar simplicity of it. Just Arthur and Merlin, out on their own, as it used to be, when their lives were so
much freer. Merlin refused to think of anything else, because there was no point, and he was so weary of thought, of second-guessing, of worry and grief. He’d know soon enough why Arthur had deemed this necessary.

They rode fast for the best part of a half hour until they came to the Great Wood to which they’d taken the Rhegedian ambassadors just two days before. And without a word, the young king slowed his horse and headed straight into the shade of the trees.

Merlin sighed, and followed.

They trotted on for another while, following the well-trodden path, sunlight glimmering and glittering through the leaves above them, until Arthur veered off again, deeper into the trees. He obviously had a clear destination in mind, but Merlin knew Arthur had been hunting in these woods since he was a small child; he knew all kinds of nooks and crannies, hiding places and refuges, and Merlin had learned from him.

They plodded in single file, with no path to guide them now, the horses picking their way through the trees, Arthur still leading them on unerringly, until at last they walked from flickering gloom into the shocking sunshine of a clearing. It was quite large, and carpeted with lush grass, surrounded thickly by trees, and at one edge, sat a respectably-sized pond, shimmering in the light.

Merlin had never been there before; Arthur hadn’t shown it to him in all their years together, trudging through these woods. And irrationally, despite everything, despite all the secrets he had kept from Arthur himself, the thought stung. But it was peaceful; truly beautiful.

The peace however, didn't last. Arthur stopped his horse two lengths into the glade and swung off it so quickly and smoothly that Merlin barely realised he was on the ground. In fact he’d just had time to halt his mount behind Arthur’s when he saw that the other man had dropped his reins and was already striding toward him, his own horse setting at once to grazing.

Merlin took one look at his set, grim expression and began at once to try to disentangle his feet from his stirrups, clumsily desperate to dismount too, to try not to irritate him further. But without a word of warning or explanation, Arthur reached up, grabbed a handful of Merlin’s tunic over his chest, and hauled him out of his saddle like a sack of grain.

Merlin yelped, “Arthur!” High pitched with alarm and protest, arms waving wildly to try to save himself, but somehow, though all his own control over his descent was gone, somehow Arthur’s iron grip on his clothing kept him from stumbling to his knees.

He floundered clumsily for a few seconds until at last he found his balance and settled on his feet, panting and wide eyed with shock and dismay, held still by Arthur’s fist, but Arthur’s expression, he saw with growing alarm, hadn’t changed at all.

He tried at once to retreat, step back from that stony, determined face, but his back was pressed against his horse’s side and Arthur's grip wasn’t loosening.

He'd thought they were here to talk, but Merlin was suddenly horribly certain of where this was going. At once, instinctively, he began to struggle, to wriggle and try to pull away.

“Arth…”

“Don’t!” Arthur snapped in furious warning. His arm flexed and Merlin was hauled threateningly, inches closer to him. He looked, Merlin thought, with wild panic, totally enraged, “Just… don’t!”

Merlin looked at him uselessly, frozen, then the tableau broke as Arthur dragged him tight against
his body and slammed his mouth on his.

It came to him as he stood there, open-eyed and open-mouthed, that it was almost exactly what Arthur had done to him in his chambers both times before. Just manhandled him; hauled him in and kissed him. _Maybe_, he thought dazedly, _this is the only way he can look at me… see me - Merlin - and do it._

Treat it like a battle; a conquest. No quarter given. Man to man.

But the repetition didn’t make the effect any less powerful when that mouth was moving hard against his own and he could smell Arthur’s scent, mixed with leather and horse and metal and sunshine. It was the scent he’d had in his nostrils for so many years on the clothes he’d cared for and the bedding he’d changed, and never been able to come close to it like this. Never been able to press his nose against delicious skin, feel the hard softness of that full mouth.

He tried, he really tried to stand passively under it, flipping frantically through all his many reasons for resisting; trying to re-conjure the nihilistic desperation he’d felt the day before to crush these feelings; to run away from the havoc they were causing. He tried to think of Gwaine's devastation; of what Gwen would do; how she would resist it. But he was hollowed out. His fight was gone, gone in truth, when he froze the arrows in the air, and he knew, knew in his soul that Gwen had never felt like this. Just like Gaius had said, it felt ...like more. Just... more. He was going under to it in seconds - that brutal, soul-hooking pull between them - right or wrong, and he knew it.

One last, desperate automatic resistance though. He started to squirm, the heels of his hands planted and braced against the other man’s broad leather-clad chest, but Arthur’s other hand came up to hold his head in place and Merlin, though he was a fairly well-muscled man himself, was no match against that strength, or his own desire. Arthur Pendragon’s greatest ally, he acknowledged in a flash of tired self disgust, had always been Merlin.

His hands, he realised, were clutching onto Arthur’s arms, his old, rough, dark brown tunic crumpled beneath Merlin’s fingers, and all the reasons he knew it couldn’t and shouldn’t happen, why it had to be stopped, seemed to have simply disintegrated; withered to nothing. Because this was Arthur, and Merlin didn’t have it in him to resist for a moment more.

He submitted with a low whimper and Arthur knew, knew the moment.

His hot, silky tongue slid at once into Merlin’s mouth, hungry, demanding, overwhelming, and Merlin felt as if his mind were closing down; his exhausted will, his conscience turning away, closing their eyes to allow him this, permitting him surrender.

He realised Arthur had moved him as before toward the nearest usable hard surface, only when his back slammed against solidity – and he registered that he was braced against a tree – a thick, old oak with a trunk far, far wider than he was. And Arthur was glaring at him with murder and lust in his eyes.

“Never!” he hissed viciously. His hard grip shifted to Merlin’s upper arms, tightened at once to agony, crushing the thick leather of his jacket with ease under his fingers, and he shook him once, twice, violently. “You will _never_ do anything like that again! Do you _understand_, Merlin?”

Merlin gazed at him hazily. He gasped a deep gulp of air and some instinct made him nod in mute agreement, even as his brain scrambled wildly, stumbling through arousal and exhaustion, trying to catch up.

Yesterday. Of course. Arthur meant that.
Guilt and regret and embarrassment hit him hard, and he felt his already flushed, sun-pink face darken still further.

His eyes darted away, seeking escape, then back, compulsively to the king.

Arthur didn’t move, didn’t change expression.

“Arthur…” Merlin thought his own voice sounded bizarre, like a croak. He swallowed hard, tried once, almost by habit, “We can’t…”


“I said don’t! Not a word! I don’t want to hear another word!”

Merlin closed his mouth and stared at him, meeting his narrowed, half-mad eyes. And in that moment, he saw more than anger there; he saw desperation underneath it, a kind of pleading. And that was enough, more than enough for a man who’d always keeled over to any chink of vulnerability Arthur had ever shown.

If they were still relying on him to stop this, see sanity, they were lost. Because, spell or not, consequences or not, he was totally in love. He knew he always had been - bound soul, flesh, blood and bone to Arthur, his other half. And he always would be.

He couldn’t save them.

He jerked forward instinctively and that was it - they were both there, both insane with it. Arthur pushed him back, hard against the tree again as he kissed him brutally; Merlin at last was with him all the way, kissing back just as hard, showing his craving.

Arthur let go of Merlin’s upper arms and slammed his palms against the trunk on either side of Merlin’s body, caging him in, and Merlin snaked both hands up to Arthur’s head, to grip tight in his thick, silky, blond hair. The sensation was beyond beautiful, touching him like that, showing him at last.

He heard Arthur make a sound in his throat, something like relief he thought, and then the thing between them was out of control, pure greed.

Merlin didn’t know how long they kissed for, eating at each other’s mouths like starving men, before Arthur pulled back, panting. Merlin’s mind was a blurry haze, his body burning with sensation and need, beyond anything he’d known before Arthur Pendragon put his hands on him.

He tried to focus on Arthur’s face, on his reddened, swollen mouth and flushed skin. He leaned forward again, chasing it like a drug, a compulsion, hands clutching at that familiar leather jerkin, fingers tangled in the buckles on one side. But the other man held him back effortlessly.

“Heard us.” Arthur murmured thickly.

Merlin blinked, grimacing as he tried to keep up, tried to focus. And then it was there in his head without conscious thought, obediently. He willed it and it became so.

His eyes burned, still staring into Arthur’s, and the protection was in place. No one would stumble upon them in this glade.

He saw at last though, clearly, Arthur’s immediate reaction to the magic, the way his gaze fixed and darkened even further, at the physical manifestation of it in Merlin’s eyes. And then he was
kissing Merlin again, and Merlin’s clear, astonished thought was startled realisation, *It arouses him.*

Their mouths tangled again for long, starving moments, tongues slick and hungry, the lust between them boiling and bubbling until Arthur, still kissing, inevitably, took the lead, hands moving down to Merlin’s groin, fumbling blindly for his laces.

His mouth didn’t release Merlin’s for more than half a second at a time without returning, while his fingers searched for the tied knot, brushing incidentally against the hard, sensitised bulk of Merlin’s clothed cock, as Merlin whimpered against his lips. He found the bow quickly, pulled at the dangling lace and Merlin felt the knot wrench free as Arthur’s lips left his at last and he stepped back a pace.

He moaned, desperate only for more touch, more sensation. He wouldn’t have run if he could.

With a violent tug, Arthur wrenched the two sides of cloth apart until he managed to finally shove down Merlin’s breeches and small clothes in one hard movement, looking down at what he’d revealed and what was still concealed by Merlin’s tunic.

Merlin gasped, all startlement and embarrassment and lust, feeling the indecent brush of the light morning air on his naked thighs, his swollen balls peeking out from under his tunic; the rough cloth rubbing against his still-hidden cock.

Arthur took a hard, heavy breath.

A part of Merlin thought vaguely, *There’s no harm in it. I’m still dreaming,* and he thought perhaps, he was still lying on his old pallet back in Gaius’ antechamber, dreaming filthily of the very thing he’d fought so hard to destroy.

The day before, all that had happened since he’d returned, all felt as unreal as tales in a storybook; so perhaps this was unreal too. *It felt* unreal. Far too perfect and unlikely and too long unconsciously forbidden, to be anything other than his mind’s trick, playing out through exhaustion and maybe Gaius’s potion.

He watched dazedly as Arthur wrenched his eyes away and focussed with new urgency on his own laces, hands scrabbling, clumsily uncoordinated, to try to pull the knot there free as well. But, as if he couldn’t keep his eyes away, he was staring almost immediately again at Merlin’s naked thighs and the obscene projection of his tunic, pushed out from his body by his freed and erect sex.

Arthur’s eyes snapped up to meet Merlin’s own and they looked as desperate as Merlin felt. He moved closer again and Merlin felt two hands slide under his leather jacket and ruck up his tunic and then the roughness of sword-calloused palms and fingertips stroking the smooth skin of his backside.

He drew a deep, shocked breath, and felt his knees begin to tremble, leaning harder against the tree for help. And as he sagged against his support he felt both Arthur’s hands head unerringly for his cleft and pull his arse cheeks apart.

His eyes closed with the force of his arousal. He felt as if his bones were molten, useless.

“*Arthur!*” And he didn’t know if it was a protest or desperate encouragement. Either way it seemed only to drive Arthur on. He groaned, and pushed his mouth hard against Merlin’s neck as the fingertips of one hand slid unerringly to his hole and circled there, pushing minutely into the sweaty dry heat. Arthur groaned again, a harsh sound, and Merlin wondered wildly whether he’d
expected to find what he’d found the first time he’d touched him there; evidence another man had been there before him.

They stilled. Neither of them said anything. They simply stood, tight together, breathing like men who’d run miles, held against the trunk of the old tree. Merlin’s trousers were around his knees, caught on his boots; Arthur’s face still buried in the crook of his neck, mouthing there, holding him upright with the press of his body and his hands fixed possessively on his naked arse.

Arthur’s fingertip slowly pulled out but only to circle the clench of his hole, and Merlin stood frozen, eyes squeezed tight shut with desperate, humiliated lust. The other man pulled his head back and Merlin opened his wild eyes to see.

Arthur, he thought with relief, looked as flushed and crazed with desire, as Merlin felt.

“This is mine,” Arthur’s voice was low and fierce and certain, “For my pleasure.”

Merlin stared at him, mouth open now, panting like a dog in heat. He felt appalled and outraged, and over all that, horribly excited. But he saw the familiar insane determination in Arthur’s eyes and all the protests and logic that crowded onto his tongue blinked to white in an instant when the finger pressed in again to the first joint; dry, this side of painful.

“That’s… Not…” he tried breathily, but Arthur’s lush mouth closed on his again, relentlessly uninterested in any more dissent.

And Merlin gave him none. He thought with a flash of desperate exculpation, I’m bespelled. But there really was no more hiding in that excuse; he’d proved to himself all too well that the only spell controlling him was his own overwhelming feeling for Arthur, the man who’d been the magnetic centre of his life from the day he met him.

They kissed, hard and hungry again, unable to get enough of it, tongues sliding slickly against each other, and Merlin was dimly aware that he was making sounds, low whimpering moans of delight. Arthur wrenched his mouth away at last, head hanging as he gasped for breath and he looked up from under his brows and met Merlin’s eyes, his own feverish, crazed, pupils huge.

Merlin stared back wildly, looking at him, still primly clad in the old dark tunic laced at his chest, and the open-bucked leather jerkin that to Merlin’s eyes had always made him look strong, mature, competent. He wondered now, how long he’d actually wanted Arthur to fuck him, wearing these clothes.

Arthur stepped back a short pace still holding Merlin’s gaze and began to pull the laces of his own breeches apart, dragging them open.

Merlin’s eyes shifted at once, shamelessly, avidly, to his groin, seeing thin white underclothes appear as the dark fabric of the breeches gave way, and underneath that skimpy white material, a huge bulge of shadowy flesh. He licked his dry lips and Arthur’s trousers slid to just below his knees, held up, like Merlin’s, by his high riding boots. Then Arthur pushed down his under-breeches too, pushed his tunic up and out of the way impatiently, and his big erection bobbed free to Merlin’s greedy gaze, just as impressive and lovely as Merlin remembered.

He didn’t even try to hide his desire any more, just stared at Arthur’s prick, wide-eyed and mesmerised.

Arthur groaned and Merlin shifted his drugged gaze to his face, his eyes.

“Fuck… Merlin,” he said, low and hoarse, underused, “You look like he said… like a deer in a
hunter’s sights."

They stared at each other wordlessly for long seconds, then Arthur seemed to snap out of his daze and shoved a hand into his tunic. He fumbled there briefly until he pulled out a small jar, as if, Merlin thought wildly, by magic.

Merlin knew what it was, of course he did; knew that again Arthur had prepared, had come here knowing he was going to do this; knowing that when he did, it wouldn’t be easy and gentle, as it would be with Gwen. That he’d have to push for it, strategise, inveigle.

But just the thought - that Arthur had planned again like the first time to gain every advantage, was so fiercely determined on it still – thrilled Merlin unbearably. He’d already faced himself, all the unworthiness there, and admitted that it was his selfish heart’s desire, had always been; to be loved, to be wanted, by Arthur. But he thought, for that moment, that if he couldn’t have love, perhaps this – passion - would suffice.

Arthur, jar in hand, pressed close again and licked urgently into Merlin’s mouth until Merlin was moaning in his throat.

Then he pulled back and turned Merlin round relentlessly to face the trunk of the old oak. Arthur clearly had no doubt exactly what he wanted.

Merlin didn’t even think of struggle now. His forehead fell forward to brace against the cool bark, a tiny point of reality.

He felt Arthur try to lift the weight of his riding coat first, then when it refused to stay out of the way, hauling at it impatiently till it slid off his shoulders to the ground. Then his tunic was raised, exposing his bare buttocks, and Arthur’s rough palm stroked over them once, possessively. There was a small rustling pause behind him, a burst of the familiar scent of Gaius’ salve and a slick fingertip returned to probe into his cleft and push against his hole and he groaned again and wantonly opened his legs as wide as the breeches around his knees would allow.

Arthur breathed, “Yes,” against his neck.

The finger circled deliberately, maddeningly – Arthur’s finger Merlin thought dizzyingly – once, twice and then it began to ease its way past the ring of muscle and into Merlin’s inner heat.

Arthur’s breathing grew still quicker and harder behind him, thrusting his finger forward and upward slowly then withdrawing and returning with another finger, then three in a bundle inside him, wrist flexing against the swell of Merlin’s backside as he worked. The image came to Merlin then, in a flash of terrifying lust, of that wrist effortlessly swirling the weight of Arthur’s sword two days before at training, with that lovely, effortless grace of his, and he made a long, low sound, full of need, rolling his forehead dazedly against rough bark.

“Is your hole too tender… after the last time?’ Arthur’s voice was thick and urgent against Merlin’s ear, the words gusting a hot torment on his skin, then, “Can you take my length?”

Merlin whined helplessly at the words and the image and nodded slowly against the bark, pushing back wordlessly, compliant against Arthur’s hand. He felt Arthur’s lips press clumsily, eagerly against the back of his neck, and then the fingers withdrew from his arse. A rustle of movement behind him, and within seconds, the blunt, slippery head of Arthur’s prick replaced them at his entrance. He gripped Merlin’s hip with his left hand, braced the other on the trunk by Merlin’s head, cloaking his body.
Merlin’s hole clenched in automatic resistance.

“Open for me,” was a low, intimate, persuading murmur. Oh and Merlin wanted to, fought to relax, but he was bow-string tight with desire. He squeezed his arse muscles as hard as he could and then let them ease. It was then he felt the cock head breach him.

He made a tiny breathless sound, embarrassingly like a squeak, and without another word or pause, Arthur began to push in and up, breath leaving him in a long groan of relief and pleasure, as inch by inch he sank into Merlin’s heat. It felt overwhelming, like an army advancing, taking a surrender.

“Slowly! Arthur!” Merlin moaned, as his muscles stretched and groaned with strain, and his inner flesh, still sensitive after its unaccustomed activity two days previously, stung with friction.

Arthur moaned too, “Yes,” but while Merlin could tell he tried to slow, somehow the push in became no less relentless, no less like a final conquest.

It seemed only seconds before Arthur’s lower stomach was pressed hard against Merlin’s arse, the bush of his pubic hair rubbing at his sensitive skin, and Arthur’s heavy balls were tickling the back of Merlin’s own sac. It felt as if every inch of Arthur’s sex was held tight in the clench of Merlin’s body; Merlin had all of him.

The intimacy of it was staggering, to be this close without struggle or fear, joined with Arthur after all these years.

For his part, Arthur was breathing like a winded horse against his shoulder and Merlin was beyond sound.

Involuntarily he clenched his muscles around the intruder and Arthur groaned and thrust forward another impossible fraction of an inch. It was excruciatingly good; better, it seemed to Merlin despairingly, than anything sexual he’d ever experienced, just like the last time. Though then he’d been so paralysed by fear of what they were doing, that even the incredible physical reality of this, the delight of taking Arthur’s cock inside him, of being mated by Arthur, was dimmed.

Now it was everything: the sensation of that long, fat prick dominating him, and knowing, knowing it belonged to the man he’d die for, the young and golden king everyone loved, his impossible friend.

He writhed instinctively, helplessly, all but pinned to the trunk by Arthur’s swollen sex, and the blinding pleasure of it rubbing against his inner walls made him whimper, brow rolling against the bark, mindless.

“Does it feel good?” Arthur murmured breathlessly, all incendiary provocation.

Merlin made another weak sound and tried to push back, craving movement. He opened his eyes, desperate for distraction, and looked down to see his own cock sticking out from his body, rucking up his tunic, stiff and red and swollen with blood, and he realised he’d forgotten about it.

“Answer me,” Arthur gusted against Merlin’s ear, “Do you like it?” Arthur, voice strained and thin, but in charge as always. It was incredibly sexy.

Merlin swallowed hard.

“Tell me.”

“Yes,” he managed, “Arthur….. Yes...” And mewled as Arthur rolled his hips slightly, moving his
cock in its sheath.

Arthur nuzzled into the thick soft hair behind his ear, “You know you make noises like a girl,” he purred, “when you squirm on my prick.”

Merlin felt a strange, terrifying mix of arousal and humiliation as the words registered, creeping like molten lead through him. The fact that Arthur could even think to say the words, dirty words, so unlike him, was amazing to him, but that implication again… was Arthur making him a woman underneath him?

And yet his limbs were jelly, his own dick straining and desperate, untouched; his balls ready to explode just from the presence of Arthur’s sex inside him, Arthur behind him, pressed half naked against him. In his mind’s eye he could picture suddenly, how they looked, Arthur over him and pressed into him, broad-shouldered and solid in that leather jerkin against his own slimmer, submissive body. Arthur hadn’t even had to fuck; hadn’t needed to show any prowess as a lover at all. Merlin really was that desperate for him, and he’d shown it.

He turned his head to the side, eyes blurry, tried to reach for the dregs of his pride. “Move!” he managed at last and it sounded he told himself, reassuringly male. “Just move. Do it!”

Arthur rolled his hips again warningly and Merlin to his own disgust, did squeak this time. He half expected the old reminder, that Arthur gave the orders, but instead Arthur laughed, low and sensual, happily sure now it seemed of his dominance and control and Merlin’s desire.

“So what?” He murmured provocatively and nipped the lobe of Merlin’s right ear, all arrogance, all Arthur. “Why don’t you ask me for it Merlin? What d’you want me to do to you?”

But at last, through the pea-thick fog of lust, Merlin’s old fighting spirit kicked in. Arthur wanted him to pay for resisting, to beg, but Arthur had always wanted him to beg, from the first day, and Merlin never really had - not at least, until his magic had been revealed.

It was just as it always had been between them – a battle of wills – and Merlin knew he couldn’t surrender; perversely, that Arthur ultimately needed him not to.

Merlin gritted his teeth and squeezed his arse muscles tight around the swollen, meaty sex inside him. He heard Arthur’s sharp, splintered intake of breath as a triumph, even if that delicious squeeze had well nigh finished him as well.

Arthur’s hand, already holding his hip, gripped punishingly tight.

“You’re bloody impossible,” he groaned, but Merlin could hear the reluctant amusement in his voice mirror-clear, and he thought maybe, he hoped maybe, some of the old, grudging respect, the old, exasperated affection. “God, Merlin. You drive me mad,” Arthur whispered, and it sounded like a confession, as if he were admitting some secret flaw.

And for Merlin then, it was easy to breath, “Fuck me. Arthur. Please! Please fuck me!”

Arthur groaned again “Yes!” and he wasn’t in control at all. Neither of them were.

He pulled his prick back halfway and slid it forward again, the oily salve and the first weak seed coating it, slicking the way, and then as Merlin yelped with the shock of the sensation, he began to fuck, pumping slowly in and out, then faster and faster, screwing into Merlin hard, deep; a strong, male animal in rut, panting out his desire and possession, even as Merlin gasped blindly against the oak and took it, speech gone, existing only for the glorious sensations in his body as he surrendered.
It went on; long, delicious strokes, as Merlin pushed back eagerly in rhythm to take every plunge of Arthur’s rigid, blood-swollen sex. All that was audible was their breathing - gasps, heavy and shaking, the occasional broken moan, the slap of Arthur’s belly and balls against Merlin’s arse, the honey-sweet tweeting of birds in the branches around them.

As the pace picked up, as Arthur’s hips began to pump harder and harder and sensation built higher and higher, the sensitive spot inside him rubbed and pummelled relentlessly, Merlin began to moan more loudly, pleading for more and more, for Arthur to go faster, harder, deeper. And Arthur gave it to him, violently, hungrily; hissing in his ear how he loved it that Merlin, insolent, disobedient, unimpressed Merlin, should be so shamelessly desperate for his fuck. And every word, every flash of memory they sparked, drove Merlin higher.

And then, it was ending. Merlin knew it, dazedly, by the short, fast thrusts of Arthur’s prick; that he was reaching the peak.

“Fuck! God! You feel …fuck…” And he was rutting now, grunting and pounding his hips relentlessly against Merlin’s rear, no mercy.

Merlin heard, hard, furious, “You were …made …for me, Merlin. No one….Else. This. Is.” He thrust deep with every gritted word, his orgasm so clearly imminent. “Mine.

He held himself deep and began to spurt his semen, hard and gushing and lush, then somehow thrusting again, each stroke more slippery and more beautiful as he slid his spending cock tight through his own seed. The sensation, even for Merlin receiving it, was unbelievably heightened, delicious beyond belief.

“Merlin,” Arthur murmured softly, disbelievingly at the end, and he fumbled his hand round at last to grasp and pull at Merlin’s neglected, stiffly bobbing erection.

All it took was two twisting, jerking strokes of Arthur’s sword-calloused fingers and Merlin was coming too, squirting his orgasm in white ropes against the bark of the tree as the last seed was milked out of the cock inside him by the rhythmic ecstasy of his contracting muscles.

Merlin’s ears were buzzing with sheer physical ecstasy; his sight full of green light. He gasped desperately for air as Arthur slumped with all his considerable weight against his back and pushed him hard against the roughness of the tree trunk. Merlin’s legs felt like string, and Arthur seemed not much better.

“Fuck,” he heard against the back of his neck, panted, low and brutally honest. “I’ve been thinking about that …since I pulled out of you.”

Merlin made a low whimpering noise, the idea of that, making his heart surge; the seductive treasonous pleasure of it. The poison of it. But he was so in love, and he let himself smile blindingly at the tree.

Arthur’s erection was diminishing swiftly inside him now, after the force of his orgasm, and before it slipped out completely, Arthur pulled back and out, himself, a trickle of his spending slithering out after him, running down Merlin’s inner thigh and balls, a shivering sensation. He squeezed his eyes closed, feeling Arthur’s seed in him again, conquered, owned; hating that he loved it. And as his mind returned to him fully, he was no closer to knowing what to expect, what to do.

He’d stopped fighting it when the arrows froze; fighting destiny or whatever this was. But the problem was, he still didn’t have a clue what that was going to mean.
After a few cowardly seconds, Merlin twisted round, still heaving for breath, to face the other man, smile gone; half ashamed and afraid and needing to hide, half desperate to see.

Arthur looked, reassuringly, completely dishevelled, hair damp and clinging to his forehead, face wet with sweat, brown tunic patched dark on his chest under his jerkin; deflated, reddened cock peeking out beneath the cloth he’d shoved up out of the way. Yet, for all that and though he was also, like Merlin, standing with his trousers round his knees, somehow, his immense self-possession seemed undented.

In fact, he looked, Merlin thought suddenly, worryingly self-satisfied.

When his eyes met Merlin’s nervous gaze, he leaned forward again, all predator, until both his hands were braced against the tree, bracketing Merlin’s upper body as before. And their lower bodies, their exhausted sensitised cocks, still slightly tumescent below the hems of their tunics, were just inches from each other.

Merlin looked down at them, registering how shamelessly obscene their members appeared, wet and red and gloriously spent.

He felt bizarrely shy suddenly; coy. Embarrassed. For all the shocking power of physical pleasure he’d felt, it still felt more than a bit like a dream.

He forced himself to meet Arthur’s eyes again.

“I thought perhaps you might be right…that it was the spell… Last time,” Arthur said softly, intensely, “When we did it at the end…” Merlin froze, “Maybe that’s what made it feel so … Like nothing I’d ever felt.”

He looked away from Merlin to the side, pouting slightly, considering, frowning.

Merlin held his breath. He didn’t know what to think then. Did Arthur believe now after all, that it was the spell? After how hard Merlin had tried to convince him?

How ironic, when Merlin had finally come to accept himself that the spell was the least of it.

“Is that…… is that what you think now?” he asked hoarsely.

Arthur looked back at him and held his tentative stare.

“I don’t know…. But it doesn’t matter, does it? Either way… it is what it is. And it was just as good this time. Better.” He frowned, troubled, as if he could hardly believe he’d said it.

Merlin felt elation twisting and churning in his chest and gut like bubbles. He felt so relieved he almost laughed aloud at himself; at his own insane, mercurial emotions.

At that instant, he wasn’t thinking of anything but this. Just enjoying this moment of Arthur, leaning over him sweetly, his lover for this short time.

So he fought down his irrational elation, trying for huffiness, “ Well I haven’t actually enchanted my arse, if that’s what you’re implying.”

Arthur looked startled for a second, then caught on and his mouth twitched, working as hard as ever not to show he was amused, but Merlin thought he could see a flash of swiftly concealed relief.
“Maybe you should,” he drawled, “A solid use for your magic at last. You could make a fortune. Buy some decent clothes.”

Merlin made a show at taking offence, but failed.

They smirked at each other for a few moments, in harmony as they hadn’t been for so, so long. Then Arthur very slowly and deliberately dropped his left hand from the tree, holding Merlin’s gaze all the time, leaning some of his weight still on his right, and slipped his free hand down behind Merlin’s back. Merlin’s eyes didn’t leave his and they stared at each other, Merlin mesmerised, Arthur slyly purposeful.

He should have expected it, but Merlin jerked with shock as he felt the hand slide under the back of his tunic and brush his buttocks, then slip down to his sticky cleft and burrow in between his cheeks to circle the hole Arthur had just fucking open.

Arthur’s fingers pushed in just slightly to feel the seed he’d left there and Merlin felt his knees start to give again at the fizzing delight bordering on torment, of that soft touch on over-sensitised nerves. As if he could read Arthur’s mind, somehow Merlin just knew he was remembering the first time he’d done that, when Gwaine’s come had met his fingers. He could see the heat in Arthur’s intense, blue eyes now as they met Merlin’s own; the satisfaction of possession established.

Arthur leaned in again slowly until his mouth was pressed against Merlin’s temple.

“What night and in the morning...” he breathed into his skin, “Don’t bathe.” Merlin drew in a short, sharp breath and stared fixedly ahead, over Arthur’s shoulder. His eyes were wide, body thrumming with tension and the stirrings of excitement. But he stayed silent, still, waiting. “Just... use a cloth... to wipe your skin...” Arthur murmured the words as if he was imparting some huge and crucial secret. “I want to know. When I look at you... today...tonight... I want to know you’re full of my seed. That you smell... of me, Merlin.”

Merlin’s breath hitched, and he felt the sharp jolt of arousal in his exhausted groin. How could he deny that Arthur’s primitive possessiveness thrilled him as much as - more than - it terrified him?

So long they’d known each other, so long this huge attraction had been buried and avoided, and now it was as if he were seeing a different man.

Arthur was totally new to him, and yet beautifully familiar. It was beyond exciting. Exhilarating.

He didn’t reply to Arthur’s sensual, insinuating demand, but as he looked at the other man’s heavy lidded satisfaction, for all he knew he shouldn’t encourage it, he couldn’t help but shiver at it and he let a slow, indulgent grin form at the smug entitlement before him - so very, very Arthur.

He drew a sharp breath through his nose as Arthur’s fingers slipped deliciously out of him, knowing all the mesmerised attraction he’d always felt and hidden from the other man must be showing on his face, magnified now by what they’d done so dirtily against a tree, outside in broad daylight, and by all he’d finally allowed himself to admit he felt.

He smiled, helpless.

“You’re ridiculous,” he chided weakly, trying hard for his old, careless insolence, but undermined fatally now.

Arthur if possible, looked even smugger, even more predatory.
“I’m the king, Merlin,” he purred, pulling back far enough to look into his face. “I can’t be ridiculous.”

“And yet,” Merlin smirked, all breathless, incendiary flirtation, “somehow you manage it.”

Arthur grinned.

“Merlin…” Arthur moved closer again, his seed-sticky fingers grasping at the cheek of Merlin’s arse.

“Shut up?” Merlin breathed, mouth now just inches from Arthur’s.

Arthur’s mouth turned up at the corners.

“Precisely,” was barely audible as Arthur’s mouth closed the distance, taking Merlin’s open lips with a hot, wet ownership that weakened his knees properly this time and sped his heart. Arthur was …overwhelming, everything about him beyond attractive, and Merlin, Merlin was lost.

When they broke apart at last after a delicious mating of tongues, Merlin was shivering and panting and Arthur only avoided it by breathing heavily through his nose. When they looked at each other again, neither was smiling.

Merlin let out a nervous gust of breath.

He slowly, deliberately let his wobbly legs give way, sliding down the rough tree trunk between Arthur’s braced arms until he was sitting on the damp grass, propped against the tree, back braced still against the trunk. He looked up at Arthur, who was looking down at him, mouth curving upward in a tiny, indulgent smile. The smile pulled higher at one side, becoming one of Arthur’s lovely lopsided grins and then Arthur turned and did much the same, sliding down to sit side by side with Merlin, back against the oak.

They sat there, shoulder to shoulder, silently, for a few seconds, both looking straight ahead, and Merlin thought suddenly of the ridiculous picture they would make if anyone were to see them. Both propped against the tree, trousers and small clothes around their boots. His face set in a huge smile - amused, uncomplicated, ludicrous, grinning inanely at nothing.

He didn’t look at Arthur when he felt the sharp jab of an elbow in his side but he felt as if his heart were seized with joy suddenly, so full of love and affection he could yell it aloud. It was so beautifully familiar; territory he recognised. Automatically he shoved back, still looking ahead, grin widening impossibly. After all they’d just done, it was insane that such a simple thing should matter so much, but through their years as master and manservant, Merlin had taken that inarticulate shove as Arthur’s clumsy way of showing affection to him, showing Merlin that they were more than master and servant; that Arthur saw his worth.

It was his prince through and through, the emotionally constipated, uptight, boy-man who would barely hug, who couldn’t say nice things to him unless he thought he was dying, who used insults to show affection…Arthur the way he used to be with Merlin, back when they came pretty much as a pair.

Merlin remembered suddenly a time years before, sitting with Arthur on the castle steps, in the aftermath of the battle with Morgana and Morgause and their horrible army. Just the two of them, side by side in that moment of peace, waiting for the knights to escort Gwen back to Camelot, to her prince. They’d talked about the future with Uther broken, and Arthur had listened to him, not as a servant, but almost as a friend, and he’d shown him, that even if he hadn’t knighted him or
anything mad like that, that he’d appreciated him; his loyalty.

Of course neither of them had ever been any good at actually talking about feelings, and moments like that shoulder shove on the steps, and the grab at his neck when he returned from the Dorocha’s attack, had always been wordless and awkward.

But they’d meant more to Merlin at the time than a sword tap to make him a knight, to lift him out of servitude.

They’d both changed since then, so much; grown older, harder, darker, more cynical. There were so many wounds and betrayals between them.

But somehow now this moment felt like a grounding—making it real, making it at last…them.

Arthur gave another hefty shove with his shoulder and Merlin elbowed back, and in no time Arthur had tackled him to the ground, and they were scuffling on the green moss as Merlin lay helpless with laughter, Arthur grinning down on him, eyes bright with glee, poking and prodding at his ribs until he yelled with reaction. The childish relief of it, the release of tension after so many days, so much terrifying emotion, made Merlin feel light-headed and almost hysterically giddy and he laughed until his sides ached, struggling weakly and hopelessly as Arthur took his revenge.

At last, after several increasingly desperate and craven pleas for mercy from Merlin, Arthur rolled away and they lay side by side, shoulder to shoulder again on the soft mossy ground, Merlin still gasping the occasional giggle, both breathing heavily with exertion as they gazed lazily up at the bright summer sky, through the dancing leaves over their heads.

There was a lovely, peaceful quiet between them, a kind of languid, boneless relaxation, as if the tension that had wound tighter and tighter between them for as long as Merlin could recall, had finally stretched as tight as it was possible to stretch and just…released.

The only sound was the light twitter of songbirds, the whisper of a breeze in the leaves, the movement of the horses as they grazed by the side of the glade.

It was lovely. Healing.

But Merlin had never been one to hide behind false peace for long.

There was an impossible reality to face. Pain they’d caused; their own pain still to come.

“I told him,” he volunteered softly at last, still staring straight up at the cloudless morning sky and those flickering leaves. He saw no movement out of the corner of his eye; Arthur was still looking upwards as well and he didn’t react. “Gwaine,” he clarified.

There was a moment’s quiet then, dryly, “I gathered. When he tried to take my head off.”

Merlin grimaced up at the trees. He drew a deep breath and let it go in a heavy gust of sadness.

“He was so hurt. So betrayed.” Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw Arthur’s strong jaw clench. “And Gwen… we spoke … did you know? And she was so…” He closed his eyes at last. “God, Arthur…”

A tiny agonising silence. Then he heard, tentatively, “What you said…the last time. I… It’s…” Merlin opened his eyes again and turned his head against the moss to look at Arthur, but Arthur hadn’t moved, his eyes were still fixed on the sky and he looked agonisingly embarrassed. “At the start… at the start you know …I think maybe… Gwen… was you.”
Merlin stared stupidly at his profile.

“What?” he asked blankly.

“You were always…different. From anyone I’d ever known. You changed…everything. Me, Morgana, Gwen…” Merlin saw Arthur’s strong throat move as he swallowed hard, still staring blindly upwards, “You saw a person. Not the Prince. No one else ever really had. And I tried but…you just burrowed your way in. And I couldn’t…” Arthur’s mouth pushed out into a kind of grimacing pout. “I defied my father for you, I drank poison for you, I followed you to Ealdor…I could have dragged Camelot into a war! I was doing insane bloody things, things I would never have considered before. Looking at life, at people differently and it just kept getting…more…”

Merlin didn’t blink, didn’t move, barely breathed. His eyes were fixed on Arthur’s face, what he could see of it, and his pulse was thundering in his head. He’d never heard Arthur speak like this before, certainly not about him.

“I knew Guinevere for years before you came, but I never really...saw her. Not really. Not as a person, like me or Morgana or Father. She was always…the perfect servant…never challenged authority, grateful, seen but not heard. And then you arranged for me to stay at her house.” Merlin nodded slowly in encouragement. Yes, that had been the beginning, he’d seen later. “She told me off... did she say to you? She told me… I wasn’t a child…shouldn’t need to be told to consider other people.” He gave a quiet, huffed laugh, “You rubbed off on her too. And then... Then she was you… “ he said simply. “A servant, brave, full of character, demanding I be…better. Seeing not just a future king, but a man.”

He stopped and swallowed hard again, as if he was struggling to go on, to say what came next.

“And you fell in love with her,” Merlin’s prompt was gentle.

“Yes. I did,” Arthur said softly, and somehow, he sounded sad too, “And now I can’t imagine not loving her.”

Merlin closed his eyes. “I know,” he said.

“Do you?” Merlin opened his eyes again and he found Arthur had turned his head and was looking at him, face calm, gaze searching. “Because of you, I saw her. And I needed someone like you.”

“Just…not me.”

“No,” Arthur agreed regretfully, “Not you. She was wrong too…a servant, a peasant. Impossible, I thought then. But not as impossible as you. At least with her there was a chance…. A chance I could have what I wanted, needed, and still serve Camelot.”

They were staring at each other now, mesmerised. Merlin could feel his heart thundering, a strange kind of grief-fuelled excitement; terrified and still wanting more.

“Do you see?” Arthur asked quietly.

Merlin gave a small grimace. “I…think…I think so.” Uncertainly. Arthur had felt the pull to Merlin but he’d found the things he liked about Merlin in Gwen? Among other things he’d swiftly liked more? “It was the right thing,” he said doggedly, “Choosing Gwen. She’s an amazing queen.”

“Yes, she is,” Arthur smiled. “The people love her. They see she’s one of them, that she understands how they live, what they want and need. They see that a maidservant can be queen in Camelot… can be loved by a king. When they see her, they see hope.”
Merlin nodded soundlessly, throat tight, though he didn’t know why Arthur’s adoration of Gwen should hurt him any more. It was a given; he’d lived with it for years, and was more glad of it than he was jealous of it.

And Arthur was right, just as Uther had been wrong; Gwen truly was the most perfect possible queen for the new Camelot.

“I didn’t realise what I was doing though... not _consciously_. How you …fitted in, I mean. But after Myrthryn talked about the prophecies… I had to think it through. What had happened and… why. And it was so...so obvious,” he finished quietly,

Merlin nodded and looked away.

He didn’t really know how he felt about it, though he knew Arthur had told him his truth. And at least he knew he hadn’t imagined it.

There had been something there once, something that was growing naturally, flourishing, until Arthur had decided it had to die.

“Looking back…I realised something. When I was in Guinevere’s house,” Merlin’s eyes snapped back, startled that there was more, and Arthur stopped awkwardly, grimaced, “Do you remember, I tried to cook her a meal? And give her the only bed? I wanted to show her that I could be more than …than a spoiled prince… to make her look at me with admiration, not that kind of … weary disappointment she shows when she hopes for better... but never really expects it.” He turned on his side suddenly to face Merlin, intent, “But you were the one I sent to the kitchens to get a cooked meal, in secret. You were the one I got to sneak a mattress to the house.”

Merlin didn’t take his eyes off Arthur’s earnest face, with no clue what Arthur was trying to impart but desperate that he shouldn’t stop. They held each other’s gaze for a second, then Arthur looked away, his thick lashes hiding the jewel blue of his eyes.

“Guinevere…. Guinevere wanted me to be _better_... the perfect knight, the perfect prince…. And… I wanted to be too… for her. So I pretended to be a man she could admire.”

“But you _were_ Arthur…. You always were!”

“No.” Arthur looked back suddenly and met Merlin’s eyes intently. “That’s the thing, Merlin. I’ve always lived with expectations... usually tried everything I could to meet them so… it was nothing new. Except...yours were different from my father’s… from the kingdom’s. Your’s and Gwen’s. _You_ both wanted me to be perfect as well ... a better person anyway. A better man. And I tried for you sometimes, even before Gwen... tried to live up to what you seemed to see in me. But I knew …I’ve _always_ known... I could show _you_ who I really was. Arthur. With all my faults, all my flaws. You knew me and still…”

Merlin’s chest felt tight with love and pity, as if a deep breath would hurt his lungs.

“Yeah, well... I was your manservant,” he protested weakly. “Of course you were going to... let it all hang out with me. And I couldn’t _really_ tell you what I thought.”

Arthur snorted. “Oh, you bloody well did! You never bloody stopped! You called me things no one else had ever dared before… would never have got away with. God, you even made up words! But ...” Softer. “Sometimes too, you looked at me as if you thought I could hang the moon in the night sky. Not who I _could_ be, if I changed to be better. But... who I _was_. And yes, I know you wanted me be this great king you kept telling me I could be, but... who I _was_, was good enough
for you to... care for too. To cry for. To bleed for.”

Merlin bit his lip hard. Just watching Arthur’s desperate struggle to articulate, he could feel his own eyes filling with emotion, the last pitiful dregs of his resistance to this huge, unmanning love melting like snow on a hotplate, no shield left against surrender.

“With Guinevere,” Arthur said stiffly, “I strive to be perfect... to be worthy of her. She inspires me to be my best; to be a man, a knight, a king, she can admire and love. The king Camelot needs.” Arthur threw him a quick, nervous glance, and seemed to force himself on. “But for you... I can be just ...Arthur, and I know you’ll...” He looked away again, over Merlin’s head, exactly as if he were delivering an unwelcome report to his father. He cleared his throat. “You’ll care about me... anyway.”

Merlin looked at Arthur then, at his obvious discomfort, knowing he’d pushed himself far further than he’d wanted to go; all his defences honed by the upbringing he’d been given, lowered just for him.

He felt his eyes beginning to water so he tried desperately, “So you just want me around because I’m a bigger sap for you than Gwen.”

Arthur darted another swift glance at him and Merlin could almost see those defences slam back in place, and the relief Arthur felt for being allowed them, for ending this emotional exposure.

But then, Arthur surprised him again. He reached out and cupped Merlin’s jaw, turned his head until their eyes met fully.

“Between us, there are no veils; no pretences Merlin. When I talked to Myrthryn... I faced it. We are two sides of the same coin. You’re...essential to me. Not because you’re Emrys, but because you’re...Merlin.”

“Arthur...” Merlin whispered, seeing the emotion on Arthur’s face, the shine of wetness in his eyes. Merlin’s throat felt choked by a boulder of joy and relief and apprehension and grief.

“What you did yesterday...”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, Arthur!”

“You’re worth my tears.” Arthur finished fiercely. And Merlin, unable to hold back for a moment longer, turned on his side too and rolled into Arthur’s strong body, clutching desperately at him, face buried in his neck as his own silent tears began to fall.

“See?” Arthur, all mocking disgust “An enormous girl.”

Merlin gripped tighter and Arthur slipped an arm round him and held him against his leather clad chest, buckles scratching at his face, until Merlin could calm.

Merlin pulled back at last, sheepish and embarrassed because, although he’d wept many times over Arthur in his time, he’d rarely done it in front of him. Arthur’s epic toughness and emotional barriers mitigated against it, and Arthur’s own tears were never, ever mentioned. Before he pulled away completely though, he surreptitiously wiped his eyes and nose on Arthur’s tunic.

“Merlin? Did you just...?”

Merlin pulled back far enough to innocently meet Arthur’s eyes. He widened his own to childlike dimensions, ignoring Arthur’s unimpressed glare, then he broke and smiled and Arthur rolled his
eyes. Just like that the awkwardness was gone.

They were quiet for a second, peaceful, but Merlin was who he was and he couldn't allow himself that peace for long. He deliberately pulled Gwen's tired, defeated face before his minds eye; Gwaine's devastated grief. He set his jaw. “It'd be so much easier if it could just be... like this? Arthur...?” he tried tentatively, hopelessly. " Friends...I mean?” Arthur looked at him steadily. “The fact we’re meant to be so...so vital to each other... always... that’s hard enough to take for them. But this...” he gestured vaguely downwards, “The... sex too...”

“You don’t want it then?” Arthur asked blandly.

“No! I mean yes! You know I mean ...yes,” Merlin finished finally, shamefaced.

But Arthur gave a tiny smirk at that and somehow his unrepentant, uncomplicated satisfaction reminded Merlin far too well of his fear.

Because... it just wasn’t Arthur not to agonise over doing a selfish thing. Merlin drew breath anxiously. He didn’t want to say it because the peace between them was so precious but it was like picking at a scab, picking till it bled. He braced himself, pulled his body back a few inches more from the warm strength of Arthur’s.

“Its just... Arthur... Its hurting them so much. Cutting away at the peace we’d come to in Camelot. I don't understand why you're haven't fought it. This isn’t like you. You deny yourself for your kingdom, for honour. There can’t be any honour in this,” Merlin finished wretchedly.

He stared at the leather expanse close in front of him as they lay facing each other on the soft ground, his eyes travelling down to take in their relaxed, spent genitals resting on their naked thighs, exposed obscenely by their rucked up tunics. He closed his eyes.

“Why not?” Arthur asked at last and Merlin could hear an edge to his voice again but he didn’t allow himself time to regret it.

He shot his gaze up incredulously, and suddenly he was furious... irrationally furious with Arthur’s refusal to face this, so jealous of that untroubled determination.

“Why not? We’re betraying them, that’s why not!”

“We’re not betraying anyone,” Arthur snapped with real irritation. It felt a lot more like the Arthur Merlin knew. “We’ve explained to both of them.”

“Oh, so that’s all right then! You tell your wife. .. the wife who adores you…that you’re going to be having sex with someone else and that makes it all... fine?! Don’t you realise she...?”

“Merlin! You of all people know it’s not as simple as that! Nowhere near that simple!” He raised his hand in a sharp ‘shut up’ gesture as Merlin instantly opened his mouth to begin a tirade at that. “ This is what was meant to be. Us. Together. How many times does it have to be spelled out to you, until it percolates into that moronic skull?”

“Why does our destiny need us to have sex though?” Merlin returned mulishly. “That’s just rubbing their noses in it. This isnt... Rheged. Maybe if we decided just ...not to do it.”

Arthur made a sound of pure impatience and his hand, which had been resting loosely on Merlin’s waist suddenly and determinedly slid down to stroke his naked arse. Merlin started, moaned, and Arthur smiled a cool, shark’s smile.
“See, that’s what I mean,” Merlin protested hotly, “You’re not taking this … this…disaster seriously. And that’s not like you …at all.”

“Oh. Haven’t I been serious enough Merlin?” The hand stroked again, idly, feather light. Merlin felt his lids close helplessly then he forced his eyes open again.

“This.” He managed, “This isn’t you.”

“So you keep saying.” Arthur drawled obnoxiously, “It feels like me to me.”

“Arthur! Self indulgence isn’t you! Self sacrifice…now that’s you.”

“Merlin… “ Arthur looked torn between fondness and fury, and that the fondness was actually visible at all, was very new to Merlin. He was beginning to forget why he was pushing the point. “You don’t remember when I was meant to marry Mithian? What you urged me to do? What I did, selfishly, in the hope of happiness? This... is...” He made a hugely impatient movement with his head, a kind of aborted shake. “Do you want it to stop so badly? That's why you tried to destroy this- who we are, who we're meant to be- for Gwen? For Gwaine?”

Merlin felt the tug of guilt as he said honestly, miserably, “I just... It feels wrong. Like we shouldn’t be doing it because we …because we’re too late.” He let his breath out desperately, hopelessly, “In this life. We’re too late.”

With one good shove, he found himself on his back and Arthur was looming over him, and all he could see was Arthur’s lovely shadowed face and his broad shoulders, blocking out the blue sky and the bright sun.

No fondness was evident now. Irritation had swept the field.

“You really don’t learn, do you?” Arthur snapped. “It’s because we denied it that it’s such a mess now.”

It was an echo of Gaius, of the Rhegedians, but Merlin couldn’t accept such an easy, glib escape.

“But we couldn’t have done anything else ...I mean how could we? Not then. I mean ...the succession... and your father for a start... ”

“Maybe. Maybe not. The point is that even if we didn’t know about the two sides of a coin thing... even if I didn’t know I mean,” he glared at Merlin accusingly, “The rest of it…the pull between us... it was always there. I always knew there was something about you that could get to me like no one else. If I hadn’t run from that…”

Merlin moved impatiently beneath him.

“But it is too late now. For that part of it, Arthur. Without destroying other peoples’ happiness.”

Arthur looked away for a second, the first sign of doubt he’d shown. “Destroying other people’s happiness is part of being a leader... a king. According to my father.”

“Arthur…”

“You do what’s necessary. Even if it costs you pain. Even if it costs other people, people you love, pain. You do what’s necessary for the greater good.”

“And who decides the greater good?” Merlin muttered.
“The king. That’s why he is the king.”

“And this? This is the greater…?”

“Stop. Running. Merlin! We can try to thwart it, refuse to bow to it. But it’s just a matter of time. We both did our level best to hide from it before … but it’s there and now the point is, we know it’s there. They know it. Everything’s changed, because now … we can’t hide from knowing. You and I….. we’re essential to each other’s destiny. To each other. To the future.” Arthur looked as if he was going to roll his eyes in irritation as he looked into Merlin’s distressed face. “If we continue to try to deny it, all we’re going to do is distort it even more than we did, drive ourselves insane. Look at yesterday! This is what it’s meant to be. All of it. Two halves… that are now… a whole. We were meant to be like this.”

When he stopped, Merlin was staring up at him wordlessly, wide eyed.

Because of course Arthur had thought it all through, and Merlin thought, he’d been wrong. It was Arthur. From the start of this madness, when Myrthryn had filled him in on the ancient prophesies. Pure Arthur.

Face up to the inevitable, decide what’s for the best for the kingdom, take it on wholeheartedly and see it through to the end, whatever your own wants and feelings. In so many ways, he was Uther’s son through and through.

“What you may… feel for me…” Merlin said in a small voice, “It’s not real. It’s duty.”

Arthur was still propped up over him weight resting on his braced arm, as Merlin still lay flat on his back trying his best not to cower at his vulnerability.

Arthur frowned. “Make up your mind, Merlin. One minute it’s self-indulgence, the next its duty. Or perhaps it’s destiny.”

Merlin snorted miserably. “That’s no better than duty,” he said bitterly and he sounded as melancholy as he felt.

“For Gods sake!” Arthur exploded and pulled away abruptly, until he sat, arms hugging his knees, at Merlin’s side, facing forward and no longer touching.

In truth, Merlin had expected it before now. Arthur’s forbearance had been so uncharacteristic he seemed like a different person; the person he was with Gwen, when she nagged him sometimes about taking risks, when the king should be staying in Camelot..

Merlin lay still, intimidated despite himself, looking up at that broad, leather-clad back, stiff with anger.

“You’ve been banging on about my destiny since I met you! Now it’s not a good enough reason for…?”

“There’s no choice!” Merlin interrupted stubbornly, “You didn’t choose to be with me!”

Arthur turned his head angrily round to glare down at him. “And you didn’t choose to be with me!”

Merlin opened his mouth at that and closed it quickly but Arthur seemed to have seen the automatic, outraged protest.

Because Yes! Merlin wanted to howl at him, Yes, I bloody well would choose, if life was fair...
There was a short, fraught pause and maybe Arthur was remembering Merlin’s desperate confession in his chambers, because when he spoke again, his voice was level, deliberately calm.

“Is what I feel for Guinevere, destiny? What you feel for… Gwaine? How can we tell what’s destiny and what’s choice? If anything’s choice in the end? Maybe …they’re the same. When you came first, I didn’t know why you affected me as you did… why I was willing to go to those lengths to keep you safe… a servant. A useless servant!” he added bitingly, “I thought it was choice. Maybe it was!” And he stopped, frustrated. “From the start… I’ve always felt more for you than I should, good and bad… more than was sane or sensible…more than I felt for anyone else. Was that destiny or choice Merlin? You tell me.”

Merlin stared up at him, stunned to silence.

He should have thought of it that way, but…he’d been so determined to find reasons why Arthur didn’t really want him that…

He looked up at Arthur’s shadowed face with the brightness of the sky behind him, at the frown on his smooth brow, the dishevelled golden hair, the demanding, impatient eyes.

“What if the Rhegedians had never come?” Merlin challenged softly.

Arthur’s eyes met his and held them. “Then I’d have continued feeling more for you than I could understand. And one day, I’d have stopped resisting it.”

Merlin sat up until they were shoulder to shoulder, and it was just as well, he thought again, that no one could see them because they were both sitting there, naked knees clasped, with their trousers and underclothes tangled at their boots.

He reached over a cautious hand anyway and smoothed Arthur’s tousled hair back from his forehead.

“Gwen said…” He smiled nervously as he pulled back, trying for ease, “She used to tell me that you talked sweetly to her. I couldn’t imagine it.” He huffed a tiny laugh. “I certainly never imagined I’d hear you doing it for me.”

Arthur’s expression didn’t change and his arms were still wrapped protectively around his knees. “Well, I don’t intend to make a habit of it, Merlin,” he said, dripping disdain, and looked forward again toward the edge of the glade, but Merlin knew his signals; could sense caution, a desire for peace.

He felt, insanely, as if a weight of fear and guilt had been raised from him, and though he knew fear and guilt would return, he knew too that Arthur was right.

If he’d died yesterday, he’d have caused so much grief, all to try to avoid that very thing. There was no easy route, no path that would ensure all was well for everyone, because magic or not, destiny or not, life was a mess, strewn with casualties. The sixteen year old boy who’d walked into Camelot hadn’t believed that, the nineteen year old who’d watched Morgana take the throne from her broken father still had the naïve faith of youth that good and bad people would get all they deserved. But the man he was now, after all he’d seen and done…that man knew everything was a compromise. He wondered why he’d forgotten that.

He felt ashamed, but for different reasons now.
In this hand they’d all been dealt, there was no way not to fail someone. And he couldn’t fail Arthur.

“All right,” he said softly.

Arthur turned his head and looked at him flintily.

“All. Right?,” he repeated scornfully and one derisive eyebrow raised itself for good measure.

Merlin gave a tiny, flinching grimace.

“Yeah. All right. You win. You’re right.” He didn’t blame Arthur for the pure suspicion that sparked at once in his eyes; he didn’t blame him at all. “But… we have to be careful Arthur. Hide it, so no one suspects…this.”

Arthur pulled his head back, that cautious mistrust still very evident in his expression as if he were watching a rabid dog suddenly sitting down to do party tricks. Merlin felt his own eyebrows rise at that analogy, but he could see Arthur’s point.

It was a sudden capitulation; a sudden move to active complicity.

But he had to accept the inevitable sometime. And it wasn’t as if he wasn’t going to agonise in the future about it; he knew himself well enough to realise he had many many dark hours of guilt ahead. But he also knew that Arthur was right. He had been running, running so hard he almost tried to leave this existence behind to avoid facing the bitterness of the price everyone would pay.

He had put all the burden on Arthur’s shoulders. He had left it all to him – all the responsibility, the hard decisions, the determination to force it through and face the truth, while Merlin had tried to flee like a child.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. Arthur’s eyes narrowed, snapped up to meet his own. “I’m not running any more.” They held each other’s gaze for long tense seconds until finally Merlin thought he could see a subtle relaxation in the other man’s body, tension slowly releasing. “But… we do have to try not to hurt them any more than we can help, don’t we?”

After another assessing second, Arthur nodded slowly, cautiously. “No one knows,” he replied. "Except the four of us.”

Merlin drew in a shallow, relieved breath that Arthur was engaging again, that he seemed to have forgiven him so easily.

“And Myrthryn of course,” Merlin said for correctness. Arthur frowned and pushed out his mouth into an assessing pout. “And Brychusa. And maybe the rest of the delegation.” Arthur’s eyes narrowed. “And Gaius.”

“For gods sake, Merlin. Is there anyone you haven’t mentioned it to?”

“Hey! The Rhegedians worked it out themselves and I asked them not to spread it around! ”

Arthur gave him another suspicious glare but he subsided. “And… Gwaine?” he asked reluctantly.

Merlin didn’t pretend to misunderstand.

“I don’t know,” he said miserably. “He…I know he would never tell anyone. He has…such honour.” Arthur bit his lip and nodded slowly. “I hope…I hope he can accept it too. And Gwen
maybe?” He saw Arthur’s eyes narrow suspiciously at once and he went on firmly, because he knew he had to lay down this line. “If he does, he’s still my lover, Arthur.” Arthur’s jaw clenched hard but he didn’t say anything and somehow that made Merlin’s heart flutter with panic more than rage would have done. “You’ll have Gwen,” he went on weakly, “and if Gwaine still wants me…” He watched Arthur break his gaze, watched his blond head drop as he studied the ground between them. “We’re all going to have to learn to share, Arthur,” he went on desperately, “All of us. You can’t expect to be the only one who doesn’t.”

Arthur looked up again and his eyes were bleak. His lips moved in a tiny, bitter smile.

“And you don’t know that on some level, I’ve always been sharing?” he asked.

Merlin stared at him, frowning, saw the raw emotion bleeding from him, no longer meeting Merlin’s eyes; saw the total lack of pretence, all barriers gone.

It wasn’t just Gwaine, he realised with a dull shock. He twisted his body and rose to his knees urgently, body turning to face Arthur, desperate to help.

How long, he wondered, had Arthur nursed this insecurity about Gwen’s love? How long?

Since the rescue from Hengist? Since Lancelot returned from the dead? Since Morgana played with all their feelings to try to wound Arthur and Gwen? All the time they’d been married? God, he thought in agony, Arthur…

“You can’t believe … Arthur, she adores you! Anyone can see how much she loves you and admires you and… wants to support you…”

He watched Arthur’s still face, staring straight ahead like a soldier on report and suddenly he thought in horror… Am I making it worse?

“It’s natural to be a bit insecure and…and jealous, when you’re in love” he tried again, and then, at once, Shit! Shit! Shit! Why had he said that? To Arthur!

Arthur’s face looked stonier than ever as he stared out over the glade.

“Jealousy isn’t worthy of a knight,” he bit out. “Far less a king. It’s not a noble thing.”

“No…” Merlin agreed weakly. He should have known, should have realised Arthur’s emotional background would leave him insecure, uncertain of love, uncertain he could be loved.

But then he realised, looking at him, Arthur didn’t actually seem jealous at all, just…accepting. Resigned.

Merlin shook his head, feeling as if his heart would burst with affection and sympathy. “You really have no cause to believe she would ever even consider having feelings for anyone else, Arthur. Not after she fell in love with you. You shouldn’t put yourself through all this noble suffering thing for nothing because…”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “You still haven’t got the hang of the whole ‘you don’t tell the king what he should and shouldn’t do’ have you Merlin?” he interrupted wearily.

Merlin closed his mouth and gave a sheepish grin, with a shrug for good measure, though he wasn’t sure Arthur saw either in his peripheral vision, because he still was determinedly not looking at Merlin.
“The problem is,” Arthur went on, and he sounded as if he was forcing calm, “That as ever, I find you tear up any rules I make for myself.” Merlin frowned, bewildered. He wished Arthur would look at him. Just look at him. “Jealousy is not becoming…shameful for a true knight. I determined to master it long since and I did… long since. I thought I had. Even when I believed she’d… betrayed me.”

He turned his head reluctantly to meet Merlin’s worried gaze at last, as if compelled, rather than of his own free will. And as if Arthur had actually spoken it aloud, Merlin felt the jolt of understanding shocking up his spine.

Arthur may have learned to master his feelings over Gwen and Lancelot but by god, he was certainly jealous of Gwaine. Ragingly jealous. He’d shown it on the practice field and in the bedroom… and now, he was laying it open again, for Merlin to see. Arthur didn’t even seem, Merlin realised, as he knelt there and looked into burning, possessive eyes, particularly ashamed of it, for all he said.

Myrthryn had warned him …it was part of the bond, ‘strongest in the one who planted the seed’, but it seemed to sit so naturally on this Arthur; a man who’d found his emotions, found his passion, and now, found his destiny.

But Arthur’s possessiveness could consume him, Merlin realised with a flash of panic. If he allowed Arthur to decide for him; it could consume them both. It was a balance, and he had to hold to it. But he felt it calling to him too; the siren beauty of mine. To have that one person all for your own; just for you. For them it was impossible of course. But so beautifully tempting.

“I don’t want anyone else’s hands on you,”

“Arthur…”

“I don’t want you to take another man’s seed. I don’t want you to love him. And yes I know… I know…but you should be mine, Merlin. You were made for me,” he repeated with a kind of quiet fury, and Merlin saw again how much that concept seemed to mean to Arthur. “I should have claimed you at the start… and kept you mine.”

Merlin repeated weakly, “It couldn’t happen, Arthur…not then,” but his heart was pounding with furious, shameful joy, “There wasn’t a way, that early. You weren’t going to approach… want a male servant.”

“Gwaine did,” Arthur shot back sullenly and he looked away, until Merlin could only see his fine, hawkish profile.

“That was… he wasn’t ever the Crown Prince though.”

“I knew,” Arthur didn’t seem to have heard him, “From the moment I realised he had you…I knew I didn’t want him to touch you; I just wouldn’t acknowledge the reason why.”

“I didn’t realise” Merlin tried helplessly, “I thought you just didn’t want…”

Arthur turned his head and glared at him. “I know what you thought Merlin. After everything, you really believed I felt you weren’t good enough for Gwaine?”

“Well…” “Put like that Merlin thought guiltily, it sounded as if he hadn’t had faith in Arthur at all, but he’d just thought… “I suppose… you seemed…after the magic thing especially…”

Arthur shook his head and looked away again. “Father was right,” he said with that old, offensive
tone of overdone wonder, “you really do suffer from a grave mental affliction.”

“Hey…!” Merlin protested but he got no further, because Arthur it seemed, had run out of patience with talking.

With no warning he suddenly seemed to both twist up and push down in one baffling, graceful movement and Merlin went over backwards at once, off his knees, and flat again onto the cool green moss.

As he gazed upwards, breath shocked out of him, Arthur, now on his knees himself beside Merlin’s prone body, hauled off his own leather jerkin and pulled the knot to unlace his tunic before dragging it over his head too and throwing it on the ground behind him.

Merlin stared up wide eyed and Arthur met his gaze, his own eyes steady and determined, wolfish, the broad expanse of his naked, lightly haired chest glowing pale in the sunlight.

He pushed himself to his feet then, with no help from his hands, levered upright by the power of his steel-hard thigh muscles and stood, looking down warningly at Merlin as he balanced first on one leg, then the other, to pull off his boots and hose and let his trousers slide down to his bare ankles and off. Finally, he stood, matter of factly naked, his impressive sex resting, partly tumescent, between his muscular thighs.

He looked down at Merlin’s nervous, dumbstruck face and his own expression of businesslike determination didn’t change.

“Take your clothes off,” he ordered brusquely, but before Merlin could react he dropped to his knees and began to haul off Merlin’s boots himself, pulling him forward, yelping, several inches as each was dispensed with.

“Arthur!” he protested, but Arthur had already grabbed the hems of his trousers and was dragging them down and off as well, undergarments going along in the tangle, no nonsense, and Merlin again was hauled a few humiliating inches along the ground with them. Within seconds, Merlin was lying there in nothing but his tunic and for the sake of his own dignity he judged he’d best take that off himself before Arthur stripped it off him again as he’d done the first time, like Bran did given the chance; like a mother undressing her child at bath-time.

He tried to cover his nerves with grumpiness as he sat up, grumbling, to strip it off, his last barrier, until finally, he sat there, blushing like a virgin, naked, in the clearing, as Arthur knelt, equally nude, by his feet.

He had no time to wallow in embarrassment though; no time to protest, to demand explanations, to try to fake calm. Arthur was on him within seconds of the tunic hitting the grass beside him, warm, heavy body stretching out over his; forearms taking some part of his weight but still pushing Merlin flat again, this time, oh this time, with the fizzing ecstasy of hot smooth skin pressing all along the length of his body, and Arthur’s mouth latching unerringly on to the base of his throat.

“Arthur…” he moaned, bones instantly liquid again with lust.

“You took off my mark,” Arthur muttered against his skin, “The last time. The next morning it was gone.” He bit there, just this side of pain, then sucked hard. Merlin whined with desire, feeling as if all the blood in his body was roaring through his veins to his groin, writhing under the broader body on top of him, feeling his rapidly filling cock rubbing against Arthur’s lightly haired belly. “Don’t do that again. You’ll wear my mark. I want to see it.”
Merlin could barely think. He gasped, “Yes,” even though he knew he should object, that he would object strenuously in time, yet all he could do was reach to grip Arthur’s golden hair, and hold his head in place as he suckled another possessive bruise into his skin.

When Arthur raised his head, his full, pink mouth looked reddened and used, and his eyes were dark and heavy-lidded with lust. Merlin looked at him and made an inarticulate sound; pure need.

Arthur’s lips twitched into a tiny, pleased smile.

“One of the first things I noticed about you,” he said, voice low and intimate, “apart from your suicidal stupidity of course…”

“Of course,” Merlin agreed solemnly, breath unsteady, blood fizzing in his veins.

“And your ears.”

Merlin glared.

“Your lips…” Arthur’s eyes were trained there suddenly, all intensity, “…they’re far too pretty… for a man.”

Merlin drew a tight breath, ready to go under to the eroticism of the moment and just drag Arthur down for a devouring kiss, yet he felt he had to put up some kind of fight. “You’re one to talk,” he managed. Arthur frowned and Merlin could see genuine startlement there. “Don’t say no one’s ever told you…” Arthur though, was looking suspicious and resigned, as if he expected childish mockery to break the moment, and Merlin realised suddenly, sadly, that no one ever had told him. No one had paid him pretty compliments and meant it. He reached up and gently traced Arthur’s luscious bottom lip. “You have the most gorgeous mouth,” he whispered.

Their eyes held for a long taut moment until Arthur cleared his throat and said gruffly, “Yes. Well. That’s not surprising.” Merlin quirked a smile, aching with affection. “But at least I don’t have eyelashes like a girl.” Merlin’s eyebrows rose, but he was still smiling. “And skin like a girl. And cheekbones like a girl.”

“Arthur, there’s a bit of a theme here,” Merlin pointed out, all long suffering patience and just a bit of unease. “I’m not actually a girl you know.”

Arthur lowered his head until their lips were almost touching. “And inside… you feel…”

Merlin’s breath caught and held, as their teasing flipped into desperate sexual expectation, just like that.

“Let me guess.” Merlin tried to sound amused, long suffering, “Like a girl?” but his voice was breathy, husky.

Arthur’s lips came closer still, until they were all-but brushing his own mouth, when he breathed, “No…” He was so close Merlin could barely make out his features but he thought he saw a frown. “Better. How’s that possible? Merlin?”

Merlin groaned and gave up; reached urgently to hook his arm round Arthur’s neck and pulled him down the extra inch to meet his mouth. They kissed voraciously, as if they hadn’t touched for months, not minutes and Merlin was starving for it, plunging his tongue into Arthur’s mouth, giving as good as he got, fighting for dominance.

He moaned with protest when Arthur pulled up and away, but his protest didn’t last long when he
felt Arthur licking his nipple, tickling it with his tongue. He arched up helplessly, his prick now so full again, it was beginning to leak with early seed.

Arthur pulled back again though, making small spitting noises which screamed irritation.

“Arthur?” Merlin managed, though he felt like his tongue was too thick for his mouth.

“Hair,” Arthur said petulantly, sounding quite outraged, pulling at his tongue with one hand. Merlin stared and let loose an hysterical giggle. Arthur glared in return and set to work again, apparently determined to wipe the smile off Merlin’s face. It was such a mixture of ease and competitiveness between them, just as it had always been, and Merlin felt as if his heart was going to burst with the joy of it.

That this was Arthur, and this was happening.

Arthur had him squirming with need, saying his name, “Arthur, please. Please,” before he finished playing with his nipples, idly brushing the head of his swollen cock, and Merlin didn’t know what he was begging for. Just…Arthur. Just…more.

He felt his legs being parted, watched Arthur shifting to kneel between them and pulling them up, pushing his knees back and up and he realised of course what Arthur wanted.

Again.

He wasn’t sure why he should ever have doubted this was where it was going. Arthur was used to sex meaning fucking, and his possessiveness was in full cry.

“You’re still open. I could just slip inside… Just…”

Arthur’s eyes when he met them looked sick with want, and he felt a blunt finger tip at his hole, circling maddeningly before pushing into the relaxed, over sensitised slickness. He hissed at the sensation, both too much, and not enough.

Arthur looked down at the point of joining and up again seriously. “Do you want more oil? Will my seed be enough? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m all right,” Merlin managed thickly, “Just do it.”

Arthur’s expression tightened and he nodded, apparently at the end of his tether too.

He looked down to grasp his erection and guide it to Merlin’s cleft, and then Merlin felt it again, the wide blunt head, slipping this time with minimum pressure into his still loose, slippery opening.

He heard Arthur’s long moan of pleasure from a distance but he was beyond help himself, every nerve ending inside his channel reacting to the slow, inward slide of Arthur’s big cock. He’d thought each time with Arthur was the best, the best sex he’d ever had, yet the next time seemed to surpass it.

He realised he was moving, trying to fuck himself minutely on the thick length inside him, desperate, desperate. But Arthur grasped his hips and stopped him, held him still with effortless strength as he whined for more.

“Wait,” Arthur groaned, head hanging low between his shoulders. “It’ll be over!”
He felt half crazy as he reached up to touch anywhere, pawed at Arthur’s braced forearms, his sweat drenched chest.

“I need it…. Arthur please…”

“God. *Merlin.*”

But he was in control of himself somehow. He forced calm for long seconds of panting stillness, head still hanging down, concentrating on control, until Merlin too began to come back from the edge on which he’d been teetering.

“That’s not fair,” he moaned.

Arthur raised his head, and grinned, a wide, white, gleeful smile.

“You see… that’s why I’m a knight and you’re a warlock. I know all about patience and fortitude, and you want it all now.”

Merlin gritted his teeth and squeezed his arse muscles tight, grinning widely himself when he saw Arthur’s face twist with effort. The grin didn’t last though when Arthur pulled Merlin’s legs straight, held them round his waist and circled his hips. Lights went off in Merlin’s head.

“Arthur!” He was squirming, half demented with lust again, legs locked tight around Arthur’s body as he pulled at his muscular shoulders, tried to bring him closer, tried to infect him with the same desperation.

“I was watching you,” Arthur said and his breathing was heavy but still somehow, he was infernally in control. “You were walking toward us… and your eyes were gold…and… you’d stopped time… Just by thinking about it. You’d stopped time. And all I wanted… was to see you exactly like this… writhing on my cock. Looking only at me.”

Merlin stared up at him, tried a huffed laugh though it sounded thin and desperate.

“You just want to fuck… Emrys,” he managed… an accusation, breathless and without force.

Arthur’s mouth quirked up in a lopsided smile and his voice was low, dark, drawling, “The pretty warlock wielding all the power of the universe… mewling for my prick? Now who’d want that?”

Merlin whacked weakly at an immovable shoulder, the thought flashing through his mind dimly that he should possibly be concerned by that, but Arthur slowly circled his hips again, watching him like prey and he felt his chin going up, his head going back, his whole body reacting with the desperate need to push his arse further down on Arthur’s sex.

“You were going to let it happen. You actually… were… in front of all of us…” Arthur’s voice sounded ragged, arousal, accusation.

Merlin’s eyes snapped open. He felt as if everything was overloaded, every particle of his body giving up and surrendering to his need. “Another eyeblink, and you’d have taken an arrow in the skull.”

“I’m sorry,” Merlin panted desperately again.

How was Arthur still thinking? Still talking? How was he coherent?

“Swear to me. *Swear* you’ll never do *anything* like that again!”
“Yes…alright…I swear… I swear Arthur!”

Their eyes met and held, desperation in both of them, until abruptly Arthur’s face twisted into an agonised grimace and he let his weight down to press on Merlin, braced partly on his forearms still. But his mouth was hard against Merlin’s neck, frantic.

Merlin moaned and squirmed at the feeling of that hot, hot breath, the lushness of those full lips.

“You’re mine,” Arthur gritted against his skin, angry, and suddenly no longer simply demanding, but somehow… despairing. “Don’t ever forget it.”

“Yes... Arthur please!”

“You had me give the order.”

And for all the extremes of desire in him, Merlin stilled. He heard the pain driving through Arthur’s voice; knew somehow that, in his head, Arthur was seeing those arrows hit home at his command; recognised his own culpability.

He squeezed his eyes shut, appalled by the guilty knowledge of what he’d almost done, just to break free. Because... he’d just been…so tired. Tired of making the best of things; desperate to escape the fate of seeing yet more pain inflicted by his hand.

“Oh, Arthur,” he whispered sorrowfully again He looped his arms round his shoulders, a gesture of comfort, of desperate remorse, desire cut down in him like a warrior on the field.

“If I lost her again it would be… I would be devastated. Heartsick. But you… Losing you would be ….”

They lay like that for sweet, sad moments; Arthur’s face still hidden in his neck, Merlin’s arms around him, hugging him tight, legs sliding slowly down from Arthur’s waist to cling around his lower thighs. It was a gentle moment between them, vastly powerful in its unexpectedness. There was no the eroticism left in their joining for Merlin, even though Arthur’s prick was still buried inside his hole and as iron hard as ever. And quickly the awkwardness of that began to seep through to him - their sexual joining; the deep emotions, no longer fitting together.

He shifted minutely, involuntarily reflecting that unease, and heard Arthur’s low gasp in response.

In return, Arthur’s sex gave an equally involuntary thrust inside him. Tiny, but Merlin gasped helplessly.

Arthur moved again, rubbing inside him, and like an obedient slave, for all he would have sworn it impossible seconds before, Merlin’s body snapped to attention in response to the stimulus.

He moved gingerly at first, a sort of tentative wriggle, and Arthur moved too as if drawn with him–a small, cautious withdrawal, a returning thrust. At once Merlin’s limbs were liquid again. He groaned encouragement.

“Please,” he whispered into Arthur’s hair, all shame long gone. “Please do it. Arthur…do it!”

Arthur pulled his head back, and looked down into Merlin’s pleading eyes.

His face looked shuttered, emotion closed away, but his pupils were still huge against the sky blue of his eyes.
He pushed his upper body away and up and braced his arms beside Merlin’s shoulders, one arm darting back to pull at Merlin’s thigh in a silent command to pull his legs up again, present his rump as it had been.

Merlin obeyed without question, calves sliding quickly up the backs of Arthur’s lightly haired thighs, over the curve of his silky rump and up to cling around his waist. His hands moved to clutch at the smooth skin of Arthur’s back, urging without words.

Arthur looked down at him intently, all solemnity, and began to withdraw his cock, sliding easily in the slickness inside; then at once, he pushed it firmly in again. In and out, in and out, still not hurrying, fucking Merlin slow and deep through his own seed.

It was beyond exquisite, and Merlin keened with the delight of it.

His erection was rubbing tantalisingly against the light hair of Arthur’s stomach, and he felt as if he’d never known what sex should be before.

Arthur’s breathing was growing heavier, almost panting again, and he began to pick up his pace, pumping faster until he was fucking Merlin hard and Merlin’s heels were bouncing helplessly against his arse. And he was looking up at that loved face.

Arthur.

Merlin could hear himself making sounds; mewling, humiliating sounds, begging Arthur never to stop, saying his name over and over like a spell, and he didn’t care about dignity or modesty or mockery or anything else. He was beyond anything but the huge ecstasy of how it felt to be mated by this one man out of all men.

They fucked, pleasure mounting all the time and all that could be heard were grunts and whimpers and Merlin’s desperate half words and pleas, and the slick, obscene, squelching sounds of their coupling.

Then Arthur moaned, “Fuck… fuck…” the first words he’d said since they began again, and then, voice thick and low, “You feel so wet… so full of my spending.”

Merlin whined and gripped tighter still with his legs, moved one hand, desperate now for relief, between their bellies, to his own aching prick. He began unselfconsciously to pump it, knuckles bumping awkwardly against Arthur’s belly.

Arthur looked down and groaned, pushed himself a few inches further up to allow Merlin room to manoeuvre.

“Yes,” he breathed, “Do that to yourself …while I’m having you.”

And that was more or less enough for Merlin. Arthur fucked in and out hard a few more times, watching greedily as Merlin managed two more stripping, twisting motions with his own hand, Arthur pushed in gorgeously once again, and everything peaked at once - all came together.

The agonising, almost there ecstasy exploded inside him like a swollen, bursting wineskin, pierced at last and… relief. Merlin’s reddened aching cock began to spurt, semen shooting over his hand, squirting onto Arthur’s braced body as he held himself taut above him.

Somehow Arthur was holding off his own climax even as Merlin’s channel milked him ruthlessly and Merlin arched in a frenzy of delight beneath him.
But when Merlin’s orgasm finally began to ease, as his body began to release from its spasm, Arthur, instead of fucking on eagerly, stayed frozen above him, balanced on his knees and straight braced arms, bowstring taut.

Merlin lay a panting, sweaty, satisfied heap beneath him, looking up, bemused, while Arthur crouched above, every muscle tense and trembling, jaw clenched tight, eyes trained on some point above Merlin’s head, trying presumably to avoid visual stimuli. He looked so focussed, so determined, so *Arthur*, trying, Merlin realised, to hold himself back, to make it last. He felt such a surge of love and affection for him, for this beautiful, magnificent, flawed man, always challenging himself and the world to do better.

Merlin reached up and cupped his cheek, a smile of amusement, of deep emotion, curving his lips. Arthur started, and looked down, and as their eyes met, his focus disappeared, and he was staring at Merlin, mesmerised.


Arthur drew a deep, gasping breath and shook his head. “Not yet. I wanted…”

“I know,” Merlin said tenderly and suddenly he grinned, wide and wild and sweet. “But right now actually… *I*’m in charge.”

Arthur looked as if he was having trouble understanding because he barely managed to begin to form an expression of outrage before Merlin squeezed tight with the muscles of his arse, squirmed a bit and bore down on Arthur’s cock for good measure.

“Oh… you…” But Arthur didn’t stand a chance. With a splintered groan, he pumped his cock in and out hard, once, twice, pushed it in as far as it would go one last time and froze, shuddering. Merlin lay exhausted and loose-limbed beneath him throughout, still grinning lazily as he watched Arthur come undone above him, head thrown back, strong throat bared, eyes screwed shut, face twisted with ecstasy and relief, and he was so beautiful Merlin could hardly accept that he was real.

He felt hot liquid again beginning to fill up his arse and trickle out of his hole around the thick column of flesh stretching it and he moaned reflexively in satisfaction at the sensation. He felt Arthur coming and coming inside him as if he were pumping out every last drop in his balls, and he tried to imprint each second in his brain; every moment and sensation he could feel, as if this joining were their last. He reached to stroke Arthur’s braced arms as the other man thrust spasmodically again for a last few delicious half-strokes in Merlin’s channel, through the slick lushness of his own fresh semen. He simply watched and waited and loved him. But finally it ended, and Arthur’s weight all but collapsed on top of him, forcing the breath from his lungs in an amused *ooof* of air.

He slid his arms round Arthur’s waist and stroked his back affectionately, loving having him there for these last seconds, even as the other man’s weight crushed him into the ground. Suddenly he could feel the contours and bumps of the ground beneath him very clearly, the tiny hillocks of grass and moss digging into his back, but he didn’t care. He really really didn’t care. He simply lay and grinned like a lunatic at the blue, blue sky.
Chapter 5

Arthur raised his head at last, looking, Merlin thought affectionately, as he used to when he woke after a night’s heavy indulgence with a serious hangover - hair everywhere, eyes bleary, mildly stunned.

When he registered Merlin’s suppressed laughter though, he visibly began to try to pull himself together, and much to Merlin’s regret, levered himself up and off Merlin’s body, rolling to lie flat on his back beside him, wrenching his spent cock from Merlin’s tender hole at the same time.

Merlin yelped and swatted.

“That’s… Owww!”

Arthur stared up at the trees for a second as if he were still trying to remember where he was, then he rallied.

“Merlin…” He began, then cleared his throat, but still his voice sounded off. “You…” He didn’t seem able to conjure up more; he looked truly, in mild shock.

Merlin though, driven by sudden anxious memory, abruptly felt disinclined to laugh. He propped himself up on his elbow and leaned threateningly over Arthur.

“I’m not, you know,” he said trying for lightness, but there was an edge of apprehension to his voice; he could hear it himself. “A girl.”

Arthur didn’t raise his head but he still managed to look at him eye to eye.

“Yes, I had noticed that Merlin. I have the unfortunate evidence all over my front.” He gestured vaguely, distastefully, to his semen-smeared skin and closed his eyes, apparently worn out. 

Unfortunate.

Merlin looked down at the mossy ground just beyond Arthur’s prone body.

“Is it?”

It took a couple of seconds, but Arthur seemed to cotton on quite quickly. His eyes snapped open.

“No,” he said at once.

Merlin looked up and met his eyes. “Its just you said… about my eyelashes and my mouth and… if you’re making me a girl in your head so you can…”

“Merlin… I was just pointing out that… I suppose… some people might think… if they have bad eyesight… that you’re… possibly… quite… pretty,” Arthur finished, glowering.

Merlin opened his mouth and closed it again, ready to object strenuously, but Arthur pulled him impatiently down to rest beside him, half on top of him, faces inches apart, and suddenly, awkwardness, squabbling, their everyday banter, flipped, to become the kind of boiling intensity that dried Merlin’s mouth, the kind of intensity that they seemed to achieve so effortlessly.

It was dizzying, disorientating, the way the mood between them could turn on a farthing, distorting everything Merlin was familiar with in his relationship with Arthur into something new and
unknown between them.

But God… he loved it. Every single second of it.

They didn’t kiss, but they were sharing the same air, staring into each other’s eyes.

“It’s as if… you were made to be my sheath,” Arthur murmured.

Merlin inhaled with a kind of startlement that Arthur - inhibited, uptight Arthur - had said that in his right mind, untainted by sexual need. And he knew he should point out that, yes, it seemed Arthur was thinking of him as a girl. But he found himself staring wordlessly at Arthur instead, hypnotised by the words, by the heat and intensity in Arthur’s eyes. By the erotic charge that was trying even now to spark again in his exhausted body.

He tried to think of anything he could say to defuse the moment before it could all start again, but what he came out with was, blurted from nowhere, a suspicion he hadn’t known he would ever have the courage to voice.

“It excites you. My magic,” he ventured softly.

Arthur blinked slowly and frowned.

Merlin regretted it at once - every word. It had been such an deeply rooted, visceral fear for so long, that Arthur would hate him for his power, and that fear had been devastatingly, heart-breakingly justified when Arthur had found out and Merlin... Merlin, after all those years at his side, protecting and caring for him, had had to go. Now, any conjunction of the two made his spine tingle with unease and apprehension.

“I just meant,” he hurried out, "you seemed… just that you seemed to like the idea of… I mean.. ” He trailed off feebly and looked away at once from Arthur’s perceptive, narrow gaze, the mood between them changed now, completely, snapped in two.

There was a horrible, uneasy silence

“I suppose… I do,” Arthur said thoughtfully.

Merlin looked up at him again quickly. He found himself torn between gratitude and suspicion, wondering if Arthur was saying it to pacify him, put him at his ease again. But Arthur was looking at him levelly, no sign of deception in him, and somehow Merlin found a surge of courage; the courage to face this oldest of fears.

“You didn’t used to… I mean when you found out about me. You were…you hated it.” Merlin’s voice was hushed as if they were sharing confidences in the dark. Arthur pushed his chin back sharply and gave a frowning grimace; a classic wordless pantomime of surprised shock.

“I didn’t. I mean when I found out.... It wasn’t… I suppose it wasn’t so much your magic that I… I hated.” Arthur’s hand slipped from Merlin’s back, freeing him to move away, and so he did, not because he wanted to now, but because he saw the distance growing in Arthur’s eyes. He lay back down beside Arthur on the moss, shoulder to shoulder once more, staring up again at the sky.

He knew he should drop it, because he was probably going to hear things he didn’t want to hear, things Arthur didn’t really want to say, but he couldn’t.

After everything, he needed truth.
“I don’t understand,” he ventured after a few seconds.

There was a long, tense silence, then Arthur sighed.

“There was a part of me that always wondered before you...before I found out... if magic was truly...all bad... If Father might have been... misguided while he lived. Twisted by grief. If I’d been twisted too, by all he taught...all I’d seen. By Morgana. What she did to Guinevere...”

Merlin rolled his head to look at his profile, remembering his own terrifying encounter with Uther’s shade. The fanaticism that drove him. Remembering Gwen's awful, quiet, unrelenting hatred of her own husband and all he stood for; another of Morgana's puppets.

“You were so furious with me...“ he said softly, “So betrayed. And... I can understand why. I hid so much from you for so long... “

“Fooled me? Told so many lies?” Arthur interrupted dryly. “Like my father and Morgana and Agravaine and Mordred and everyone I ever let close to me, except... except Guinevere?”

Merlin let his head fall back until he was staring upward again.

“Yes,” he conceded simply.

Perhaps Arthur heard the guilt in his voice. He sighed. “I couldn’t blame you though...not really, once I got over the ... the enormous bloody shock. And the anger, the betrayal. You didn’t have much cause to tell the truth did you...? To trust me.” He sounded matter of fact, blaming himself as always, for falling short of the ideal.

“Between Father...and the way I was... in my first years as king.”

“God, Arthur, that wasn’t your fault!” Merlin rushed automatically to comfort, “We all learned lessons, didn’t we?”

Arthur didn’t reply.

“I don’t understand then.” Merlin put in at last, unnerved, but still...still desperate to know. “Why you’ve seemed so angry with me for so long.”

Arthur made a humourless sound.

“Why? Because... because I thought I’d known you. I thought I knew you through and through, better than anyone. I could rely on knowing you. And all of a sudden... I saw I didn’t. I didn’t have a fucking clue who you were, or how you felt, or what you believed... And I realised I never had.”

“You did! You do! I was still ...Merlin. I still am!”

“Merlin...was my manservant,” Arthur replied, almost conversationally, “Bloody appalling at his job but... loyal to a fault, entertaining, unique. Merlin...cared about me, made me laugh, threw himself at death like an idiot, to try to save me. And serving me was an honour, though he made a show of moaning and whining half the time... Still... for a peasant boy from Ealdor...manservant to the prince, then manservant to the king.... what greater honour could there be?” Arthur was still staring straight up at the sky, and if he was aware of Merlin’s stare he didn’t show it. “That’s how it was going to be. You were... mine. My servant, my ... friend, always by my side. You wouldn’t want any more because... you couldn’t be anything more. And you would always be there. For me.”

Merlin closed his eyes. “Oh,” he whispered
And at last, he thought, stunned, he might be beginning to understand.

“But then … you weren’t … Merlin. Not the Merlin I knew. You never had been really. That Merlin was an invention. You were… you were the most powerful man in any room we entered together. I thought I’d been protecting you, and you could have crushed me like an insect under your heel any time you wanted. You must have laughed about that.” Merlin made a sharp, desperate sound of protest but Arthur slogged on, “And on top of that, I suddenly had to accept that you’re not just a sorceror, but apparently the greatest warlock the world has ever seen. You’d been protecting me …like a mother with a babe who didn’t know better.”

He turned his head suddenly and he was staring straight into Merlin’s apprehensive eyes.

“I didn’t know what you’d ever felt about anything really. If anything I believed you’d felt was real. And you could make any choices you wished; go anywhere, live in luxury and wealth … forget Camelot even existed. Any day… you could do that, on a whim. You weren’t… mine anymore, and I realised you never had been. Not as I’d thought.” Merlin saw Arthur’s jaw clench, muscles working under smooth-shaved golden skin. “Suddenly you were your own and… then you were Gwaine’s…. And magic’s… You’d belonged to magic all along. All the things I thought had been done from devotion to me… I realised they’d been devotion to destiny.” He looked away again, staring blindly toward the trees. “ So I tried not to think about it, while you were away first…and after you came back… I tried not to look at you, because…because it hurt my heart,” he said simply. “So I tried sending you away on embassy. And then…”


“Yes. And without meaning to, they showed me …how to solve it.”

“Solve it?” Merlin whispered, half appalled.

“Emrys or Merlin,” Arthur turned his eyes back to him. “You were always meant to be mine.”

“God, Arthur,” Merlin said despairingly, “You know I always was. I always will be…”

Arthur reached a hand across his body and twisted slightly to cup Merlin’s cheek. “Yes,” he said quietly.

Merlin raised himself on one elbow, desperate to get closer, and he leant over Arthur to press a hard kiss to his lips, full of emotion and a desperate need to make him believe. Arthur took the kiss willingly and returned it, moving his lips sweetly under his. Finally Merlin pulled away, his point, he hoped anxiously, made, and he opened his eyes to find Arthur’s just opening too.

Arthur looked at him for a second, gaze warm with emotion, and what he saw there made Merlin instinctively duck his head shyly, and glance up at Arthur tentatively through his lashes, half smiling.

Ludicrous to feel shy after all they’d done by now, but… it was all so new to see such clear, unmasked feeling for him from Arthur. Romantic feeling.

Arthur stared at him as if mesmerised, then he seemed to come back to himself. He cleared his throat and blinked hard. Then he grinned and pushed his hand up to run through Merlin’s unruly mop of hair. “If you don’t stop that, we’re going to end up going at it again,” he said hoarsely.

And Merlin laughed, full of joy. “No chance! My arse is worn out!” Still smiling, he let his weight go, and lay down, head on Arthur’s solid shoulder, and Arthur’s arm automatically came up around him cradling him against his side. They’d never lain like that before together…like lovers, and
Merlin adored it. “There are other ways, you know,” he chided lazily.

“I do know that, Merlin,” Arthur drawled, hand moving down Merlin’s back instinctively it seemed, coming to rest on the curve of his backside, stroking there unconsciously, but still, unquestionably, possessively.

Merlin rolled his head on Arthur’s shoulder to try to peer up at the other man without actually moving away far enough to see properly.

“Of course you do,” he said politely.

Too politely.

Arthur moved his head too and squinted down his nose at him, all disdain. “Yes. I do. I don’t know why you sound surprised. I’ve been …. I’ve had my prick sucked, you know. By a camp follower.”

Merlin tried to move before Arthur saw his grin. “Wow. That’s…that’s great.”

“Merlin. Are you patronising me?”

Merlin shook his head blindly against the warmth of Arthur’s skin, still smirking wildly. “No. No. Perish the thought!”

There was a short tense pause then, “Anything he does for you…” Arthur said stiffly, “I can do too, you know.” Merlin froze. “You just have to show me.”

And Merlin’s smile was gone, wiped away like a mark on glass, because suddenly it wasn’t funny. He raised his head and looked uncertainly at Arthur’s determined glower.

“It’s not a competition,” he mumbled tentatively, but Arthur’s exaggerated ‘how much of an idiot are you?’ scowl told him what he thought of that. And he was right. How had Merlin even considered otherwise? Everything was a competition for Arthur Pendragon, but this, Merlin realised, went to the core. It unnerved him again, reminded him that there were huge worries outside this glade, just waiting to leap on them again. Devour them maybe.

Yet for all his apprehension, he couldn’t help it - everything was swamped now by a huge and desperate joy, rushing and bubbling like the finest wine through his blood. Because it hadn’t been his magic, not really. It wasn’t Uther’s conditioning. It’d been… Arthur and his useful excuse of class - servant and master - to keep Merlin with him always, even if he couldn’t admit to himself why. Yes it had been selfish and entitled but… he was beginning at long long last to believe in his own importance to Arthur; that somehow, all along, through all those dark years of hovering in the background of Arthur’s life, believing himself unappreciated and taken for granted, in reality he’d been…significant all along. Needed. Vital. Loved.

He turned his face and hid his manic smile in Arthur’s golden skin.

They lay together peacefully, Arthur playing idly with his hair, for uncounted minutes, and Merlin revelled in every one of them. He’d never had anything like this with Arthur as he’d had it with Gwaine; never had peace or tactile affection. It seemed unreal; some kind of fever dream.

Arthur had been his focus for so long, unquestionably out of his reach for so long, that the simplicity of this – just lying on the summer grass, cocooned safe in his lover’s arms.... The thought struck him that perhaps Arthur needed to feel that too; that he was the protector. That had always been their dynamic, until the illusion was ripped away. Merlin wondered now if the loss of that balance was what was really behind the constant push for Merlin’s sexual surrender, the
references to his girlishness.

Perhaps Arthur needed to feel in charge of him again. It was just... so Arthur.

Merlin smiled again, indulgent and sly, up at the branches arching against the blue sky. The sun was higher now, he noted idly, hazily, and the mild chill of dawn was gone.

“We should get back,” he ventured unconvincingly.

He let his smile widen at Arthur’s non-committal hum of response. Nevertheless, his own long tradition of looking after Arthur, keeping him out of trouble as best he could, forced him to push reluctantly for common sense.

“They’ll be missing you,” he pointed out, “you’re not just the prince any more.”

“I was never just anything Merlin,” Arthur drawled all languid haughtiness, even though Merlin could hear his drowsiness. Then, a sigh, “But I suppose you’re right. Which must be a new experience.”

Merlin jabbed a hard, sharp elbow into his abdomen. “You’ll miss taking training if we don’t leave soon. And... there’s the Court for the lower town and the Rhegedians are leaving tomorrow.”

He felt Arthur heaving in a long hard breath under his cheek, letting it go with a heavy sigh through his nose and he wondered with sudden nervousness what Arthur was thinking. He hauled himself up on his elbow at once, instantly wary.

Arthur met his eyes, frowning slightly in surprise at the abrupt upheaval.

“They...” Merlin bit his lip, and wondered if Arthur was thinking the same confused thoughts as he was, unsure whether to wish the Rhegedians had never come, or now bless the chance that brought them to Camelot. “They certainly made an impression,” he finished weakly, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

Arthur’s eyes had narrowed though, studying him carefully.

“Well,” Merlin chirped obnoxiously, “Come on then! Up and at ‘em!” Arthur’s assessing gaze changed in an instant to a look of near loathing and Merlin couldn’t help it, the relieved rush of familiarity again, the pure shock of selfish pleasure that so much had changed, while so little had. He pulled back and settled on his knees, deliberately echoing the past. “Let’s be having you... lazy daisy!”

He was already on his haunches and propelling himself backwards onto his feet when Arthur lunged, so he was able to scramble into a clumsy run first toward the clothes they’d left scattered on the ground near the tree and then, realising how filthy he was, darting toward the pond by the edge of the clearing, Arthur on his feet too, behind him.

He kept Arthur in his eyeline as he knelt and began to wash, ready to run again if there was any suggestion of a dunking, but Arthur had slowed and then stopped by the edge, just watching him as he scooped water and swept a damp hand down his chest and stomach, washing away the viscous mess of half-dried semen there. He glanced over compulsively and felt the flush of hot blood sweeping up his face and down his neck and chest, at the look in the other man’s eyes as he followed every movement.

“You need to clean up too,” he blurted nervously.
Arthur’s mouth lifted in a slow, lopsided smirk, powerfully sexy.

“I’ll just… wait till you’re finished, I think. Then you can help me. It was your job after all,” but the purr of his voice didn’t match his words at all.

Merlin drew in a deep breath and felt his colour rise even more, but he had no will to argue, so he slowly waded into the water until it reached the middle of his thighs and reached behind himself self-consciously to sketchily wash the slippery cleft of his buttocks, careful not to wash too thoroughly. He didn’t look at Arthur while he was doing it, but he could almost feel the hot weight of his stare. When he finally finished and stepped up back to the bank of the pond, he couldn’t resist any longer. He looked up and met Arthur’s eyes, and the power of the lust and emotion he found there was both reassuring and utterly terrifying.

As he walked tentatively toward him, he could see the other man’s body was already beginning to react, and his own exhausted cock was desperately trying to twitch its way back to life as well. He stopped and swallowed, still feet away.

“Actually,” he husked, “Maybe it’s better if you… you know… clean yourself up. Yourself, I mean. Do it…yourself.” His voice was barely a whisper when he finished and he could feel the pull toward Arthur again, frighteningly strong. He swallowed hard, closed his eyes and made himself turn away, walking determinedly toward his clothing, and began to dress, while behind him, after a pause, he heard the quiet swishing of water.

He didn’t feel safe enough to turn around again until he was fully clothed except for his boots. But the moment he did, he felt as if he was right back where he started, dry mouthed and out of his depth.

Arthur was walking toward him, damp and totally naked, heavy genitals swinging with each step, and he looked so glorious Merlin could have wept. Instead he closed his eyes and swallowed hard, waiting for the power of the image to weaken.

He felt a hard jolt to his shoulder as Arthur bumped him deliberately in passing. “Having problems, Merlin?” he asked smugly, and casually began to dress behind him.

Merlin stayed still and waited, eyes still closed, trying not to put mental images to the rustling sounds he could hear.

He sensed movement, but he was so focussed on thinking of other things that he jumped when Arthur’s dry, ”You can open your eyes, you dolt,” came from in front of him rather than behind.

When his eyes sprung open, Arthur was shouldering into his leather jerkin, all wry mockery, looking so like his prince that Merlin couldn’t resist stepping forward and reaching up to touch his cheek, just because he could. And when he saw Arthur’s eyes soften with a kind of relaxation, he knew he’d done the right thing.

“Come on, then,” Arthur said quietly, but he was smiling very slightly, and he reached up briefly to squeeze Merlin’s wrist.

They walked together toward the horses, grazing peacefully at the end of the glade near the pond, and began to gather reins and prepare to mount.

Just the thought gave Merlin pause though, the realisation of the ride ahead after the fuckings he’d just taken.

“Sore?”
Merlin looked up sharply to find Arthur taking in his hesitation with a kind of predatory satisfaction that both infuriated and bolstered him. His stock reaction to Arthur really.

But yet again he thought, *Perhaps he needs this*, the knowledge that Merlin… *Emrys*… had bent over for him so eagerly.

He shrugged in deliberate response, ducked his head and felt himself blush, a tiny, helpless smile on his lips, and when he looked up again flirtatiously through his lashes, Arthurs predatory look had intensified to the extent that Merlin swung himself up on his mare’s back instantly, sore arse or no, and dug in his heels to urge her to move, before Arthur hauled him off and started all over again.

He waved away the spell of protection round the clearing when Arthur came up beside him on his mount, aware the other man was watching his magic avidly all the while, then he let Arthur lead the way back through the forest until they emerged onto open ground and they could begin to canter and then to gallop. Again it was enlivening, truly magical, but this time Merlin let himself enjoy the journey back, the fear and worry shoved away and buried beneath the joy of what had happened, the understanding they had come to, the future they had agreed they had to share.

He let it all go, the guilt, the grief, the worry, and just revelled in the euphoria of the moment, racing behind Arthur through the glorious summer morning, knowing that they were lovers, knowing that Arthur had chosen him.

Yet when Camelot came into view Merlin felt as if he were waking from a dream. And for all the physical relief he felt at an end to the pounding his poor tender arse was getting on the saddle, he also felt the sharp tendrils of worry awakening again to begin their dance of torment, to burrow into his gut like hungry worms into an apple.

He was frowning when they pulled their mounts down to a canter and then to a walk, in order to enter the gates of Camelot, the obsequiousness of the guards on the gate reminding Merlin all too sharply that Arthur was king, not prince. Their walk to the courtyard was solemn and silent but Merlin thought he caught sight of a figure in the windows above them in the castle watching their return as grooms ran to take their reins, and he thought he knew it all too well.

Gwen, he realised with a sick dread.

Gwen had been watching out for them; Gwen knew they’d been alone together for hours and she’d been waiting. All of a sudden his happiness in the morning seemed selfish beyond comprehension.

Arthur led them to the front of the castle where Merlin could see a small retinue was already waiting: William, Bran, Arthur’s secretary, Colm, Leon. Their peace was certainly at an end.

They came to a halt and Arthur swung his leg easily across his horse's back, sliding gracefully out of the saddle; Merlin hauled himself altogether more clumsily to the ground after him.

Arthur turned, as the fastest groom raced to take the reins of both horses, and looked directly at Merlin, his expression familiar and solemn. And Merlin stared back for those last, quiet seconds, trying to say so much about their reality, with no words to help him. Thinking of it, he realised he didn’t even know what he’d vocalise if he had the freedom.

*Thank you, perhaps. I love you. I’m scared*

Arthur frowned very slightly, and his mouth pushed out into a small, thoughtful pout. He lowered his head, an inch, maybe two, still holding Merlin’s eyes, and the corner of his mobile mouth
twitched up minutely; a kind of grave acknowledgement. It was such a subtle connection, Merlin couldn’t believe anyone else would have seen it without careful study, but somehow, it lifted his heart.

He swallowed and let his own lips curve into an uneasy grin, looking for the tiny tug of acknowledgement in Arthur’s smile in return. Then Arthur turned away to meet the urgings of his secretary, just as Merlin noticed a small, blue-clad figure, hurrying down the steps toward the King’s party.

It took Merlin just a second to recognise Gwen’s new maid.

He watched with an odd kind of ache in his chest as Arthur turned to her and inclined his head to listen, as she bobbed a curtsy and gave her mistress’ message.

Merlin expected the nod of agreement, knew that Gwen would be anxious to see Arthur, knew that this was how it was for all of them and always would be.

But still he found he had to turn away and leave the gathering around the king behind him.

He came back to himself only when he’d taken a few paces away from the castle, realising that he actually wanted to go up to his rooms, to hide, to begin to gather himself again. So he drew in a sharp impatient breath and began to skirt around the courtyard, head down, beginning to edge around the party still standing at the bottom of the steps.

But as he shuffled along something made him raise his eyes to a still figure, standing alone, watching his progress.


Merlin’s stride faltered and stopped, until he was standing, barely breathing, in the middle of the courtyard, staring at his lover. And Gwaine stared steadily back at him, his lean, handsome face sombre, hand resting lightly on the pommel of his sheathed sword. The moment stretched, still and frantic.

Merlin was suddenly crushingly aware, so aware, of how he must look at that moment; windblown, flushed still, sparking with life. And he wondered if it was as obvious as he feared, that he was fresh from having sex with someone else. He opened his mouth, but he couldn’t think of a thing to say.

Gwaine’s lips seemed to twitch, flinch. He gave a jerky nod before turning to walk out of the courtyard and Merlin, read the summons.

After a short, panicked second of stillness, he started into movement, following anxiously behind, heart hammering in his ears; right out of the courtyard, keeping that straight mail-clad back in sight, round to the side of the castle near the training fields, until Gwaine finally stopped beside a wall. He stood with his back turned for a few moments as Merlin approached, then he turned and slid down to sit, shoulders braced against the grey stone, settled eyes fixed ahead, with one leg straight against the ground and one knee raised. Merlin stopped nervously in front of him, but he hesitated only for a moment before he turned too and slid down to sit beside the other man, shoulder to shoulder.

They were private here, no one else to hear, and even though they were in plain sight, no one, it seemed, caring enough to watch.

Merlin darted a quick sideways glance, but Gwaine wasn’t looking at him…not yet.
His face was slightly downturned, glossy hair concealing what was written there.

Neither man spoke, for long, agonising heartbeats, but Merlin fixed his eyes on Gwaine’s half-hidden profile pleadingly and didn’t move them.

“I went to Gaius’ this morning, to see how you were,” Gwaine said at last, carefully unmoving. Then his gaze lifted and turned sideways to meet Merlin’s. “He said you were…summoned.”

Merlin swallowed. “Yes,” he said stupidly, and he knew that was hardly the appropriate response to the unasked question.

Was he going to make Gwaine do all the work?

He saw Gwaine’s eyes shift suddenly then to his throat, fix there and turn away, back to his own hand dangling over his knee, and Merlin remembered only then with a hot rush of shame, his own elation as Arthur had held him down and marked him again. Staked his claim recklessly for everyone to see.

Anyone to see, who could understand it and judge it for what it was.

Gwaine.

He closed his eyes, heart stuttering with guilt as he thought of how he must look to Gwaine; how much pain he must have dealt him from the start of the madness.

Gwaine was the most resilient of men; carnage and death, nothing could kill his mad, graceful humour. And Merlin…loving Merlin had made him look like this.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry”

There was a short, agonising pause.

“Yeah,” Gwaine said at last, thickly, “So you keep sayin’” A beat, then another. “So…” again, softer, “It wasn’t just once then, after all. Can’t say I’m exactly…” He gave a cynical grimace, “…surprised.”

Merlin let his breath go in an audible rush of distress. “I don’t… I tried…”

“Yeah.” Gwaine interrupted sharply. “I saw that.”

Merlin snapped his mouth shut. More shame, embarrassment. He felt as if everything he’d done since the moment he returned from his embassy to the Druids had been a knife to Gwaine’s heart. All that loyalty and easy love, rewarded by betrayal and cowardice.

But then he thought suddenly on a note of panic…does he mean yesterday or this morning? Which particular betrayal?

“Nothin’s ever that bad, you mad bastard!” Gwaine snapped and the question was answered. “I can’t believe you’d be that stupid. After everythin’ that’s happened… how much we need you…”

“I thought…I just thought… it’d be easier…”

“Easier for who?” Bitterly.

“Everyone was hating each other.” Merlin was pleading for understanding. “You and Arthur.
Gwen and me... And it was tearing Arthur and Gwen apart...”

“Gwen,” Gwaine snapped. “Why aren’t I surprised? So it was for Gwen.”

“No! I...”

Merlin trailed off. Because suddenly he thought ...was that it?

Not primarily, for shame about betraying Gwaine, or despair that Arthur couldn’t love him back, or even worry about the canker it could place at the heart of Camelot...? But horror that he had hurt Gwen...undermined her place with Arthur?

Because... he had ceded the field to her so long ago, so completely accepted her perfection, her absolute superiority to his own horribly flawed character, that the idea of any kind of challenge from him to her, anything he did or that anyone did that might make her unhappy, he had come to see as the worst of crimes.

He’d come to almost idolise her, he realised suddenly, just as Gaius had said; to see her as a person without real flaw, who could never do the things he had done, who would never have blood on their hands, would never lie or hide or abuse their unwelcome power, never make stupid decisions. A person who would never have terrible secrets. The person who deserved Arthur. Who could one day give him equally perfect children.

And to disappoint her... to hurt her... to make her less than perfect, even for a second....

“She’s just a person, Merlin.” He met Gwaine’s impatient gaze, dazedly. “Yeah, she’s lovely an’ a brilliant queen an’ all that... but she doesn’t have a right to happy ever after, any more than anyone else. In the end we’re all...straws in the wind. Luck... Destiny... None of us ... none of us is owed a thing.”

He spoke, Merlin thought, with a kind of gritty stoicism, instinctively, even now, Merlin’s friend; driven to comfort and help him. And Merlin realised, with a rush of warmth, that in that minute, he had never loved him more.

It should have been Gwaine he put first, all along. Gwaine, he fretted about, and lost sleep over hurting. But he was so used to prioritising Arthur and Gwen he’d been treating him – his own lover - as just one more guilt, one more complication.

He bit his lip, mortified; revelation forcing words, honesty to his tongue.

“It...it can’t be broken... the union...” he said with soft brutality, because such blows were best dealt fast and hard, right to the heart.

Gwaine snapped his eyes to the front as if he’d been struck, looked blankly out at the slowly filling training ground, arm still resting, deceptively relaxed, on his raised knee.

“It was... meant. For centuries. Apparently,” Merlin pleaded, but he saw Gwaine’s jaw clench. “I’m sorry,” he blurted again and swallowed hard. He gropped for courage. “I thought maybe... I did think maybe it didn’t have to be... physical again. But that’s not...what’s meant to be between... us. I mean... it’s meant to... I think it’s meant to kind of...force an end to misunderstandings, create unity. Bring the two...sides as close as possible.”

Gwaine didn’t move or react for a few seconds as Merlin stared anxiously at his strong profile, then his mouth twisted into a kind of grimace.
“Not much point in tryin’ ‘its him or me’ then I suppose,” he mocked, and his face looked hard.

“Gwaine…” Weakly.

“I’ve been thinkin’… since you told me…” He huffed a cynical breath, a sound with no humour.

“It was inevitable wasn’t it? I just can’t believe I never let myself see it.”

“That’s not… no! If it hadn’t been for the Rheged…”

“I knew it.” Gwaine went on as if Merlin hadn't made a sound. "From the very first time I met you, in that tavern… I fuckin’ knew there was a somethin’… a connection there no proper nobleman and manservant would have. Far less a prince and his servant. But I let his endless bloody arsiness distract me. Because… I wanted to be distracted… no… fuckin’ much. I thought… maybe you thought too much of him, gave him too much of your loyalty an’ your attention when he treated you like shit in return, but that was all it was… You just… wantin’ him to see your worth. And…” Another huffed, cynical. “There was Gwen. But all that time I think … I think I really knew, deep down. All along. He was so fuckin’ polite with her. All the time. Never himself. Never the bloody Princess. Like she was glass, not his woman. But with you… always… ”

Gwaine turned his head suddenly, met Merlin’s eyes squarely, his own glittering with pain and grief and resentment. “When the Dorocha almost finished you …and we were all riding to our deaths… he was gonna just… just turn back from the quest to save all of Camelot… to try to save you… just you.”

Merlin stared, totally taken aback. He hadn’t known that. Gwaine turned outwards again, eyes rolling up in a quick movement of remembered incredulity. “Fuck. Leon had to remind him who he was, what was at stake, that you were just one man. He was quite willin’ to go to his own death to save everyone… but when it came down to it… he wasn’t willin’ to sacrifice you. Camelot or not.”

Merlin tried to hide his reaction, his shock, but he couldn’t help it - the horrible, unworthy, beating joy of it fluttering in his middle. Gwaine’s mouth twisted, because as ever it seemed, he was seeing too much.

“When you went with Lancelot, it was like the soul left him. I stuck my fuckin’ hand in a bees nest… talked an’ talked like a bloody eejit… just to try to wake him up. I thought he was just scared, scared of what was comin’, but when you came back he was himself again. An’… when you disappeared soon after, he was gonna go out alone to find you, though Gwen was hangin’ off his bloody ankle, trying to talk him out of it… The king… a new king without an heir, all alone into bandit forest… for a servant he wasn’t gonna let go. An’ I was there tryin’ to persuade him to show you a bit more appreciation.”

He snorted an infinitely humourless, derisive laugh.

Merlin never dropped his gaze as Gwaine talked, low and urgent and self mocking, almost as if he was talking to himself, purging himself, and he cringed at the bitterness there so clearly eating at him, the most easy-going of men, souring him now, because Gwaine was only human. “All along. It was there in front of me all along and I didn’t let myself see it. He showed more emotion with you than anyone, always, even if it was anger, alot of it. Like you… you… woke him up. Just you. Fuck, no wonder he hated my guts when you came to me.”

“Gwaine. He didn’t…”

“In his head… you belong to him. You’ve always belonged to him. Even when he hadn’t claimed you… you were meant to wait, weren’t you?”
Merlin didn’t even try to deny it. Instead, anxiously again, “Gwaine… he doesn’t hate you…”

Gwaine snorted and turned his face away again, back to stare unseeingly at the activity on the training field. “Yeah, maybe not. Why bother? He has you. He can be the benevolent monarch again,” he said coldly, and there, the malignancy between them now, the king and his bravest knight.

Merlin drew a deep shaky breath and reached out a hand, withdrew it again nervously.

“You have me too,” he ventured, “If you… want.” He thought Gwaine seemed to almost freeze, but he didn’t look back at Merlin. He just waited. Unmoving. “We can… still be together. Like we … were?”

He watched Gwaine’s jaw moving, the tanned, bearded skin shifting over clenching muscles and his own emotions were beyond him, a twisting, churning, burning mess inside him.

“An’ … you think that would work, do you?” Gwaine said softly at last, “The Princess being so big on sharin’ an’ all?”

Merlin bit his lip and slogged on regardless, trying to cajole, to convince, even though he wasn’t sure any if this plan was rational or wise; healing or horribly destructive. He was running purely on instinct.

“He has to share, Gwaine,” he managed confidence somehow. “He still has Gwen.”

Gwaine threw him a look of near dislike. “So you’d have me. Tit for tat. Keep him in line.”

“No! No, Gwaine! We’d all be … be sharing.”

Gwaine grimaced. “But the difference is you wouldn’t be sharing me, would you? An’ he wouldn’t be sharing Gwen. You have more because of … because of what you did… both of you… Me an’ Gwen… we’re the ones who’ve lost.”

Merlin looked at him helplessly. Because… how could he deny that? Any of it? It was getting away from him. Gwaine was getting away.

“I understand… if it’s not enough,” he said in a small voice. Gwaine closed his eyes. “But… I love you, Gwaine,” he said at last and it was the final, most powerful weapon in his arsenal. “For all the value in that. I really do. I know it’s asking a lot and it’s probably not worth it for you, but I thought I’d just… just try. I don’t want to … lose you.”

Gwaine turned to meet his eyes then, his own glistening with emotion.

“I wondered if you were ever gonna say that,” he said trying for lightness. Failing. “The thing is… I know you do. And I even understand what it is to feel so much for someone you’d do anythin’… just to be with them.” Merlin looked down at his own hands twisted in his lap and said nothing, loving him so much then; his lack of real condemnation; the forgiveness of a man who knew how powerful and destructive real passion could be. He forced his gaze up again. Gwaine was still looking at him, and Merlin wondered if he could see it in his eyes then, the love he felt. Gwaine gave a small, sad, twisted smile. “I just don’t know, Merlin. I don’t know if I can live with bein’ second best forever.”

“You’re not!” he protested but Gwaine gave him such a fierce look, and he snapped his mouth shut again, because they both knew. And pretending the truth wasn’t the truth, wouldn’t help anything now.
“I do love you,” Merlin said helplessly again, because that at least was real.

Gwaine nodded and turned to the front again, hair swinging forward to cover his face as he bent his head. He made a strange sound, half humour, half sob. “Hell… it could be worse. At least I get a choice to be second best. Gwen’s the queen. You don’t get any less choice than that.”

Merlin drew a deep breath in and let it go in a tired sigh. “I know,” he said.

He’d accepted it that morning- that he’d have to face up to the damage they’d done, he and Arthur. Face up to it and shoulder the burden of honesty and guilt.

There was a quick movement beside him as Gwaine stood up in a lithe stretch.

“I’d better get goin’,” he said quietly. Merlin looked up at him, his features dark and indistinct against the framing brightness of the sun. “It’s good... it’s good you sorted things out. With him. What you tried to do… I never want to see you that desperate again.”

Merlin nodded, throat tight, looking up at his strong, dark silhouette. “You’ll think about it? Gwaine? Let me know?”

Gwaine turned his head away for just a second, as if in thought, then looked back down at Merlin’s seated figure.

“Yeah,” he said softly, “I’ll think about it.” And with a tiny nod he turned and began to jog toward the knights now stretching on the training field. Merlin, after a long, shaken second, pulled himself upright and headed back toward the castle.

He didn’t look right or left, his mind a preoccupied, stunned disaster of conflicting emotion and events, clawing at his heart and his throat. The dyspeptic turmoil of unbelievable joy and relief blending with stunning shame and guilt and worry, was the self same mix he’d felt after the first forming of the bond. But it felt magnified a thousandfold now by all that had happened since, good and bad, until he felt physically sick with it, as if his body wanted to vomit it all up, expel the whole sorry mess. He didn’t look up from his furious, desperate concentration on the ground until he barged into a figure waiting in his path.

He looked up, horribly startled.

“Right,” Bran said breathlessly when he’d righted himself. “Gaius said I was to bring you straight up to his chamber when you got back. And no arguing. Sire.” Then, scandalised, “You look like you’ve been trampled by a horse. Your breeches! “ he shrieked. “Were you trampled by a horse?”

Merlin stared at him blankly for a few seconds, trying to focus his thoughts in the real world again, but when Bran raised a meaningful eyebrow and jerked his head toward the castle he didn’t argue. Merlin could see the ill-concealed worry on the man’s face and he couldn’t blame him really. Bran's tendency to fuss and flutter over him like a mother duck with her duckling had increased markedly in the past days, because, Merlin supposed, he must have seemed like he needed it. He wondered what his servant was really making of everything now; if he even had the slightest inkling of what was going on beyond Merlin’s obvious emotional disarray. Bran was really fond of Gwaine too.

“Not exactly. And I wouldn’t dream of it,” he answered with a brave try at a cheeky smile, but it didn’t seem to ease Bran’s concern in the least. So he let himself be shepherded to Gaius; the exact place, he realised only then, he really wanted to be.

The old man was measuring ingredients on a scale, dressed in his old light purple robes, when
Merlin and Bran entered, but he looked up sharply when the door opened, all his attention focussed at once on his erstwhile ward.

“Merlin!” he said as he rose to his feet, then, as if he remembered they weren’t alone, he extemporised blandly, “You’re back.”

“Um…Yeah. Just a few minutes ago.” He stood uncertainly by the door, so full of things he needed to say that he felt paralysed by it. But there was Bran, whose presence effectively silenced them both.

“Well come in! Come in! Have you had breakfast?”

“Er…no… I just got in,” which did little to diminish the disapproving frown and sigh he got in return.

“Bran… would you mind?” Gaius asked, all weary patience, “Try to get some meat if you can. And fruit. He needs some proper nourishment.”

“I’ll get all I can,” Bran said in a tone of approving complicity and scurried out of the chamber.

Gaius waited a few beats after the door closed behind him, all his years of experience in subterfuge as ingrained in him as the lines on this face. Then he asked, frowningly, “Well? Are you all right?”

Merlin took a deep breath and let it go again in a heavy sigh.

Was he?

He walked slowly further into the room, toward the other man, and slumped into a seat at the table, staring unseeing at its familiar, pockmarked surface.

“I… think so,” he ventured, darting a glance upwards. “I think I understand what the bond is for.”

Gaius looked at him steadily as he took his customary seat across the table from him. “Do you?”

“Well… I’m guessing but …I think it’s to make us communicate. At last. Force us so close that we can’t misunderstand each other. Maybe?”

A small frown settled on Gaius’ brow. “And you’ve just worked that out.”

Merlin stared at him, startled by the dry sarcasm, before he spotted the familiar twinkle in his mentor’s eyes.

“Yeah. All right,” he groused, but the involuntary smile he felt forming on his lips was growing wider by the second, until he was grinning helplessly; grinning like a lunatic.

It felt brilliant; the delicate balance of emotion inside him teetering abruptly back up to the joy of the morning. All these things, these new unbelievable things he wanted to share with someone...

“You talked then.” Gaius prompted and he was smiling too, indulgent. “You and Arthur.”

Merlin thought suddenly of all he and Arthur had actually done together since he’d last seen Gaius, felt the dull, hollowed out ache in his arse as he shifted on hard wood, the generous slickness of salve and seed inside and between his cheeks, and a hot, powerful rush of graphic memory and arousal and embarrassment flooded his skin. He met Gaius’ eyes with difficulty.

“Yeah,” he managed, “We sorted a lot out.”
Gaius raised a wry eyebrow and waited. It always tended to work on Merlin, and now was no exception. Because... he *wanted* to share it; his near disbelief, his excitement, wanted so badly to say it out loud. And who else could he say it to, but this man with whom he’d shared all his terrifying secrets through the years?

“He explained it to me. How he felt, about my magic, I mean,” Gaius eyebrow climbed a fraction higher and he looked at Merlin gravely. “I think… “ Merlin met his eyes, knowing his own were sparkling with feeling, “I think he loves me Gaius,” he blurted at last, but he was looked anxiously at Gaius’ reaction, waiting for disbelief.

Gaius’ mouth twitched.

“Well,” he said, dry as ash, “I can’t say that’s exactly a revelation to me.”

Merlin looked at him.

“No,” he persisted, perversely disappointed by Gaius’ lack of shock. “I mean like…” Gwen he thought with the old kneejerk guilt. “I mean…”

“Yes. I do *know* what you mean, Merlin.” Gaius lowered his head and twinkled up at him, apparently fighting his amusement.

“You …do?”

“I think we discussed it last time, didn’t we?” The quelling eyebrow again. “In... some detail?”

Merlin drew a deep breath. Then, frowning, “You’re not surprised?” he repeated blankly.

Gaius raised his head and smiled. “Merlin. Having watched the two of you together for all these years... it’s been obvious to me for a very long time that Arthur loves you.”

Merlin stared, then snorted with derision. “Oh. Right. When he was throwing things at my head you mean? Or using me for target practice? Or ignoring my warnings? Or when he found out about my magic? Or *since* then?”

Well, maybe, he thought, mildly surprised at himself, it was too soon to expect the death of old resentments.

“All that time,” Gaius returned steadily. “Because at the same time he was putting his life on the line for you over and over again, and letting you treat him the way no one else ever had. And changing himself for you.... Making you as essential to him as his weapons and his duty to Camelot.”

Merlin gaped, but huffed weakly, “Oh, great.”

Gaius shook his head, chiding. “I’ve known Arthur since he was born. I know better than anyone that he treated you badly at times, but I’ve never seen him relax and lower his barriers and let himself... *be himself*, as completely with anyone as he has with you. Or *need* anyone as much as he needs you. I’d just... come to believe neither of you would actually face up to it, whatever the Great Dragon said.” He pursed his lips thoughtfully, “It’s lucky the Rhegedians decided to visit really, isn’t it?”

He held Merlin’s wide eyes for long, sombre seconds until finally his mouth twitched again and they both snorted with childlike amusement.
“I’m not sure everyone would agree with that,” Merlin said when they’d finished sniggering.

“No,” Gaius agreed fairly, still smiling.

Merlin tried to sober, to sound accusing.

“You didn’t think to share this with me before, then?”

“There didn’t seem much point,” Gaius said serenely and Merlin sniggered again, feeling stupidly, inappropriately light hearted.

It wasn’t even funny.

In fact, when he thought about it even a bit, it was as far from funny as it was possible to be; to have lived for so long believing himself despised and looked down on by the person who mattered to him most.

But all he could do at that moment was giggle half-hysterically like the big girl Arthur had so often named him. It felt as if all his ability to agonise had been exhausted.

Or perhaps not.

“I saw Gwaine. When I got back,” he said quietly, when he’d calmed himself.

Gaius’ smile faded too. “Yes,” he said, with a slow, sad nod, “He came by this morning, looking for you.”

“He’s … he’s really hurt. He hasn’t let himself get involved much before, and here I am…”

“It’s understandable,” Gaius interjected softly. “He does love you very much.”

Merlin closed his eyes. “I know. And I love him. When he opened his eyes again, Gaius was looking at him sadly, wordlessly. “I told him… if he wanted, we could still be together. He’s… well he’s going to think about it. I think.”

Gaius raised his chin and he looked no less troubled.

“And…do you think that can work?” he asked carefully. “They’re both possessive men, Merlin. And that fight at the tournament…”

“I know… But I just… I do love him. And I can’t just… surrender my whole life to Arthur. To this… thing!”

“And… Arthur still has Gwen,” Gaius stated gently.

Merlin’s eyes snapped up to meet the older man’s calm, sympathetic gaze.

It was an exact echo of Gwaine, just as Gwaine had echoed Gaius earlier. He gave a snort of humourless laughter.

“Gwaine and you. You share a brain.”

Gaius looked comically shocked. “Merlin! That’s possibly the most alarming thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Merlin managed a wan smile.
“He said the same thing though. That ...I just want him so I can make Arthur jealous. The way I’ll be jealous.”

“And… is he right?

“No! I do love him!” he repeated doggedly

“But... if you had Arthur to yourself...“ Still gently, “Would you be suggesting this?”

Merlin looked at him, and he didn’t even want to think about it. He knew the answer; they all did.

“But I don’t. And just like him, I have someone else I love.”

Gaius held his defiant gaze for a long second, then he sighed. “Well. He knows the truth. In the end, he’ll choose with his eyes open.”

Merlin bit his lip hard and looked down at the scarred wood under his hand.

It was true. In the end Gwaine was the only one of the four of them with the choice about what happened with them. The choice to walk away.

The rest of them, were trapped.

There was a cursory knock and Bran swept in to lay two platters laden with food on the table, and though Merlin groaned and whined, he was all but forced to eat a hefty chicken leg, some stewed quince and a heel of bread with newly churned butter. At the end of it, even with his silent and stern audience of two, monitoring every mouthful, he had to admit he did feel better.

He stretched in his seat and grinned dopily, tired and full and drowsy.

“Now, it’s time to sleep,” Gaius smiled indulgently.

He lifted a small vial filled with dark blue liquid and waved it meaningfully in front of Merlin’s nose. Merlin recognised it very well from the night before.

“Awww… no Gaius! You can’t keep on knocking me out!”

“Merlin, you’ve been sleep deprived for days and you had nowhere near enough rest last night before being dragged out of bed before the crack of dawn. You look three days dead.”

“You know I have to attend the Court of the Lower Town…”

“It can run perfectly well without you.”

Merlin spluttered, scandalised. “I can’t just… not turn up! In my role as…”

“Arthur agrees.”

Merlin froze. “Arthur?”

“William popped in,” Gaius said, with majestic economy.

Merlin’s stomach did a stately somersault.

Arthur had sent William? In a sneaky manoeuvre to make him rest?

“I won’t sleep tonight if I sleep now,” he tried weakly.
“Oh, I think you will.” Gaius waggled the little bottle again and smiled smugly.

Merlin opened his mouth and closed it again, then huffed a breath just to let Gaius know he wasn’t actually agreeing with the plan, just surrendering to it. But his heart wasn’t in it. He was still turning around in his head, the concept of Arthur fussing over his well-being.

He took the vial and drank, then stood and shuffled to his old bed. He was actually beyond tired, well into the kind of mind-numbing emotional exhaustion he’d only experienced a few times in his life. The potion worked swiftly this time and within a few minutes of laying his head on his pillow, he was fast asleep, vaguely aware that Gaius was tucking the blanket higher around his shoulders again to keep him warm.

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When Merlin woke the quality of light in the room told him that many hours had passed; that it was dusk and he had slept the day through. He felt incredibly decadent and automatically guilty; sleeping the day away wasn’t something a peasant or a servant did.

But he couldn’t deny that he also felt infinitely better; clear headed and alert. He swung his legs off the bed, and sat on the edge of the straw mattress, elbows on his knees and forehead resting on his hands, as he tried to make out the voices he could hear muttering through the closed door. Gaius and Bran he realised, with a surge of affection; his two mother hens.

He sat there, listening, and yet, not; slowly letting memory seep back in all its complication, feeling his heart start to pick up pace at once, pattering fast with exhilaration and worry.

So much had happened in less than forty eight hours. Soaring. Crashing. Soaring. And where was he now?

All he knew was that his hopeless misery of the day before seemed surreal to him; it had been another person entirely who’d done what he did, who’d been terrified and guilty and desperate enough to believe that only his own permanent removal would bring happiness back to the people he loved.

It seemed the reasoning of a lunatic. But he supposed, that when he stood and watched the arrows flying, that was what he’d been.

Right now, he realised, despite everything, he’d never felt more glad to be alive.

He stood, trying to straighten the kinks in his back; the ache in his arse was beyond the healing of anything but time, a hot bath and possibly some salve. But he found himself automatically discounting the idea of anything more than a wipe down with water and a cloth again, even if he’d had all the time in the world to heat a tub full of water and soak for hours.

He hadn’t promised or anything, but he knew that he may as well have done.

When he emerged, yawning and stretching, into the outer chamber, Gaius was already dressed in his best robes and hovering near the door muttering instructions; Bran was seated at the table with a tankard in front of him, listening gravely.

Merlin’s appearance though, galvanised him to his feet with obvious gratification.
“Well… we didn’t want to wake you, Sire,” Bran said briskly, “But since you’re up… There may just be time to get you ready.” He was already hurrying to a pile of clothing draped over a chair.

Merlin looked at Gaius, poised, eyebrows raised, by the door, then at the failing light coming through the window.

“So, on a scale of one to ten… how late am I?”

“Well… personally I’d try to go in through a side door,” Gaius said dryly. “Or,” with a significant look, “You could just plead exhaustion. It wouldn’t be a lie.”

Merlin bridled. “It’s the Rhegedians’ last night. You should have woken me.”

“Yes, I thought you’d say that,” he replied with a sigh. “William said Arthur’s orders were you should sleep as long as you needed, and I must say I agree. I’m sure the delegation would understand.”

Merlin stared at him, thrown again by Arthur’s interference and mollycoddling, but he knew he didn’t have time to argue.

“Well… I’m going,” he declared and turned toward the screen in the corner of the room where Bran had draped Merlin’s red jacket and fresh black trousers and a white shirt. Merlin looked warily at his manservant for more censure, but all he saw was busineslike focus.

“There’s water there,” Bran chirped. “No time for a bath. I’ll get a tub filled for after the feast though. You look as if you’re stiff all over.”

Merlin drew breath but just nodded, “Thanks, Bran.”

“Erm… Merlin..” Gaius ventured almost tentatively. It was an odd enough tone to make Merlin stop unlacing and look at him; at his frowning, assessing contemplation. “If I were you, I’d consider… er... a scarf... perhaps? One of your old neckerchiefs?”

Merlin looked at him blankly. When had Gaius begun to take an interest in his sartorial choices? Then the meaning hit home hard.

His hand flew up automatically to his neck and the tenderness of the bruise there. He could feel hot blood surging to his face.

Gaius’s chin dropped and he twinkled at Merlin from under his brows. “It is rather… mmm… prominent?”

Pink turned to scarlet. Merlin tried a glare at the old man but he knew it didn’t come off and he caught the tail end of Bran’s smirk as he turned. That cosy complicity threw him for a second of near panic, but then he realised that Bran must assume the mark had been made by Gwaine when they’d disappeared that morning, even though that was a game he and Gwaine hadn’t played between them.

He wondered nervously how Bran was going to react when he realised what was actually happening. But then he thought, with a sudden dose of reality, Not that he necessarily will.

How, after all, could he and Arthur see each other more than a handful of times as lovers, in a castle as packed full of gossips and scandalmongers as this one? How could Merlin visit Arthur and stay? How could Arthur, the king, be seen to make any kind of habit of spending real time in Merlin’s rooms without tongues wagging?
It was impossible.

Which was probably why they hadn’t spoken about it. Neither had wanted to face that kind of reality.

He blanked it from his mind. There was no time for brooding; not yet.

Instead he moved, head down, behind the screen and pulled off his clothes in privacy, anxious to wipe himself down and dress again before Bran could spot other marks on him. His bottom half was worst; he could see definite finger bruises on his hips and thighs. But once he’d pulled on his trousers he thought he actually looked all right.

Except for the mark of which Gaius had reminded him, and when he looked in the glass set out for him with water for shaving, he could entirely see why.

It was a dark red-purple against the paleness of his skin and it didn’t need particularly strong eyesight to make out the impression of teeth. He looked at it with a mixture of utter horror and a terrified, visceral excitement.

He could remove it now rather than let anyone else see it, just as he had the last one. And with the thought, he recalled with perfect memory how he’d felt when he’d done it – the killing despair of knowing Arthur could never love him back.

Knowing. And he’d been wrong.

He could hide it with a scarf, as Gaius expected.

“I want to know. When I look at you… today…tonight… I want to know…”

Or…

He pulled in a deep breath and let it go; a sound of decision.

He called Bran behind the screen to help him shave in the poor light and Bran, give him his due, didn’t mention the bruise even when he pulled the blade delicately over it. They barely spoke, Bran picking up again on his master’s mood.

When Merlin’s chin and throat were clean and smooth again, he pulled on his shirt and his red jacket over it, settled a belt around his narrow waist and took one last assessing look in the mirror. He thought again that he looked alarmingly young and untried, for all that his chest and shoulders were now those of a man. His eyes were wide and dark in the light of dusk; the red of his velvet tunic stark against the paleness of his complexion, restored from yesterday’s sunburn, and the near black of his hair. But all he could really focus on when he looked at his reflection, was the mark on his neck, lurid, like a brand of ownership, and though he tried to pull his shirt collar forward to conceal it, he knew that wasn’t going to work once anyone got close.

There were all kinds of excellent reasons to take Gaius’ advice and cover it with a scarf, or better still, remove it - but none was as important as Arthur.

He left the room at last with Bran fussing at his heels, and hurried to the banqueting chambers, accepting he was going to have to use his old knowledge as a servant to slip in through a concealed entrance near the centre of the room, rather than entering through the main doors. He and Bran got a few knowing glances from the maids and kitchen boys working the supply system outside the feast, but no one said a word as they sneaked in.
The shock of noise and colour in the room was startling, the banquet well underway, with servants bearing platters of food up and down behind the seated guests. Merlin and Bran had emerged across the room from the knight’s places and, automatically, Merlin’s eyes shot to Gwaine, sitting in his usual seat, idly twirling the stem of his goblet on the table, listening absenty to Leon rattling on into his ear. Merlin thought Leon looked jolly and animated, as if the wine had already loosened his tongue and eased his reserve, but Gwaine looked anything but.

Then, as if he’d been called, Gwaine looked up, and met Merlin’s eyes, taking all of him in; his lateness, his attempt at stealth, his garb, his wide anguished eyes. The corner of Gwaine’s mouth turned up in a gracious, lopsided smile of acknowledgement, and Merlin fancied he could see cynicism and acceptance in it and unhappiness too. He smiled bleakly and tentatively back. Gwaine’s smile twitched and he tipped his goblet very slightly on the table in a tiny, sad gesture of salute, then his eyes dropped again, breaking their silent communion.

Leon was still talking, oblivious.

Merlin clenched his jaw.

He drew a deep breath and turned stoically toward the top of the U of tables, to the central royal chairs.

And there it was – the violent fluttering of nervousness he’d been enduring since he woke, like flocks of moths, alive and whirring their wings underneath his heart, drawn to his excitement like light.

He could see that the king and queen were already eating, making Merlin’s late entrance against all court etiquette. It was too late to second-guess his decision though so he gritted his teeth and moved forward anyway to try to slip toward the empty seat he saw beside Brychusa at the top table, assuming it had been left for him. Stealthy movement had, of course, never been his forte, but all he could do was try to remain as inconspicuous as he could, close to the walls, Bran trying his best to look furtive too, at his heels.

And he couldn’t keep his eyes away from Arthur, his first sight of him since the morning.

The king was listening intently to Myrthryn, who was seated, as usual since his arrival, on Arthur’s right side, in the place of honour. Arthur’s golden head was cocked down and leaning toward the other man in an attitude of intense concentration as the Rhegedian spoke steadily, and his right elbow was on the arm of his chair, thumb under his chin, fingers hiding his mouth as he focussed, frowning, eyes down. He looked every inch a monarch.

But suddenly, in an odd echo of Gwaine, he raised his gaze, and though he didn’t move at all from his listening pose - his fingers still pressed against his mouth, his elbow still propped on his chair, even his frown still in place – he fixed his eyes unerringly from beneath his brows upon Merlin as he continued to edge along the side of the hall, dodging weaving servants, toward the top table.

Their eyes met and held. Merlin felt ludicrously shy under Arthur’s heavy stare as it flickered down for an instant to his neck and then back to his eyes but he felt as if he’d met a pact, proven something, even if he wasn’t entirely sure what it was. Something that counted.

Their gazes locked for what felt to Merlin like an age as he neared his chair, a surreal, heart-thundering age. Then, like so much of his life it seemed, it all jolted from drama into farce.

Brychusa, who was seated beside Myrthryn, spotted Merlin just as he was reaching the end of the table, but, to Merlin’s disbelieving horror, he rose respectfully to his feet. Myrthryn looked up too, murmured something to Arthur, and began to rise as well, followed, horribly, by the rest of the
Rhegedian delegation all looking at him with awe and pleasure.

Thus Merlin’s plan for a quiet, discreet, unnoticed late entrance became instead a public spectacle and the centre of all eyes, as inappropriate levels of honour were paid to him. The kind of honour paid to a royal consort.

He was beyond appalled.

Frantic, he could only wave the smiling Rhegedians down with sharp, flapping movements of his hands and a hissed “Sit! Please!”, but the disturbance had inevitably all but silenced the room before he managed to urge all the Rhegedian bottoms back on to their chairs.

Brychusa very determinedly though, vacated the chair beside Myrthryn, gesturing Merlin into it, as he sat in the one beside that. And Merlin, wanting by then only to slide under the table and hide with a bucket on his head, did the next best thing, and sat down, face and ears now an incandescent, graceless scarlet.

He was only relieved that he couldn’t see Arthur any more, or Gwen.

It took him a few gibbering seconds to gather the courage, but when he finally dared to look up at the room, it felt as if every eye were fixed avidly upon him; studying, assessing, remembering. Judging him anew, after yesterday’s display.

He felt their suspicion, all those familiar courtiers and commoners; their fear and their fascination.

He didn’t look up toward the knights or Gaius, but he held on desperately to the knowledge that they were there, and his friends.

He heard then, “Merlin.” A dryly amused, regal acknowledgement of his arrival from Arthur, which made him flush an impossibly deeper red. He managed to stumble out, “Sire,” in return, through dry lips.

Otherwise he kept his eyes on the table, watching as Bran’s hand appeared in his eye-line to whip Brychusa’s soup bowl rightwards to his new place, and put down Merlin's full bowl in front of him. Which gave Merlin something legitimate to do that didn't involve interacting in any way with anyone. He focussed immediately on his meal as if he’d been starving for days, feeling the weight of Arthur’s court staring at the supposed Greatest Sorceror in the World, eating his soup.

“My Lord Merlin…?”

He jerked, startled, and a spoonful of soup splashed onto the table, thankfully nowhere near his tunic.

Myrthryn leaned closer. "I’m deeply honoured you were able to attend.” Merlin nodded cautiously, unsure what he could say to address the deep respect in the man’s tone; respect he didn’t deserve.

He loaded his spoon again mindlessly and raised it to his mouth. “I wonder though, if I might speak privately with you? Perhaps in the morning, before we depart?”

Merlin darted his gaze sideways to look at the other man but he could see only polite intent. Arthur was apparently engaged now with Gwen, or perhaps the Rhegedian on her other side, leaving Myrthryn scope to talk with the object of his fascination.

Merlin nodded slowly. “Um. I think…Yes. That’s… fine. That’s... Will I come by your chambers?”
“Thank you my L... Merlin.” Myrthryn leaned discreetly closer, “I’ve just been informing your king that I’m confident a full treaty can be agreed when he visits our country, if he so desires.”

Merlin felt the relief of that, like a blow. He let himself relax into a genuine smile. The thought of it thrilled him. An alliance between Rheged and Camelot...

“I’m sure the king is delighted.” he said warmly.

Myrthryn nodded again, smiling his own diplomatic smile. “My king too, will be very pleased, I believe. We have not been disappointed by the truths of Camelot ... or her king.” Merlin met his dark eyes directly for a long second, and he wished he could read the secrets there. Myrthyrn looked steadily back at him, as if Merlin had spoken the wish aloud. “My king gave me authority… if I found what we wished… I could offer this… If Camelot should need our help before King Arthur’s visit to Rheged can take place, if he sends word, we will do all we can to help, distant as we are. I told your king that you would find a way to reach us, as we would find a way to send aid.”

Merlin frowned thoughtfully but he nodded slowly again in agreement. They were talking of magic of course. He'd never tried to send a message over that kind of distance quickly enough to make any difference, but he’d learn.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “An alliance with a kingdom of magic….” He shook his head, because he didn’t need to say any more. They both knew too well, the bloody history of Camelot.

Myrthryn gave a last understanding quirk of his lips, then turned again to Arthur, to engage the king in conversation, as convention demanded.

Merlin returned to smile mindlessly at his soup.

“All is well then,” Brychusa stated softly from his right.

Merlin looked up at him, at his kind, pleased smile, and he knew he meant much, much more than the settlement of a new strategic alliance. He wondered what Brychusa saw, that made him sound so sure.

The dark mark on his neck, poorly hidden by his collar? Or the new calm Merlin felt steadying him at his core, despite everything? Or perhaps, he thought, with a startled rush of mortification which scattered that calm and widened his eyes,...perhaps he stank of sex. Perhaps Arthur had actually got his wish exactly, and they could smell the king on him? No bath after all, just a cloth.

He found himself flushing again with horrified self-consciousness at the thought, then somehow he found the stoicism to force it away. No point in worrying now.

“So... are you looking forward to getting home?” he blurted, all false cheer.

Brychusa’s smile widened. He bowed his head briefly in acknowledgement of Merlin’s shamelessly clumsy change of subject. But he allowed it graciously and they spent the rest of the evening talking of Rheged and the experiences the Rhegedians had had on the trip to Camelot, grinning with pleasure at the fire-eaters and acrobats and the singer who’d been drafted in as entertainment.

Merlin had relaxed so much by the end of the feast in fact, that he was shocked when the scraping of chairs on stone, announced the departure of the king and queen.

He stood automatically though, with the rest of the court, and watched as Arthur and Guinevere
bade goodnight graciously to Myrthryn and his party. Then the king turned, gave his arm to his wife and began to leave, their servants at their heels.

It was only then that it hit Merlin forcibly that the evening had been a perfect echo of that agonising trip through the forest with the Rhegedians; of every banquet since he and Arthur had formed their union. Arthur hadn’t actually addressed him at all since he’d acknowledged him after he sat down. Not once; he’d spent the whole evening again playing diplomat and chatting to Gwen. The realisation cut through the happy haze of alcohol like a knife through soft cheese and the jolt of feeling was both disappointment and panic.

The realities of their situation, which he’d believed he’d fully accepted earlier, were coming home to him in style. And it looked as if Arthur, was just getting on with it again.

His eyes dropped to the table, unwilling to watch the departure again, wondering if Gwaine had observed the continuing distance between them, which Merlin hadn’t even let himself register until now.

What he made of it? That Merlin was to be the bit on the side perhaps, kept hidden and publicly distanced?

He bit his lip hard. But he knew that, once again, Arthur was simply giving him what he’d demanded himself. Wasn’t it what he’d asked for?

Absolute discretion? Total secrecy?

And, he soothed himself, if Arthur had leaned across Myrthryn and addressed him directly, or tried to haul him into his conversation with the ambassador, Merlin knew he’d have blabbered with embarrassment. He was almost certain he couldn’t have pretended normality.

Perhaps... perhaps Arthur knew him too well. Perhaps Arthur would have found it hard too.

But even as he reasoned it all out, he couldn’t help feeling… deflated. The anticlimax of normality maybe, after the madness of the past days.

“Oh… I nearly forgot. Merlin.” Merlin’s eyes shot up again in shock from their glazed stare at the table. Arthur had turned, Gwen still on his arm, this sudden attention a very obvious afterthought. “I’ve told William to talk to the steward about your… er…… infestation.”

Merlin stared at him. He actually felt himself pale with apprehension.

For a second he met Gwen’s dark eyes and they looked as startled and wary as he felt himself, then his gaze darted to William’s stoic, unhelpful countenance, and back again, compulsively, to Arthur.

“Infestation,” Merlin repeated, very carefully. His own voice, he realised, sounded far too high.

“The … cockroaches,” Arthur reminded him. “And… the… er…” His lips puffed out with a blown breath, and he shook his head slightly, eyebrows raised, not really bothering to pretend he wasn’t inventing as he went along, “…rats?” He met Merlin’s eyes, deadpan.

Merlin’s gaze darted wildly toward Bran, standing in his place at the back of the room. Bran in his turn looked both shocked and more than a bit outraged.

“Cockroaches. And … *Rats*?” Merlin repeated again for clarity, looking back to Arthur desperately for a cue, some kind of hint. Anything.
“Yes,” Arthur said with exaggerated patience; his old tone of humouring the idiot. “Since you say your manservant can’t deal with it,” Merlin darted another horrified look at Bran just in time to see his head jerk back with betrayed outrage, “William’s told Colm to.” He looked straight into Merlin’s wide eyes, and Merlin stared back, lost. “Well,” Arthur said softly, and moved his gaze back to Myrthryrn. “We’ll bid you good night, gentlemen,” and turned again toward the door through which he and Gwen always exited.

This time he didn’t halt, and he and the queen disappeared from view, followed by William and Gwen’s maidservant

Merlin was left with the after image of what he’d fancied to be a flash of smug glee on Arthur’s face and that same blankness on Gwen’s.

He vaguely noticed Colm, the steward, sliding in next to the still glaring Bran, and the obvious altercation that then began between them. And when he turned dazedly back to his companions, he could hardly miss the veiled, indulgent amusement of the Rhegedians.

Merlin desperately wished he knew, what they thought they understood.

He snapped back sharply to himself when he realised the rest of the courtiers around them looked interested by the scene and Merlin’s obvious incomprehension; sensing some scandal perhaps, like the fine-nosed scavengers they were. So he gathered around him as best he could, some last dregs of his self preservation and dignity, and bade those in the vicinity goodnight, nodding and grinning like a lunatic as he eased his way toward the side door again, his servant a scowling thundercloud at his shoulder.

When they broke clear, they both marched silently through the corridors to Merlin’s rooms, Merlin’s mind scurrying and sniffing for explanations all the way.

But when they finally made it to Merlin’s outer rooms and privacy, he was still at a loss to know how to explain to Bran or to himself, what had just happened, though Bran was very obviously waiting to be pacified.

His silent reproof as he picked up the poker to rake the coals in the hearth was as good as a demand for an answer.

“I don’t know!” Merlin blurted desperately.

Bran looked at him and raised an eyebrow. Then the dam broke.

“Cockroaches?” he burst out with huge bitterness. “Rats?” Merlin looked at him miserably. “Colm was raging! Blamed me for not dealing with it. For not telling him, without the king being dragged into household matters.”

“Bran… I don’t know why he said that.”

“Well if you don’t know, who does? Sire? There’s nothing here! But Colm wouldn’t believe me. He said if the king says there are rats, there’re rats! I just don’t understand it. Why would you tell him that?

“I didn’t!” Merlin protested indignantly.

Bran looked at him with patent disbelief. “Then why would he say you did?”
“Why?” And suddenly Merlin was totally, impotently furious, “Why? Because Arthur’s a complete bloody clotpole. That’s why!”

The expression on Bran’s face, he thought humourlessly, probably matched his own when Arthur had played his stupid, childish, pointless prank. As if he couldn’t believe the words that had just hit his ears.

“Clot…pole?”

“Yes!” Merlin spat vengefully. “When I had the huge misfortune to be his manservant he was such a dollophead I had to make up words just to come close to matching his fat-headedness! This must be his idea of a joke!”

Bran’s eyes widened even more. “A joke? The king?”

“Yes the King! He’s always been a prat!”

Bran was looking at him now with such horrified concern, it was almost comical. He looked as if he’s suddenly understood his master was unhinged. And it hit Merlin only then, that Bran didn’t know... didn’t have a clue how Merlin and Arthur used to interact.

How could he?

The man Bran had seen was the husband and king; the dignified, serious, noble, perfect ruler of the new age. To Bran, Arthur and the queen were close to supernatural beings, beyond human mistakes and imperfections.

Bran hadn’t seen Arthur being a provoking, tormenting, bullying arse, hadn’t witnessed Merlin’s old relationship with him, hadn’t seen anyone really tease him or call him names, hadn’t seen Arthur being childish or playful or ridiculous in return.

Bran didn’t know who Arthur was. Arthur the man. No one really did any more.

Merlin drew a deep breath and released it in a huge sigh.

He felt suddenly, very tired.

“Just… trust me,” he enunciated with simple, weary economy. “I didn’t tell him we have rats.”

Bran stared at him warily for a few more seconds, as if he were waiting to see if Merlin was about to start frothing at the mouth, or talking in tongues. But when Merlin simply looked at him with raised brows, trying to radiate reason and authority, he gradually and visibly relaxed.

“Yes. Well,” Bran sniffed, with a kind of reproachful forgiveness, still not quite able to let go of his outrage. “In any case. We’ve ended up getting moved now, and these were good chambers too.”

Merlin stilled.

“Moved?”

“Moved.” Bran turned and wielded the poker resentfully again at the pile of glowing coals on the hearth, “Colm said William insisted, and we all know what that means. I mean it didn’t matter how often I said there weren’t any…”

“Moved where?” Merlin’s heart started picking up pace again.
Bran poked hard at the banked fire again until little puffs of ash and sparks flew upwards. “To those… those empty rooms in the West tower.”

“Which ones?” So much for a new calm. “There’re three or four whole…”

“Those big ones beside the chambers the king uses,” Bran clarified with disgust. “So that’s an extra flight of stairs from the kitchens.”

Merlin opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

*The prick,* he thought wonderingly, *The arrogant, high-handed prick.*

“You’re smiling,” Bran said accusingly.

“Am I?” Merlin beamed. Then, quickly, “No I’m not.”

Bran gave him a narrow-eyed look but after a few seconds he got on with preparing the chambers for the night ahead. Merlin told him not to bother filling the bathtub because it was simply too late to be hauling bucket loads of water up the stairs, but Bran had procured a large basin of water, placed behind the dressing screens which he knew Merlin could heat with an eye-blink.

In many ways, Merlin thought, he was actually a brilliant employer.

He found himself stripping off his clothing and cleaning himself, with a light heart, nerves skittering with a kind of thoughtless gut-borne excitement, but when he came out into the main chamber again, clad in his sleeping attire, he realised he hadn’t a hope of sleeping through the thoughts tangling and skipping through his brain.

He eyed Gaius little bottle of sleeping draught, sitting waiting on the table, and after a short internal struggle he succumbed to temptation. Without it, he knew he’d lie awake all night analysing all the events of the morning and the evening compulsively, and probably, winding himself up into a frenzy of worry. He could do with another good night’s sleep.

He downed it quickly under Bran’s approving gaze, then turned toward his much loved, insanely comfortable bed.

A discreet knock at the door made them both jerk with startlement, then stare at it as if it would open itself. It was very late.

Merlin wouldn’t allow himself to wonder, to hope, but his heart was hammering like a crazed woodpecker in his ears by the time Bran had laid down the linen he was folding and gone to open the door to their late visitor.

He knew at once, even though he couldn’t see their guest until Bran stood back to allow entry. There was a relaxation in Bran’s stance, not new tension. And indeed when Bran turned back into the room toward his master, he was grinning conspiratorially, as if this normality was a huge relief.

“It’s Sir Gwaine, Sire,” he announced and there Gwaine was, looking uncertainly and sheepishly at Merlin, as if he couldn’t quite believe he was there himself.

They stared at each other for agonised moments.

Merlin heard Bran’s diplomatic, “If that’s all Sire, I’ll bid you goodnight.” But Merlin didn’t acknowledge it or tear his gaze from Gwaine’s. He was vaguely aware of his servant’s departure but he didn’t look away from those intense brown eyes.
“Would you…? Can I stay?” Gwaine asked softly.

Merlin drew in a shallow breath.

He thought about the morning, how he’d lain in Arthur’s arms with barely a thought for anyone else, the king’s seed he’d taken ecstatically into his body, the mark he’d tacitly agreed not to remove. He thought about the instant of stabbing disappointment when the knock at his door hadn’t been Arthur.

Was it fair – any of it – to Gwaine? Did either of them want this really? If he lay with Gwaine tonight, wouldn’t it just mean more pain when his old lover saw and felt another’s possession?

Or maybe… maybe it was best to start now – accept the future they could have.

He’d hesitated too long.

Gwaine smiled a sad, lopsided smile.

“Just to sleep,” he said.

Merlin’s heart clenched into a hard stone of pain and guilt and with it his mind was set. He gave a quick twitchy smile. “I’m sorry. I took one of Gaius sleeping draughts… so I’m not much use for anything else.”

Gwaine nodded tentatively. And Merlin knew what he had to do.

“You get into bed,” he said encouragingly, “I just need to…”

He gestured to the screen, which hid the chamber pot behind it, but when he slipped out of view, he went straight to the mirror. He looked at the mark on his neck, multi-coloured and spectacular now. And he thought about Gwaine’s incredible acceptance and what it seemed tomorrow was going to bring, moving symbolically even further away from him, to rooms next to Arthur’s.

He wiped all the bruises and marks on his body away with another thought and walked out to the bed to crawl in and snuggle into Gwaine’s arms.

Give and take.

Arthur was with Gwen tonight, and this was their new reality.

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Gwaine was leaving.

The realisation tore Merlin from his contented doze and propelled him up into a sitting position, then on to his knees amidst the crumpled sheets. And there, indeed, was Gwaine, standing, startled and still naked, by the bed, shirt in hand.

“You’re… you’re up.” Merlin said stupidly. Gwaine’s mouth quirked.

As his senses began to return and the instinctive panic that had woken him eased, Merlin tried to wrestle his thoughts into some kind of order, but the jumbled chaos of his feelings and wants, left him groping for the right thing to say to stop Gwaine slipping away like this, silently, without another word exchanged. The ground he was on with Gwaine was so shaky and confused, that he felt as if anything he said could be the wrong thing, especially when he didn’t know what he could cope with himself.
But there was one thing that he knew had to be addressed, even if that was the thing he was most confused about. Yet they had to come to grips with it sometime.

"You don’t want to… stay?” he blurted.

Gwaine frowned.

They both knew what Merlin was offering, in the determination to get things back to normal. Restore an even keel.

“I… I’m not sure we’re ready for that,” Gwaine said quietly, and that, perversely, seemed to expunge those exact doubts in Merlin’s mind, and the jittery panic started again.

“You don’t want it any more, you mean?” he accused and he could hear the hurt in his own voice. Instantly, guilt followed it, because he didn’t have the right to feel hurt. Not in this. “I didn’t mean… it’s really all right if you don’t…”

“Merlin. I’m not…”

“I mean I totally understand why you wouldn’t want…”


Merlin opened his mouth, then closed it again, unsure where to go next.

He opted for the crux of it all.

“I thought maybe, since you stayed last night… but then you’re leaving and… Have you… did you decide then? If you can… if you want to? Go on? With me?”

Gwaine sighed and after a second’s hesitation sat on the edge of the bed, the muscles of his tanned back rippling beautifully with the movement.

Merlin, now poised behind him, reached a hand out automatically to touch, then slowly he pulled it back. He didn’t think Gwaine noticed.

“I was thinkin’ about it a lot,” Gwaine said softly to the empty space in front of him, “I was all for just givin’ up, you know? Because… well… You know.” Merlin bit his lip hard. What could he say after all? Because, yes, he knew. His throat was thick with tears. “Then I thought, when I’m lookin’ back on my life … When I’m an old man …”

“Assuming you get there.” Merlin’s voice sounded very choked but it was a matter of pride to him to try. Make it easier.

“Ah…I’m far too good to die young. Or maybe …I’m far too bad.” Merlin humped a teary laugh. “Anyway,” Gwaine went on firmly, “Lookin’ back. What’ll I think? Say I had somethin’… somethin’ beautiful… and I lost part of it… lost… a lot of it… Do I throw away the rest, because I don’t have all of it any more? Leave myself nothin’ but my pride? When I’m… old an’ dribblin’ an’ livin’ in the past… what’ll I think when I look back on that?”

Merlin stared at the back of Gwaine’s glossy head.

“And… what’ll you think?” he asked, whispering.

“That …if it was that precious… I was a fuckin’ fool not to hold on to what I could, while I could.”
Merlin closed his eyes and drew a deep, sharp breath, full of such incredible relief suddenly, full of such light, such love.

“I’m glad,” he said thickly. Gwaine turned his head slightly, until Merlin could see his profile, chiselled and fine. He was still frowning. “I don’t…”

“If that’s gonna be you don’t deserve me… I wouldn’t bother. No one does.”

Merlin snorted tearfully. “Yeah, well, that could be taken more than one way, you know.”

Gwaine’s mouth quirked, and his head turned more, until he was all but looking over his shoulder at Merlin’s damp face.

“I’m a gift from the gods, you know,” he reproved mockingly. “To show the rest of you the meanin’ of grace under pressure.”

Merlin grinned a manic grin he knew was probably a bit snotty. “Oh, so that’s what the gods call going to the tavern then?”

He wasn’t quite ready for Gwaine’s twisting leap and so he went under quickly and more than willingly, laughing like a lunatic as they wrestled and tickled each other in the wreckage of the bedding.

When they slowed they were tangled up together; belly to belly, face to face, and Merlin didn’t hesitate. He pressed his lips gently against Gwaine’s, a kiss of love and gratitude.

Gwaine didn’t pull away, so Merlin deepened it experimentally, let his tongue slowly stroke at Gwaine’s soft mouth until it was allowed entry.

He very deliberately didn’t compare; wouldn’t let his thoughts go to another mouth; fuller, more demanding. He just blanked his mind, still slightly sluggish and dreamlike from the after effects of Gaius potion, and let his senses guide him.

The kiss was long and wet and sweet, and when Gwaine finally broke it, they were both breathless and smiling. *It can work,* Merlin told himself joyfully as Gwaine stroked an idle, possessive hand through his hair, *It really can.*

And it was just then, like a prod in the side, that his conscience chose to remind him of the events of the previous night.

Cockroaches. Rats. Colm. Bran. *Arthur* - and it all hit him anew and without the cushioning effects of the potion, in a the now familiar tangle of worry and happiness.

What was happening today.


“What?” Gwaine asked, but he sounded lazy and amused, so Merlin realised with relief, that he must have concealed his emotions to some extent.

But then he thought, *No. No more hiding things from him because you're scared.*

He drew a deep breath. “I just remembered,” he said tentatively, “I have to move chambers.” Then, clarifying determinedly, “Today.”

Gwaine’s hand stilled in his hair. “Why? Or…” sounding suddenly very careful, “Should I be
“Why’s… why’s… ridiculous. Arthur told the steward we have rats.” He said tentatively, trying for lightness. Gwaine’s eyebrows raised, and he tensed. “And … and cockroaches. Bran’s furious.” Gwaine said nothing, frowning, and Merlin had nowhere else to go but the hard truth. “We’re being moved to chambers in the West Tower.” He swallowed, and muttered, “Next… next to Arthur’s.”

Gwaine’s hand tightened in his hair and slowly released until it fell away onto the pillow behind Merlin’s head, arm laying heavy against his neck, but he didn’t pull bodily away. Merlin tried to take comfort in that. But inwardly he was cringing.

“Well,” Gwaine said at last, distantly, “That’s the Princess for you.”

“I’m sorry,” Merlin tried, voice low and earnest, and he was starting to feel that was all he ever said to Gwaine now, when just days ago apologies between them had been rarer than hen’s teeth.

“Yeah. I know you are,” Gwaine returned softly, but he didn’t meet his eyes. “And I know you’re not.”

Merlin tried to find something in himself to deny it, but, they both knew it was true.

In the end, after a short, tense silence, all he could manage was a blurted, urgent, “Will you…? Gwaine… you’ll still…?”

“Ah… Another flight of stairs isn’t gonna stop me, Merlin,” Gwaine said, suddenly all cheerful robustness, but Merlin could see, his eyes were flint.

“It’s just… I suppose…” Merlin began, desperate to try to make it better, to make the whole insane arrangement less… bitter….less riddled by resentments, “You can sort of …see why…”

“Oh yeah… I can see why all right…” Merlin flinched. Because Gwaine, glaring now, unseeing, over Merlin’s shoulder, sounded just as bitter as he feared. But then, as he met Merlin’s eyes, he seemed to catch himself; almost visibly wrestle it under control. “It won’t make any difference’’ he said quietly, “Not to me.”

Merlin held his stare for another few seconds and he tried to convey everything he felt; how truly sorry he was, how grateful, how glad. But all he said was, “Good,” softly. He moved forward to kiss Gwaine again; tender, lovely.

The sound of a knock on the door was loud, peremptory and startled both of them into jumping apart a few inches, even Gwaine, the trained knight.

Both of them were on edge, Merlin supposed.

He realised only then that the light in the room suggested a later start than he was accustomed to making, though he didn’t have anything major to do before his meeting with Myrthryn.

But Bran of course, being that horrible cross between a proud mother and a dedicated matchmaker, would have made sure he slept late with Gwaine.

This – Bran’s attempt at discretion now by knocking and not entering - was all the more pointed because he’d walked in on them in every possible state of undress over their time together, and
more than once he’d found them going at it, hammer and tongs.

Every time he’d declared himself traumatised and had to be calmed down, even as he all but cooed at them when all three of them were in the same room together.

Merlin rolled his eyes and looked at Gwaine, who was still lying on his side, holding him, with his back to the door, stark naked.

And Gwaine, after a second, seemed to raise himself from his subdued quiet, and waggled his eyebrows back at him, totally in tune.

Merlin grinned, vastly grateful for the distraction of their old harmony.

“Come!” he called innocently.

The door opened, and William walked in.

Merlin gaped at him over Gwaine’s shoulder, froze, and then frantically tried to haul trapped bedcovers over Gwaine’s naked backside, as Gwaine himself tried to roll over to see what had caused the panic. All he succeeded in doing though, was giving William another eyeful of his naked front and half-hard cock.

Merlin squeaked and managed to shove a cushion in front of it, and was grateful beyond words that he was still in his sleeping clothes himself.

“You’re not Bran!” Merlin accused, as he and Gwaine stilled at last.

“Indeed not, Sire,” William said with wintry economy, and his expression was just as it always was - in fact he appeared entirely unruffled by the scene of humiliation he’d just witnessed. Merlin wondered savagely if he’d appear ruffled if someone ran him through with a blade.

Once that first reflexive, defensive burst of anger had passed though, he thought at once, Arthur.

“Was there… something…?” he asked uncomfortably because he desperately wanted to know, but not from William, and not in front of Gwaine.

He glanced down to find Gwaine lying totally relaxed, all but naked, and smirking with a kind of savage glee against the pillows.

“I was merely trying to establish if the move to new chambers was progressing satisfactorily, Sire… to find out if your manservant needed any help. But as he’s not here…”

“Oh,” Merlin said, lost. “That’s… um… kind of you.”

“The king asked me to make sure all went smoothly, Sire,” he said quellingly, as if Merlin had just accused him of a dreadful misdemeanour.

Merlin blushed. Where the embarrassing tableau he and Gwaine had presented to William of all people hadn’t managed it, the idea that Arthur had despatched his manservant to make quite sure he moved brought blood rushing to his face and neck until he knew he must be glowing with it.

“’Right…Well… I’ll pass that on to Bran when he…”

With horrible timing, Bran appeared at that second over William’s shoulder, breakfast tray with two goblets and two plates and an extravagant amount of food, in his hands. He looked first bewildered, then, a split second later almost mortally horrified when he realised he was arriving in
Merlin’s rooms later than William. And that Gwaine was lying naked on Merlin’s bed with just a cushion protecting his modesty.

“Bran’s… Ah, there you are Bran,” Merlin blurted. “I just sent Bran to fetch some breakfast, didn’t I Bran?”

He was vaguely aware, from Gwaine’s suppressed giggles shaking the bed, that he was overegging the pudding, but Merlin was all too aware that, for all his decade and more of subterfuge, he’d never been that convincing lying under pressure. He’d just been lucky that everyone he lied to had seemed so trusting, or indeed, in some cases, so stupid, that anyone could have been fooled.

William at the moment however, showed no signs of being fooled at all.

“Yes Sire. Indeed Sire,” he said coldly, “I’ll just leave you... and Sir Gwaine... to your breakfast then. But,” he went on relentlessly, “I’ll check later to see how the move is progressing.”

And with that warning shot, he swept out, closing the door behind him.

Gwaine’s giggling began in earnest then, even as Merlin and Bran looked at each other, appalled.

“Ah… there’s nothing like a bit of farce to set a man up for the day,” Gwaine grinned irrepressibly, as he hauled himself upright, naked, and began to search for his clothes.

Bran was still too mortified to pretend to be shocked; instead he appealed desperately to Merlin.

“I thought you needed a sleep-in,” he said, dazed by the enormity of his embarrassment as a manservant.

“I know,” Merlin soothed.

“He’s going to think I’m always late!”

“No… no he won’t. I told him I sent you for…”

“He didn’t believe it! You could tell.” Bran let out an almighty groan. “Why did it have to be William? On top of the rats.”

Gwaine let loose another unwise giggle at that.

“Ah, c’mon, Bran,” he grinned as he pulled on his shirt, “What d’you think he’s gonna do? Besmirch your maidenly reputation throughout Albion?”

Bran glared at him, and at Merlin’s swiftly suppressed smirk as he got up himself too.

“I’m already the talk of the kitchens,” he said with considerable dignity, “…because of a certainstory that’s been spread about infestations and the like. All I need is the rumour that I let the king’s servant walk in on my master… doing… things…”

Merlin stopped smirking and his eyes widened.

“William won’t say anything,” he said definitely, hopefully. “He’s the definition of discreet.”

Bran huffed then said with gloomy realism, “That depends. He’ll tell the Steward I was late. And he tells the king everything.”

Merlin drew a deep breath and looked involuntarily at Gwaine, and Gwaine - Gwaine was still
smiling, but though it wasn’t wider or shallower or noticeably different, somehow the quality of it had changed. Now he looked satisfied rather than amused.

Merlin closed his eyes for a second, and tried to calm his panic at the thought of Arthur’s reaction.

Then he went into his formula for trying to reason with himself; forcing the facts into his mind.

That Arthur knew he would be with Gwaine as well. That he’d been with Gwen. That they’d agreed, even if Arthur hadn’t actually come out and said that…. 

He groaned inwardly, because there was no way round it. This… this was really rubbing Arthur’s nose in it after yesterday in the forest. He couldn’t even imagine what William would say; how he’d describe what he'd seen to his master.

No wonder Gwaine looked quietly, fiercely pleased when he turned.

He was fully dressed now, ready to go.

“I’ll see you at the farewell,” he said smiling, and pressed a quick kiss to Merlin’s lips. Just a few days ago, Merlin thought involuntarily, it would have been a full, tongue-delving possession, but Merlin didn’t even know anymore which he truly wanted most at that moment.

“Aren’t you going to have something to eat before you go, Sire?” Bran fussed reflexively, but Gwaine just grabbed an apple and a heel of bread before departing with a wink and a comforting thump to Bran’s back.

Merlin sighed again and slumped down at the table. Neither he nor Bran said a word as breakfast was set out, then Bran blurted the matter that was clearly still obsessing his thoughts.

“He said he was going to check on the move!” As stunned and shocked as if the king himself had rolled up his sleeves and offered to wash the vegetables for the cook.

“Yeah,” Merlin said wearily, prodding desultorily at a bit of apple on his plate. “He wanted to see if you needed any help.” Bran pulled in air – a tiny gasp, as if something amazing had in fact been confirmed. “He must have thought we’d be up at the crack of dawn.” Merlin said morosely. “Packing.”

“Well…. it’s the talk of the kitchens, you know.”

“I didn’t. Say. We had rats,” Merlin gritted.

“Not the rats,” Bran said impatiently. “They’re more interested in the favour the king is showing you. Moving you to rooms beside his, getting his servant to oversee it. They’re saying your star is really on the rise.”

Merlin gaped up at him, and saw suddenly, the poorly hidden pride there. That Bran, for all his moaning, was actually now becoming more than a bit thrilled that the king had taken such an interest in his master’s wellbeing, because it was a message to the court. And his fellow servants.

He wondered again how Bran would react, if he ever came to know the truth.

He gave up on breakfast soon after that and took his long-awaited bath, letting his muscles unknot in the blissfully hot water with massive relief. He didn’t think even Arthur would grudge him this now.
After he’d wallowed for long enough, he got out, dressed on his own, and shaved himself, as Bran began to gather up his belongings. Then, because he owed him for the fiasco that morning and - indirectly - for the rats and cockroaches, against all etiquette, he helped him with the packing, mainly by thinking his clothes out of the cupboard and into the leather packing bags, and flying all his personal possessions, scant as they still were, into the wooden crates Bran had procured for the purpose. Bran looked on from the edges while he worked, smiling with awed delight as magic made such a mundane task, beautiful.

It was past nine when he left to go to Myrthryn’s chambers, and his own rooms looked as if they’d been attacked. But Merlin thought Bran more or less had everything under control.

Once he had to leave behind the practicalities though, the implications of the move, which Gaius’ potion had ensured he couldn’t really consider the night before, slithered demandingly to the front of his mind.

As always, it seemed, he was torn in two by what Arthur had done. On the one hand he was furious and appalled that Arthur had caused all this upheaval and upset when the actual practicalities hadn’t changed. How could the king slip into his rooms or vice versa without the guards knowing? It was impossible.

And yet … yet on the other hand… Merlin couldn’t deny that he was buzzing with happiness that Arthur had bothered; that he’d made the gesture, to show, if nothing else, that he hadn’t put Merlin to the back of his mind, now he’d settled things. That he still wanted him as close by as possible.

It took a few startled looks, averted eyes, and in two cases, tentative smiles from people he passed, for Merlin to realise that he was grinning like an fool. But then, all it took to sober him was the thought that William was possibly reporting even then to his master what he’d found in Merlins rooms.

When he arrived at Myrthyrn’s chambers at last, it was to find them in much the same state as his own.

It was a chaos of packing and moving, but with many servants involved, carrying out the final chests and cases. The room looked already, almost unoccupied again.

Myrthryn was seated at a table, a calm centre in the middle of the storm, and Brychusa was seated with him. The two men were talking quietly and serenely, as if they were seated in a bower, surrounded by flowers and softly humming bees.

Merlin, when he saw them, hesitated by the door for a moment, loathe to disturb their communion. But Myrthryn spotted him quickly and rose to his feet with that familiar aura of respect. Brychusa took his cue, and quickly and gracefully did the same.

“Erm… Morning?” Merlin croaked cheerfully.

The Rhegedians smiled indulgently, as if he’d just said something endlessly charming.

“My Lord Merlin,” Myrthryn bowed his head respectfully.

“You wanted … “ Merlin began haltingly, “You said you wanted a meeting. Before you leave.”

“Indeed.” Myrthryn agreed, and smiled slightly at Brychusa, who seemed to take it as his cue, striding to the door and ushering the last, bustling servants out into the hall before him, with a friendly nod to Merlin as he swept past.
When the door closed behind him, the chamber seemed suddenly and eerily, suffocatingly still.

Myrthryn was still smiling.

“I wanted to give you this, my Lord,” he said softly, “It belongs to you.”

Merlin blinked, puzzled.

Myrthryn raised his left fist, turned it, and opened his hand out flat. There was an object in his palm, and, Merlin perceived suddenly, a kind of suppressed triumph in him, like a man about to succeed in a great task, or gain some fine honour.

Merlin walked forward slowly, frowning in puzzlement.

The object was a metal disc, made of old gold by the look of it, lying on top of a coiled, burnished golden chain. Jewellery. A necklace of some sort it seemed, touched, Merlin guessed from first glance, by countless hands over countless years. Whatever else, he knew he hadn’t seen it before.

“I…ummm…I don’t understand,” he said carefully, “That’s not mine.”

Myrthryn stretched his arm out a little straighter, reached a little further, and as Merlin looked at him, lost, he could see the other man’s expression was the epitome of wordless encouragement.

Cautiously, he reached forward and took the necklace from Myrthryn’s palm as gingerly as if it might be coated with lethal poison. He felt the power in it at once, thrumming in his palm.

It was the size of a sovereign perhaps, the disc, and carved to perfection, though it was undoubtedly worn with age. On one side, the fine engraving portrayed a dragon, rearing in front of a carved crown.

When Merlin flipped to the other side the representation was of a bird of prey. He thought it looked like a hawk, or...no...no. Like a falcon, and every feather seemed real.

For a second, Merlin looked at it with a kind of bewilderment, and then, almost instinctively, his pulse began to pick up.

The meaning was unmistakable once he recognised it.

Unmistakable.

But how had they done it? How had they managed to commission a magical object like this, with this very carving, so quickly in Camelot? Make it look like this? Ancient.

Instead, though he didn’t understand it, the question he found he asked wasn’t how, but, “Why?”

Myrthryn cocked his head to look at him, but he wasn’t smiling now; rather he was frowning slightly, all intensity.

Merlin looked down at the object again, impressed despite himself by the incredible detail in the carving. He could see every scale on the dragon’s hide; every lethal tooth.

“It’s been in the keeping of Rheged’s seers… for many centuries, my Lord.” Myrthryn said softly. Merlin’s eyes jerked up to meet his, stunned. “Waiting for the one for whom it was made. There is power in it. Protection.”

Their eyes held.
“Centuries?”

“Yes.” Simply. “Since the first prophecy was made, long, long ago, when magic was all-powerful on the earth, before the kingdoms were properly born, when the crystal cave was not hidden from the sight of men. These… were commissioned then, gifts from the great seers who first saw the coming of the sorceror and the king who would create the brief glory of Albion… and ultimately, in centuries still beyond imagining, save all.”

Merlin’s eyes were wide, horrified, but he couldn’t break Myrthryn’s gaze, couldn’t look away from those exalted, dark eyes. It sounded like a recitation; like the repetition by rote of a form of words used countless times before.

“We have treasured these for so long… waiting for the moment to arrive. And… I … I am the one who’s been honoured to give you Rheged’s gift.”

“I…”

But what did Merlin want to say, really? ‘Thank you. It’s very nice?’ When instinctively in his gut, in his bones, he wanted to run from it?

He didn’t want it. Not really, not with all the symbolism of it, the old power, the responsibility. Not when that object, given to him, finally brought home how real it was, how long and loyally people of magic had been waiting for him.

Him. And Arthur. It was insane.

He stared down at the ancient medallion in his palm, the dragon facing uncaringly upwards. He thought of the havoc of the past days, of the struggles to come.

‘Rheged’s gift.’ He almost snorted at the irony.

He wondered if Myrthryn knew what his ‘gift’ had actually been. How completely he and his fellow ambassadors had created the very event they’d come to celebrate. And he looked up into the other man’s clever eyes, and he knew.

“It wasn’t a mistake.” Merlin said wonderingly, “What you said… before the court, that first time. You knew. When you came. That Arthur wasn’t with me, like that.”

Myrthryn slowly inclined his head. “Yes. We knew.” His lips quirked and he gave a tiny shrug, “How could we not?” he asked simply.

It was blindingly obvious really. They’d travelled through many lands; through Camelot itself. How could they not have heard of the much loved Queen Guinevere?

“But… you pretended,” Merlin said accusingly, like a betrayed child, “That …whole act about …thinking I was the one Arthur had chosen, that we were the ones you’d come to honour…”

“You were.”

“But…”

“There was …an element of…dissembling. I regret it. But it was necessary.” Merlin looked at him, speechless. “It was foretold, my Lord… Merlin. Our role…Rheged’s role and duty were foretold. We would never have chosen to turn from our destiny.”
“Your role?” Out of nowhere, he felt outrage bubbling to the surface like gas in a hot spring, remembering so many moments where the Rhegedian’s had seemed to innocently make things worse. “To…to manipulate us into some tie your forefathers thought they saw? Maybe they…”

“And if we had chosen not to play our roles… not to interfere…?”

“What?” Merlin gritted. *We’d all still be happy! More or less. All of us, not just…* Not just him and Arthur.

Would he give that up? Knowing now how Arthur really felt; had always felt? If he could go back, would he change things, stop the Rhegedians at the gate before they could play their part?

That was his shame. That was why he felt such anger toward the man before him. Gwaine and Gwen – their pain… his own despair.

He would pay and accept the burden of all of it again, for the gift he had now. Rheged’s gift.

“The tie between you was begun before you were born; it would still have been completed somehow, I’m sure of that. That destiny was inevitable. But the path would have been longer and more tortuous. The darkness between you, the resentments and denials… they might have lasted too long.” *Darkness.* “You see each other now, as you are.”

Merlin opened his mouth to argue furiously, but... how could he, when he had the joy of the previous day tucked under his heart? For all the continuing doubt and pain, the certain knowledge at last of how Arthur felt about his magic, about him. He swallowed, and saw Myrthryn’s mouth lift in a small, understanding smile.

But then the other man seemed to find a thought, and that thought troubled him visibly. His ageless brow creased into a frown.

“I believe, I was chosen for this honour because…” Myrthryn appeared to struggle for just a moment, a new sight. “Perhaps because, once… my lord was mine.” He stopped and looked at Merlin almost uncertainly. Merlin looked back, puzzled. “Before… he and my king accepted their union. It’s never easy... for the ones caught in the middle.”

And then Merlin understood.

Myrthryn was Gwaine. And, he was Gwen.

They stared at each other mutely.

Merlin suddenly wanted to ask so badly, but how could he? Maybe though, Myrthryn saw it written in his eyes.

“Yes... we do still share... occasionally,” he said softly, “But I must accept it for what it is now. There is no competing with destiny.”

Merlin’s pent up breath left him in a long sigh.

Whatever else, Myrthryn was consistent.

But he wondered with painful apprehension if Gwaine… or Gwen… would ever find that acceptance.

He gave the older man a deliberate, final, unsmiling nod, then he turned to leave. He wanted
urgently to get away now from the Rhegedian and his satisfaction that matters were at last as Rheged’s seers had set in stone so long ago. A mission successfully accomplished.

“You should know…” Myrthryn said clearly behind him, “There were those who fought against this… who argued the time of the prophecy had not really come, even though it was foretold that you would appear when a king of Rheged found the completion of his own soul. Still, they said that you were a false saviour, not the true Emrys. That Camelot and Arthur Pendragon did not deserve the friendship or aid of Rheged. That Uther’s son could not be The Once And Future King. Then, envoys were sent from your king’s enemies, urging us not to fulfil our role to forge your union…” Merlin turned slowly to face him, eyes wide, shocked. “The White Dragon herself came to persuade us not to go to Camelot; to remain neutral in the battles to come. They all said that even if you were the figures of prophecy, you would bring destruction, not salvation. They were… very persuasive. Many in the court began to believe them. But in the end…” He shrugged gracefully. “... we knew our destiny. We’re too old a kingdom, and our role has been awaited for too long.”

Merlin drew a deep shaky breath. “Your... role,” he repeated, but softly now, understanding. “To be… a catalyst?”

“Yes. A catalyst… if the time had truly come. And I was sent… I was sent as Rheged’s eyes. To see for myself this king of whom we’d heard so much … to see his sorceror for myself, and judge if I should speak the words. And what should be Rheged’s allegiance. It was a great honour; a great responsibility.”

Merlin stared at him.

Because he’d had no idea, no suspicions at all that they were being tested from the first, scrutinised, weighed up, manipulated. That the Rhegedian alliance had been very far from in the bag. That their union was the stuff of argument and dissension and fear. He’d been so caught up in his own personal, human dramas that the political and strategic battles raging around them had totally passed him by.

He was mortified. Some Court Sorceror he was. Some advisor.

“How?” he choked out finally, “How did you judge?”

Mrythryn shrugged again and tilted his lips in a small, wry grin. “I knew. I knew the moment I faced him. I knew that this was the Great King, the seers had foretold. And after that, who could you be, but Emrys? Then... you proved it to all of us…. As easy as a thought, you bent the universe to your will before us. You are Emrys. But even before that, I knew I had chosen correctly when I told your king of your joint destiny. Then of course, I also had to decide if your enemies spoke truly… if the great men we’d awaited for so long, were to be forces of evil after all. So… I watched, Merlin… I watched and talked and listened, and I saw who you are. Both of you. I will tell Rheged,” he finished simply, “… our seers saw clearly. These gifts have been awaiting you and your king, as the world has been awaiting you.”

Merlin stood in silence for a second, the medallion held tight now in his fist. Then he croaked, “There’s more than one.”

Of course there was.

Myrthryn smiled.

“I gave the other to your king this morning.”
Merlin drew a deep breath, and nodded again. Just the idea that Arthur had heard all of this too - that he held the physical evidence of how long they’d been awaited together; how important their unity was seen to be, created the familiar nauseous excitement in his abdomen.

“Merlin…” Myrthryn said gently. “You think we’ve meddled.” Merlin’s gaze darted up once more, but he couldn’t find it in him to deny it. His ambivalent feelings toward the Rhegedians and all they’d done – their…gifts, were tangled inside him even now... resentment grappling with gratitude, all the more confused now that he knew the truth of what they’d done. “I truly believe you’ll come to thank us for what we did. In future years, perhaps, we’ll have a place of honour in your thoughts. Because… the pain we have brought, my Lord Emrys… it’s as nothing next to the pain of centuries we may have turned away.”

Merlin held the other man’s stare for a long, long moment, reading only kindness and goodwill there, until his own lips turned up in a tiny grimace of acknowledgement. Gratitude, perhaps.

Merlin bowed deeply this time, genuinely, catching Myrthryn’s flush of surprised pleasure.

“I’ll see you outside,” he said softly, “With the king, when you leave. And...thank you … for the… the present.”

Myrthryn nodded slowly, still smiling, and Merlin left him in his chambers.

He walked down to the courtyard and beyond, to a secluded corner he used to use as a servant, when he needed a moment of peace away from the insane demands of his life. He sat down on the grass there, back against the chilly, shadowed stone wall, and raised his knees up defensively close to his chest, like the child he’d been when he first arrived in Camelot.

He tried to think. Of what Arthur had said to him in the glade: that he would have succumbed to the pull between them eventually, that he should have succumbed years before in fact, saved them all pain. Of Aithusa, who’d tried at some point to stop it, stop what they had now done. Of Morgana … she must know of it surely… had she sent the dragon? Morgana knew of his new link with Arthur? Mordred? Their enemies hadn’t wanted it to happen. Surely that was a good sign? That they’d done the right thing, he and Arthur?

Suddenly it all seemed so much greater than Gwen’s pain, or Gwaine’s. Suddenly it felt like part of the long, long war he seemed to have been fighting all his adult life.

And then he thought, abruptly furious with his own self indulgence, What’s the point of agonising about it and chewing at it any more?

He’d probably never know if Rheged’s meddling was ultimately for the good or not. It was done. And that was that.

It was only then that he became aware of the dull pain in his left hand, clenched in a fist on the ground beside him, just as awareness hit him of what was causing it. He opened his fist on the grass and looked down again at the medallion that had been clasped convulsively in his hand, so tight that he’d left red scar lines on his palm. Slowly he parted his raised knees, raised his wrist to rest on one them and opened out the necklace, allowing it to drop and dangle on its chain from his fingers, watching with a kind of fascinated, frightened repulsion, the ancient golden coin spinning hard with its own momentum. He could see the images blurring together, dragon and falcon, blurring into one unknowable mass until finally the disc slowed to a kind of swaying stillness. Only then, did he carefully unfasten the intricate clasp, reach up and tie it around his neck.

It was meant for him, after all.
He sat and thought for a long time.

Eventually he became aware that the sun had shifted some way across the sky and the background hubbub he could hear around the corner in the courtyard had built significantly. He pulled himself quickly to his feet and hurried toward the great steps.

He was late again, he could see that obviously from the great crowd of knights and courtiers arrayed on the stone stairs, and most of all by the presence of Arthur and Gwen at the foot, talking and smiling with the Rhegedians.

Arthur was in his mail; Gwen was magnificent in a dark green velvet gown cut low on her shoulders and breasts as most of her bodices were. From the impressions he caught of her as he darted forwards, Merlin thought she looked tense still, and her smiles warmed by false cheer, but he supposed she had little cause to feel any goodwill toward Rheged’s delegation. She must be glad, in her heart of hearts, he knew, to see their backs.

Merlin would have infinitely preferred to slink to the rear of the group, but he knew he was expected to say his own farewells; that the ambassadors and Arthur himself would expect it. So he found himself heading fast, straight for the centre of the action, all but skidding to a halt behind the delegates, on the small stones that covered the courtyard.

Inevitably all attention turned at once to him. He spotted Gwaine behind the king and queen, solemn, even given the target for teasing Merlin had presented again.

There was a tiny, embarrassed silence until Arthur broke it, with that old edge of weary, quelling mockery.

“Late again?”

Reflexively, Merlin flushed, not because of the reproof, he realised, but because any word to him from Arthur now, seemed to have him blushing like a girl. It was appalling.

“My apologies, Sire,” he said lightly, trying desperately for dignity. But Arthur it seemed was in the kind of taunting, teasing, restless mood Merlin hadn’t seen in public since his magic had been revealed.

“Haven’t you heard of the word punctuality, Merlin?” he drawled obnoxiously.

He looked, Merlin realised suddenly, genuinely out of sorts; eyes narrowed, mouth tight. Out of the corner of his eye Merlin saw Gwen make a small, quickly stilled movement at her husband’s side.

William had told him then. Merlin was abruptly, completely sure of it.

Perversely, it gave him a rush of confidence. Arthur was jealous. And then he spotted the glint of old gold at Arthur’s neck.

“I’m not sure, Sire,” he said innocently, fighting to contain his sudden flare of mad joy. “Is that a word you made up?”

Arthur’s eyes flew to his for a shocked moment and Merlin thought he could see recognition, then amusement, pleasure. Or perhaps it was what he wanted to see.

In any case Arthur waved him to his side and Merlin went, vaguely aware of the astonishment of the courtiers around them who hadn’t seen the king given cheek like that since Merlin ceased to be his servant. He found he didn’t dare look at Gwen.
Myrthryn, he found, when he finally got to face him, was smiling indulgently, as were all his fellow ambassadors, like proud parents of charming children.

“We are honoured that you came to bid us farewell, my Lord Merlin,” he proclaimed loudly, in his court voice, “and we pray that you will one day accompany your king when he visits our land of Rheged.”

Merlin darted a glance sideways. He very pointedly hadn’t been mentioned when Gwen had suggested a delegation, so he simply nodded and smiled.

But, “One day,” he said. “I’d love to.” And he meant it.

Myrthryyn lowered his voice to a more intimate level, audible only to the small group around the king.

“And remember... if Camelot has need of us before then...”

Arthur nodded. “I’m grateful.”

They clasped arms then, Arthur and Merlin and the men of Rheged, with a special little hug from Brychusa for Merlin. The ambassadors kissed Gwen’s hand and mounted their horses, slowly wheeling about to lead their small procession toward the gates, larger now than when they came, with a new, fine wagon piled full of gifts from Camelot.

Before the Rhegedians disappeared from view, Myrthryn turned in his saddle and raised a hand in farewell. And then the horses and wagons ambled out of sight, as if they had never been.

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Merlin made straight for his new chambers when he managed to get away, though that had actually proven quite simple. Gwen had murmured something to Arthur which served to break the spell of the Rhegedians departure, and Merlin had taken the chance to step away to the side of the crowd on the steps behind. Then he'd weaved his way up towards and through the great doors, leaving the royal couple safely behind him.

He'd really, really had no wish for a cosy chat at that moment - not with anyone.

He nodded at the guards outside the king’s empty chambers on his way past, trying for authoritative. He suspected though, that he’d just produced uncomfortable.

Because … it was ridiculous.

_Him?_ Rooms next to the king’s?

The doors of his chambers were open when he neared them and he could hear voices and activity inside; in fact just as he stepped through them, a young boy was coming barrelling out. He squeaked when he saw Merlin, went a violent shade of puce, babbled an apology and fled out into the corridor.

Once, Merlin thought ruefully, there would have been no trace of terror in his eyes; once perhaps he’d have been hurling rotten cabbage hearts at the prince’s hapless manservant in the stocks. He pursed his lips and focussed on the chaos inside.
Servants seemed to be everywhere: two girls were laying a rich purple cover onto the large bed; two hefty, bearded men were dragging presumably empty trunks toward the door; another was stacking books on a shelf, a boy was folding clothes into a wardrobe and at the centre of the chaos, giving orders like a lord born to it, was Bran, a look of the purest satisfaction on his face. He was very obviously loving, Merlin thought fondly, the role of servant to a man the steward had clearly concluded, was favoured by the the king.

So much for discretion, Arthur.

Merlin sighed quietly, mentally rolled his eyes, and dodged and weaved over to stand beside Bran.

“So,” he said with careful seriousness to his newly-empowered servant, “What d’you think?”

“Not there! There! No!!! There!” A startled boy darted back and forth like a rabbit before a fox, before being guided forcibly toward a cupboard by one of the girls. Then, with exquisitely grudging understatement, Bran replied, “I suppose it’s big enough. Sire.”

Merlin couldn’t suppress his incredulous grin if Uther himself had ordered it.

“Big enough? It’s twice the size!” And it was. His last rooms had been intimidatingly grand enough for him, but these… these were fit for royalty.

“Hmm,” Bran sniffed, turning to face Merlin and clearly determined to hold his grudge in front of him for as long as he possibly could. “I suppose with all this floor, we’ll be able to spot the rats in this one.”

“Bran…” Wearily.

“They can hold a tournament with the cockroaches.”

“Braaan,” Merlin was whining and he knew it.

“And it takes years to reach from the kitchens.”

“Yes. Yes. It’ll be hell for you,” Merlin deadpanned impatiently.

His sarcasm however, was completely ignored.

Bran had, it seemed, lost all interest in Merlin. Instead he was staring, wide-eyed, at a point over his shoulder.

Merlin frowned, noticing only then that the whole room also seemed to have stilled, the frantic activity freezing as unnaturally as if Merlin had stopped time. And he was almost completely sure he hadn’t.

He peered slowly behind him, following Bran’s stunned, disbelieving gaze.

Arthur was standing in the open doorway, looking around him at the shambles with an amazed frown, as if the sight before him were somehow utterly ridiculous, as opposed to perfectly normal for a man moving his rooms.

Merlin hadn’t expected it. Not an open personal visit like this.

He drew in a deep breath and began to try to control his heart’s automatic response to Arthur now; picking up pace, thudding hard in his chest, that familiar obedient confusion of conflicting emotions tumbling around inside him like puppies in a basket.
“Arthur,” he said, but it came out much more breathlessly than he wished.

Surprise, that was all it was.

But he’d sounded like a swooning girl, he thought irritably, and his response to that was as ingrained and automatic as his quickened pulse.

“Come to view the chaos? Check for rats?” he sniped.

He heard Bran’s sharp intake of breath behind him but he ignored it. Arthur’s eyes fixed on him and he looked alarmingly intense.

“Leave us,” Arthur said and though his gaze didn’t shift from Merlin’s and Merlin’s eyes stayed locked on his, there was no doubt at whom the command was aimed.

The room emptied around them then with an unearthly speed; Merlin caught a quick glimpse of Bran’s bemused face from the corner of his eye as he pulled the door shut behind Arthur, and then it was just them. Himself and Arthur, alone, for the first time since they’d come back from the glade.

Merlin swallowed hard, and to his enormous chagrin, he felt his cock stir.

Arthur gave a small smirk, but his eyes showed a complexity of emotion Merlin couldn’t really read. He decided to see the one Arthur probably wanted him to see.

“I don’t know why you’re looking so pleased with yourself,” he blurted bravely, desperate for some kind of upper hand, some familiarity. “That was… this is… Rats? That’s what you call discreet?”

Arthur visible satisfaction vanished in an instant, and what seemed to be an almost uncertain frown took its place. “You didn’t want to move closer?”

Merlin opened and closed his mouth. “I… that’s not the point… Everyone’s talking now, the servants… wondering what’s going on… why you’re favouring me all of a sudden.”

Arthur moved a couple of paces further into the room. His expression defined incredulity. ”All of a sudden?” he asked disbelievingly, “You were at my side every day for years! Everyone knew I favoured you!”

Merlin gaped, and the see-saw of complex emotion between them tilted again. The buzzing edges of arousal, of awareness, were suddenly and dramatically swamped by righteous anger, because this, he realised, was still a very sore point indeed.

“Favoured me? How exactly did you favour me?”

Arthur’s frown deepened and he pulled his head back in a classic gesture of exaggerated incomprehension. *Come on! How could you not know?* the gesture said.

“You were closer to me than anyone. Everyone knew that,” he repeated in exactly that tone.

“Oh, right. They’ll have *seen* how much you *favoured* me, then? All those new clothes I got as your servant? All that respect? The way you always spoke to me in front of everyone, like you valued me? The way you always listened when I warned you about people? The way you elevated me like all the other people you *favoured*?”
Arthur’s expression blanked. “I thought … I believed we’d dealt with that. I explained…”

“Yes, you explained.” Merlin snapped.

He looked away and started to chew his lower lip, unsure himself where all the renewed bitterness had come from, his anger weakened by Arthur’s apparent unwillingness to fight back. He’d given the same litany to Gaius just the day before; believed him when he said Arthur had always cared.

Yes, there had been years of relentless petty, and not so petty, rejections and humiliations in amongst the good bits of being Arthur’s servant, and yes, he’d never actually confronted Arthur with it. How much it had hurt. But Merlin had honestly thought those resentments had been pretty much buried beneath the terror of losing everything. All the years of small hurts dealt by Arthur, overwhelmed by the cathartic trauma of the near end of their relationship. When Arthur had discovered his servant’s own sins, when Merlin’s magic was exposed and their friendship smashed, the resentments of being undervalued hadn’t seemed remotely important any more.

Not when he'd thought he’d lost Arthur forever.

He shouldn’t be complicating the tangle they were already in, with old pain.

But, “It didn’t make it any easier to live through though,” he muttered mutinously at last. The tone he used wasn’t what he’d call friendly, but it was obviously conciliatory enough for Arthur to take another step forward. “You could have treated me better,” Merlin went on stubbornly and began to turn away. “Even if you kept me as a servant all that time, you could have…”

“I know. Merlin, I’m… I… apologise.” Merlin froze. The formality with which Arthur delivered the words made it sound like a great declaration of state, but the precious rarity of an apology from Arthur was the thing that stunned him. “I suppose…” Arthur seemed to be forcing himself onward, “I… perhaps I was worried about … showing… softness… It was always a slippery slope with you.”

Merlin felt his eyes widen at once in reaction into an outraged, disbelieving glare. A slippery slope?

“I mean,” Arthur said quickly, “I mean… a slippery slope for me. When I started, I just... I didn’t want to … stop. I gave you my mother’s seal,” he finished hopefully, a man hoping to balance the scales. And... it was true. He had done just that. When Arthur was braced to die to stop the Dorocha, he’d given Merlin one of the most precious family heirlooms he possessed. Something of priceless value to him. Something they both knew, even at the time, he should have held for his wife, then passed to his heir. It had been an astonishing gesture really. Merlin wondered now why he hadn’t questioned the motivations behind that more at the time.

“Yes… Well..” he huffed uselessly, floundering in the face of that memory, “I suppose. Yes… “ He saw Arthur’s wide mouth begin to curve at one corner into a wry smile and immediately, determination not to crumble before it, stiffened. Because, to his chagrin, he realised that wasn’t all that was stiffening. “It doesn’t change the fact that you’ve caused chaos with this … room thing. And for nothing!”

Arthur smile wiped away. “Nothing?” he repeated incredulously. He looked, Merlin realised with horror, wounded. “I’ve brought you next to me and you say that’s…”

“No! I know. I know it’s not nothing. It’s a sign of favour I realise that. It’s just… it’s not… going to make it any easier to…” Arthur was still frowning. “You know…”
He trailed off, trying to look meaningful, but he was sure he was glowing a fine shade of crimson; certainly his face felt hot enough to toast bread. His prick, he was mortified to realise, was more than half full in his trousers, reacting to the tension. Arthur, by contrast, suddenly looked totally on balance for the first time since he’d arrived in Merlin’s new rooms, narrowly alert.

“To…” Arthur’s voice lowered, all mocking amusement. “You know?” His mouth tilted upwards again, and the look in his eyes was triumphant and predatory.

Merlin felt the acid burn of caustic, panicky excitement in the pit of his stomach as his cock took the extra push into full, aching erection. He just felt incredibly grateful that he had a long tunic on.

“Look…” he spluttered, “I wasn’t the one who spread tales about infestations to get some more….” Arthur raised an eyebrow, “More… you know. I was just… pointing out that you didn’t think it through. You just… rushed into it. As usual. I mean even if we… we can’t just stay in each others chambers for hours on…”

“Merlin. I. Am well aware. Of that. Which is why you…” Arthur bit out through gritted teeth and in the space of seconds, Merlin could almost see himself blinking in Arthur’s eyes from sexual prey, back in time, to the idiot manservant utilised in Arthur’s plans. “Are going to create… a door.” Merlin stared at him. “Round about….there.” He gestured to a point somewhere behind Merlin’s shoulder. Merlin, eyes wide and mouth open, finally turned to look. What he saw was a blank stretch of stone wall. “I’d say that’s about five feet along from the head of the bed on the other side. There’s no furniture there either.”

Merlin turned his head back to look at Arthur, then swung his eyes again to the bare stone. Then back to Arthur.

“You’re gawping,” Arthur commented caustically, “It’s not an attractive look.”

“Arthur! I can’t just… I can’t just make a door,” Merlin managed at last, scandalised. “I’m not a… stonemason. Carpenter. Whatever.”

Arthur sighed loudly. “You’re supposed to have the power to control nature and time, Emrys. So. Just…” he waved his hand vaguely, “… make a hole in the wall. And shove a bit of wood on to it.”

Merlin was thrown enough to let that one go.

Could he? Could he just… think solid stone away, and a door into existence, for his own convenience?

“But… people will see it,” he said, one last effort to halt the stupidity. “If I manage it. They’ll know there’s…”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Use the thing you used in the forest. Modify it if you can. So we can see it but no one else. It’s not difficult.”

“How would you know?” Merlin squawked, but his outrage was a ridiculously pale thing, and already his mind was burrowing away at the problem, turning to method, how to fulfil Arthur’s typically straightforward plan. Now that it had been outlined though, it was so stupidly simple, so blindingly obvious he was mortally ashamed that he’d never thought of it himself. Perhaps some of that showed in his expression. His arousal had long since wilted like a flower in a drought.

“It’s called tactical thinking, Merlin,” Arthur drawled, so familiarly, languidly smug, that Merlin was tempted to declare he couldn’t do it, just to see that self-satisfaction punctured. Instead, he restricted himself to a poisonous glare, and turned to concentrate.
That was all he needed really. He knew that now for sure.

He just had to accept the extent of his own power, picture his purpose, and think.

His sight misted under a haze of gold.

When it cleared, the image in his head was reality; a modest wooden door stood in the centre of the stretch of wall Arthur had chosen.

He thought again, thought of protection for his new creation, for Arthur’s creation. He saw gold once more, and when colour returned, he knew the tailored spell was in place.

Arthur had been right. It hadn’t been difficult at all, not when he accepted his own truth; that he could do just about anything, other than control birth and death. That still left quite a bit of scope.

He turned to Arthur, who, he was gratified to see, was staring at the new doorway with a kind of awe. Merlin watched his Adam’s apple bob in a heavy swallowing movement, then his intense gaze turned to him. He looked, Merlin fancied suddenly, almost shy.

“Well…” Arthur said gruffly, “It could be bigger.”

Merlin grinned with joy. Arthur’s reaction to his magic now, answered all his dreams.

“Planning to fatten up for the winter again, are you?” He took the other man’s outraged glare with a smirk of his own.

They exchanged a long look of unusual harmony. But, with depressing inevitability, Merlin thought of a problem. A big problem.

He really, really didn’t want to broach it, but it couldn’t be ignored; the potential for disaster was too great. And surely Arthur must have addressed it too? Surely?

Merlin chewed briefly at his lower lip, then bracing himself, he said with all the delicacy he could muster, “Arthur.. Have you thought what happens if we’re… otherwise ….engaged?”

Arthur frowned blankly.

“If… well…” Merlin sighed. “If say Gwen’s in your rooms or…” Spit it out, then. “…or… Gwaine is …um, visiting me…."

The effect was instantaneous. Arthur’s mild, puzzled frown turned into a thunderous glower. Merlin swallowed.

The coward in him who wanted only to hide in sweetness with Arthur, wished the words back into his mouth at once; the realist knew the issue would have to be repeatedly faced. He opened his mouth to try to begin to voice that, but he didn’t get the chance. Arthur spoke with cold precision.

“Guinevere will share my old chambers as always. She won’t come here. As for…” his scowl deepened. “You’ll just have to sort it out with him.” And just like that the unmentionable subject was before them.

He’d done his level best not to think about it properly since it had happened, but Merlin knew he had to face up to it now: face the fact that what had happened that morning in his own chambers had been one of the worst conceivable ways for Merlin’s continuing relationship with Gwaine to
have been announced to Arthur.

It was the first test of their agreement to share, and he could tell already that Arthur wasn’t going to play.

“William. Told me,” Arthur said shortly before Merlin could say a word. Well that was hardly news.

“Arthur…We agreed…”

“The same night? You couldn’t even wait…”

“You were with Gwen!”

“So you go and get fucked, tit for tat?”

Merlin sucked in an audible breath. Part of him was appalled and terrified by how quickly the mood between them had changed; how their easy, flirtatious banter had flipped over, like a tossed coin, into hostility and recrimination. But the other, larger part was instantly seething with defensive outrage.

“You have no right, Arthur! We agreed…!”

“You agreed. And I wasn’t with Guinevere,” Arthur shouted, then seemed to fight his voice back under control. When he went on his voice was at its normal pitch but icily cold. “We spoke for a while, then I left. I slept next door. Alone.”

And that took the wind absolutely out of Merlin’s sails, even though he knew it shouldn’t.

The principle hadn’t changed. They both had the right to be with their other partners.

Just because that once, the first time, Arthur hadn’t… it didn’t mean Merlin’d let him down, by devoting himself to trying to hold on to Gwaine, the night after he and Arthur had finally reached understanding.

It didn’t.

Yet somehow, he couldn’t quite bring himself to believe it, not when he could sense the hurt in Arthur, not when deep down he knew he shared the urge to possession. They all did. All four of them.

The principle though. He should be holding on to that.

“We didn’t either,” he blurted instead. “I mean… he stayed with me but we didn’t… do anything,” he finished, as awkwardly as an adolescent boy.

It had sounded uncomfortably like an excuse, he realised, and he knew with shame that he’d sold the pass. Arthur’s expression was stone.

“That’s not what William said,” he bit out icily.

Merlin’s eyes narrowed. “William wasn’t there to…!”

“Gwaine was naked, in your bed, aroused.”

Merlin gaped, appalled. “William told you that?”“
“My father taught him,” Arthur gritted, “That it’s the duty of a king’s servant to always watch his master’s back.”

Merlin stared at him silenced, torn between hurt, distress and alarm at the many implications of that statement. That Merlin’s own service to Arthur had lacked that quality; that William had thought Arthur was being played for a fool by Merlin; that William knew all about them.

He barely knew where to start.

Ultimately though, all that emerged was a muted, almost resentful repetition, muttered, “We didn’t do anything,” like a sulky child trying to convince an adult to stave off punishment.

The effect was dramatic and not what he had anticipated. Arthur made a sound of massive impatience and closed the remaining distance between them with two strides. In less than a second his face was inches from Merlin’s and his hand was gripping Merlin’s bicep.

He squeaked with shock, “Arth…”

“Tonight,” Arthur said with hard determination, “We are most definitely going to do something. Repeatedly. You know,” he mimicked savagely, “So I suggest you make sure you’re alone.”

Merlin held his hard stare with a kind of stunned, mesmerised shock even as he felt his prick trying to jump to attention like an obedient hound. He wanted to kiss Arthur's thinned mouth, he badly wanted to kiss it into softness, but he was almost certain it would end on the bed or over the table, with Bran outside…

He nodded in acknowledgement, dry-mouthed.

Arthur held his gaze for another few determined, angry beats, then let go of his arm. “I have to go,” he said shortly, “Check if your manservant sees anything unusual on your side of the door. I’ll test it on William.”

Merlin nodded again, trying not to think of Bran’s reaction if he spotted a brand new entrance to the King’s chambers in the wall.

Arthur began to turn away then, until a thought seemed to strike him, and he turned back. For a moment he looked almost uncertain, then brashness covered it. “It’s too shambolic at the moment but …I intend to dine here. Regularly.”

Merlin stared, then nodded dumbly again, knowing that the idea would thrill him beyond measure when he had the chance to think it through. He and Arthur dining alone as friends, after their long estrangement.

Arthur began to leave again.

“ But I’ll have to tell Bran … He’ll have to get food and things...” Merlin called out.

Arthur glanced over his shoulder but he didn’t stop moving until he reached the door to the corridor. “Its very simple Merlin. I’ll be coming through here for dinner with my friend and advisor,” he said as he grasped the handle, tone one of exaggerated patience for a simpleton, “And I’ll be leaving through here, after dinner, to go to my own chambers next door. Then,” he gestured with his head behind Merlin as he began to open the door, “I’ll come back through that one. Try to keep up.”

And he was gone, slamming the door behind him.
Merlin stood in the empty room trying to gather himself, but he felt as if he’d just been battered by a horde of enraged bandits rather than managing a simple conversation.

He dragged his eyes finally from the door through which Arthur had disappeared and turned toward the new, modest one in the wall dividing his chambers from Arthur’s. His lips quirked in an involuntary smile and the tiny bubble of joy in his chest began to expand at the sight, as he thought about Arthur’s plotting and planning, at his typical overwhelming determination to get what he wanted, come what may.

It wasn’t what he should be feeling.

He should be worried by Arthur’s continuing inability to accept that Merlin wouldn’t be his alone; by his own useless capitulation before it. And he knew he should be more than worried by his own satisfaction about it. It would come he knew; the worry. But right then he looked at the magic door and smiled.

He hadn’t even mentioned to Arthur, his conversation with Myrthryn; discussed none of the important things they should have discussed, but Merlin found guiltily that he really didn’t care.

Bran was knocking on the outer door barely a minute after Arthur left; he must have been hovering, but Merlin was hardly surprised.

“You know,” he said conversationally, as Bran bustled in, agog, desperate for gossip, Merlin knew, but too well trained to ask. “You really are a cunningly disguised little old woman.”

Bran gave him a speaking look, but oddly, whatever sarcastic reply was on his lips he kept in and began instead to pick up a heavy wool blanket from the leather sack in which it had been transported, folding it neatly for the cupboard.

Merlin frowned, thrown.

It was totally unlike Bran not to give as good as he got; often better. But after a moment Merlin thought he might understand why.

The king had visited Merlin’s rooms. The king who was increasingly worshipped by Camelot’s people; the king they didn’t see as a human being with flaws and faults like their own, but a kind of demigod in their midst. Now, his glory had finally reflected in full measure on Merlin, in Bran’s eyes, as it had reflected, Merlin knew, in far greater measure, upon Gwen.

But she had to have it. She was the queen.

Merlin didn’t like it at all.

“He didn’t even help tidy up, the turniphead,” he muttered deliberately, and began to think the remaining books onto the shelves. “Mind you, he’s never picked up after himself in his life, so its probably just as well he didn’t try.”

Bran gave him a of look of scandalised shock, but he didn’t tell Merlin off as he would have done just the day before. Which was a real cleft stick, Merlin thought ironically – Bran would think he should reprove Merlin, out of respect for Arthur. But he couldn’t, because Arthur had shown Merlin such favour.

He rolled his eyes and continued to use his magic to speed the settling in.

The other servants didn’t come back, so he and Bran worked in something less than their usual
relaxed camaraderie until the room resembled order, but by the end, after a number of choice tales about Arthur’s prattishness, Bran was answering back again, which satisfied Merlin enormously. He just hoped he could make it last.

But then he supposed, if Bran discovered his sexual relationship with Arthur, both of them might lose Bran’s respect. Maybe, Merlin mused, maybe he should just tell him everything. Straight out.

Just.. not yet.

When the room was more or less in order at last he left Bran building a fire, and headed to Gaius’ rooms, hoping against hope that the older man was there. As it transpired, he was in luck.

Gaius was pouring a deep red liquid into a metal bowl when Merlin answered the call to enter. He watched as the substance inside reacted with a kind of greyish smoke, then Gaius began to speak as his eyes glowed. The incantation instantly seemed to provoke a more spectacular reaction. The smoke thickened to a sulphurous ochre and gold sparks flew upwards. Then everything settled and Gaius leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction.

“There,” he said, “That should do it. Kay’s squire has damp in his chest.” He didn’t even look up, but began immediately to decant the liquid from the bowl into a glass phial. It was a spectacular crimson colour.

Merlin frowned and nodded, though Gaius couldn’t see. Damp could spread quickly, until the patient was barely able to breath if things were allowed to get out of hand; in the end their own lungs drowned them. And truth be told, without magic it took a miracle to stop it. But Gaius was able to utilise all his abilities at long last to heal without fear of retribution.

He had learned though, through so many years as a reformed sorceror under Uther’s cold gaze, that open bravery did not pay, and even these days he didn’t do magic in public, even though it was widely known his remedies were now infinitely more effective, and why. Still the physician's gut fear remained. Only a very select few had seen Gaius’s eyes glow gold.

“They’re gone,” Merlin offered.

Gaius glanced up at last. His eyebrow snaked upwards.

“Yes,” he said, “I saw.” He turned his attention back to the bowl and the bottle. “And you are troubled by cockroaches, I hear.”

Merlin started and flushed brightly enough to match the remedy slowing to a trickle in the phial in Gaius hand. He didn’t know why he was surprised. Gossip may begin with servants, but it reached higher ears quickly enough. Gwen would know by now what Arthur’s ridiculous assertion had brought, he thought nervously.

“I wasn’t expecting it,” and he knew it sounded like an excuse. Nothing to do with me...

“Well,” Gaius put down the bowl and picked up a wax stopper to push into the narrow neck of the bottle. “Arthur does tend to go all out, once he’s decided on something.” He gave his full attention to Merlin then. “Are you angry with him?”

Merlin opened his mouth to answer, then he stopped. He forced honesty.

“No. I’m glad he … that he…” He couldn’t finish, but his high colour said it all he supposed.

Gaius’ mouth twitched upwards and he gestured to Merlin to sit as he began to potter around,
finding the weak, sweet ale he favoured, pouring it into cups.

“So is this a social call? Nothing troubling you?” he teased.

Merlin gave a rueful, relieved grin and began to recount all Myrthryn had told him, unburdening his fears, sharing his concerns, just as he always had with Gaius.

When he finished, when he’d placed the Rhegedian medallion in Gaius’ hand, he waited for a few hushed seconds.

Gaius was handling the object with obvious reverence, and when he looked back up at Merlin there was the same awe in his eyes as there had been in Myrthryn’s. Merlin blinked.

“For all I know of who you are, Merlin,” he said softly, “It’s still a jolt to see an object that’s waited centuries to find you. I forget sometimes how great you will be.”

Merlin stared at the old man for a horrified moment, then he bit his lip and bowed his head. He felt in that moment, finding veneration in his old friend’s gaze, somehow not more than human, but less.


He gritted his teeth.

“Morgana. And Mordred. They must know that it’s done. And Aithusa…” He trailed off. He could never think of her without a huge stab of regret.

“Well, I suppose the Rhegedians intent must have been known to some, for a long time. The prophecy … about Emrys and The Once and Future King… many people of magic will have heard it over the centuries.”

“Then why… why are they opposing it? I don’t get it. They wanted magic back and Arthur's allowed it, and now… that ancient prophecy they’ve all wanted fulfilled, as a sign of better things…. Why aren’t they pleased? And the other stuff… about the far future. I don’t understand any of it, but it sounds important? Why would they try to stop it?”

Gaius huffed a small laugh. “Oh, Merlin. I’d have thought you’d have have a better grasp of human nature by now …. It’s irrelevant to them if Arthur brings back magic, or if he’s the Once And Future King, or what Emrys is fated to do… for Morgana and Mordred now, its about hatred and power, not principle. They want to win. They want to wipe out the Pendragon line. They want to destroy you. That’s what it is now. It’s personal,” he finished simply.

Merlin held his gaze and nodded slowly in agreement. He’d known it really.

“Have you spoken to the Great Dragon?” Gaius asked as he refilled their cups.

Merlin sighed. “Not about this.”

“Perhaps you should. If Aithusa was involved…”

Merlin looked away.

Aithusa was their joint burden of guilt, he and Kilgarrah; their joint culpability.

“Tonight,” Merlin promised.
He spent the rest of the day with Gaius, because for once there were no meetings of council or the Round Table or royal audiences. For once he could pretend things were as they had been when he first came to Camelot.

So he assisted the old man when he visited Kay’s squire, who was indeed in quite a bad way, and helped him make up fresh medicines with herbs and roots just gathered by Gaius’ new apprentice. Merlin found the day immensely restful and he stayed happily for dinner, relaxing with his old mentor as he could with no one else.

When he left, it was late; dusk was gathering. He dithered for a moment, worried that Arthur might decide to make use of the new door in his absence and burst in on Bran preparing the rooms for bedtime. He tried not to imagine it: Bran looking up, to see Arthur apparently walking through the wall. The screeching that would follow… But no, he told himself, Arthur wasn’t that stupid. He’d thought up the plan after all; he’d know the door couldn’t be safely used until everyone else was in bed.

He nodded decisively to himself and headed out of the castle, then followed the well-worn path to the clearing outside the town where he could safely summon Kilgarrah. The evening was calm and held the warmth still of the beautiful day it had been; the light just beginning to mute, to dull the bright fresh colours of early summer. He heard the early hoot of an owl; saw bats circling, chasing the tiny biting insects that plagued the town at this time of year. He felt a bone deep contentment in the moment and he revelled in it.

The dragon, as ever, appeared swiftly, as if he spent his life just waiting for Merlin’s call. Merlin was pretty sure it wasn’t like that in reality, but it was a nice conceit. He was smiling as Kilgarrah swept gracefully downwards and settled in front of him; smiling and he realized, happy. So different a mood from the desperation pumping through his veins when he last stood here, frantic to find escape at any cost.

“Merlin,” the dragon said graciously, “You summoned me.”

“Yes. I just… I wanted to tell you what I’ve learned. Since the last time I saw you.”

“Indeed.” Kilgarrah inclined his head.

“I was a bit …upset.” The dragon said nothing to that clumsy understatement, merely held his great unblinking eyes on Merlin and waited. Merlin chewed his lip; he hardly knew where to begin. With the important bit, he thought determinedly. “The Rhegiedians only came here to get us to complete the bond - Arthur and me. The rest of it… the diplomacy, the alliance… they were … they’re important to Camelot but they were excuses really. Myrthryn said …their role had been laid down, centuries before. “

“Then, they have their prize,” Kilgarrah said loftily, "But if not Rheged, something or someone else would have forced you and Arthur to see your course eventually. It was inevitable. It was simply a question of when and how.”

“But…that’s... hang on. I thought you said… you said destiny couldn’t be escaped. So if that was their destiny for centuries, then no one else could have... If they hadn’t come, we’d have carried on like before?”

Chapter 6
“I have learned …” Kilgarrah intoned, "The path may differ, but the end can not change. For Rheged… that was a path they believed long ago forseen, and much desired. But if they somehow had been stopped from playing their role, still, you and Arthur would have found your destiny. However others tried to prevent it.” Kilgarrah’s voice softened to something near gentleness, “And however badly you wished to escape it.”

Merlin gulped a shallow lungful of air, and let it go slowly.

“It …was you, wasn’t it,” he said, caught between wonder and accusation. A statement, not a question, “In my mind.”

Kilgarrah looked at him solemnly.

“I could not allow my soul brother to commit such a terrible crime.” Merlin flinched and bowed his head. There was a short uncomfortable silence. “Besides, if not I, something would have stopped you…” The dragon paused delicately, and his tone took on an almost teasing note. “After all… it was not…”

And Merlin knew he was being let off the hook.

“My destiny? I gathered.” He smiled feebly, then sobered.

He braced himself, drew in a deep breath through his nose.

“Aithusa went to Rheged to try to persuade them to stay out of it,” he blurted, “To stay away from Camelot.”

They looked at each other for a long moment, then the dragon turned his great head away. His pain was palpable, and it wrenched at Merlin’s heart.

“Yes,” Kilgarrah said sadly at last, “Aithusa was the lesson I needed to learn. But,. I learned too late.”

He sounded beaten, defeated and though Merlin was familiar with his reaction to any mention of Aithusa’s choices, her suffering, familiar with the way Aithusa had diminished his old friend, there was something more in Kilgarrah’s voice that set Merlin’s teeth on edge, some truth he sensed was about to be told.

Merlin frowned.

“I don’t understand,” he said carefully, hoping that sudden overwhelming gut feeling of alarm didn’t tell in his voice.

“What I said.” Kilgarrah’s reply was at once, snappish, impatient. Merlin was reminded that while clarity had never been one of the dragon’s most obvious virtues, he hated to be asked for elucidation. But then, surprisingly, he chose to answer, still in that irritated, sharp tone that Merlin had come to recognize as defensiveness. “That no one can truly change fate. Destiny. I …tried. I was arrogant enough to try. I sought to persuade you to have them die before their time… Pendragon’s nemeses …the witch and the druid boy. You saw the outcome… the judgement of the Disir. I did persuade you to defy the prophecy of the end of my race… and Aithusa is the fruit. I tried to forestall the betrayal of your king, leading to his end… But I learned that the end will always be the same. Only the route can alter.”

The foreboding Merlin had felt gathering in his gut since the name of Aithusa had been mentioned, began to curdle and freeze, an icy lump against his spine. His suspicions were a sharp pain in his
“What do you mean… ‘forestall the betrayal’? Kilgarrah? Was that what you wouldn’t tell me the other night?” He summoned his Voice, commanded sonorously, “Tell me now.”

Kilgarrah sighed wearily. “The queen. And the First Knight.”

Merlin stared at him blankly. The First Knight? Of all things, he really hadn’t expected that. Ancient painful history.

“What?” he managed incredulously.

Kilgarrah blinked slowly. “It was foretold. They would betray Arthur, and the discovery of that betrayal would tear the heart from Camelot and Albion… begin its downfall in this life.”


“Wrong? No.”

Merlin huffed a desperate, disbelieving laugh.

“Yes, you are! You know you are! It was all one of Morgana’s plots. She managed to call Lancelot from beyond The Veil and controlled him, and she enchanted Gwen. She almost managed to break up Gwen and Arthur, but in the end, she failed…” And he could recall so clearly his own huge, huge shame when it was all discovered, that he had ever believed, even for a second, that Gwen would voluntarily have let herself betray Arthur, or that others were allowed to believe that Lancelot would even consider it… His own failure to thwart Morgana, to save Gwen from exile…

“Merlin.” Kilgarrah said firmly, sadly. “In time…it would have been so. The witch played out a pale imitation of the great tragedy fated for Arthur and Camelot. But it was nothing. A weak, pitiful farce compared with what had been foretold, if I had not interfered.”

And all Merlin could find to say was, “You?” He felt frozen, terrified, unable to comprehend the irony that he had come to tell the dragon that all was well; that the worst of the pain was over.

“Ah. You did not notice my treachery? That I placed the encouragement there before the most noble of men, while he still lived? Nudged him inexorably, toward the route that he took?”

Merlin thought back frantically to the days of terror trying to stop Arthur’s sacrifice to the Cailleach. And suddenly, clearly, he recalled the moment he bade farewell to Kilgarrah, his old friend; Kilgarrah’s words to him before Lancelot…

“He was my friend!” A howl of protest. Of anguish.

“And Arthur Pendragon’s downfall.”

“Lancelot would never have betrayed Arthur in his right mind! He was too noble!”

“And the queen, too pure of heart?”

“Yes!” Merlin shouted desperately, but he was afraid.

“And yet, that was their destiny.”

Merlin shook his head violently. “So you averted it. You averted it, and you said no one can!”
“I said it. The road to the final end may vary, but the end will come.”

“What end?”

“The end of Camelot.”

“But…” Desperately. “Gwen’s future… if all that were true which I do not believe for a second… that’s changed hasn’t it?”

“Perhaps. But that is as trivial and unimportant to history as Rheged’s small triumph. She is but one strand in Arthur Pendragon’s great destiny. There is no Once And Future Queen.” Merlin made a sound of protest but Kilgarrah ignored him. “Do you not understand, young warlock? Ultimately I changed nothing. Perhaps the future I have brought about… perhaps the route to the end I helped create, is worse.”

“But that’s… even if I believed it… anything would be better than that. Gwen wouldn’t lie or….”

“I believed, anything would be better than the end of my kind. See my pain.”

Merlin tried to breathe steadily, but he could feel the tightness of panic and distress in his chest, the hard hammering of his heart, frantic tears blurring his sight.

“The end… You said… you said Mordred… and Morgana… I stopped them. You know I did… The vision… it didn’t happen!”

“No, Merlin. You know you did not. In your heart. You know Mordred was born to be Arthur’s true bane. In this life. And the witch. She will play her part, for all my efforts in the past, for all your efforts. They too have great destinies; too great for any real interference.”

“Great?” Merlin felt like sobbing, but his voice held steady somehow. He’d wanted so much to forget what Kilgarrah had said at the start awaited them, to hope for pardon.

“Evil can also be great.”

There was silence between them as Merlin struggled to absorb what Kilgarrah had told him, his confession.

That he had discovered that destiny could not be thwarted; that he had tried, and played with the lives of Merlin’s friends.

“It’s… you’re wrong, you know!” Merlin repeated doggedly, “Gwen and Lancelot… they would never have…”

“And still that is all that concerns you?” Kilgarrah asked incredulously.

“No! No… It’s just…”

That was the bearable part; the guilt, the destiny, he could bring himself to think of. And if that was wrong, maybe the rest of it was too. He almost hiccuped a laugh, half hysteria. Gwaine thought he was obsessed, and maybe he was, with his image of Gwen; perfect, always truthful. And he thought about what Gaius had declared; that Gwen could never want anyone enough to overcome her principles, her goodness…

“Was it us?” His voice sounded raw to his own ears. “I mean… would it have been… us? Arthur and me? Would we have driven her to it?”
“That future is gone,” the dragon said harshly.

“But she was exiled for a kiss and we…”

“She is queen. In any future, of all women, a queen must be beyond reproach.”

“But she didn’t… it’s not fair!”

“Fair? “ Kilgarrah’s voice raised suddenly to its most intimidating pitch, and all his unaccustomed patience and humility were gone in an instant. ‘Is any of what is to come, fair? The end of my kind? The fall of the kingdom? And you whine of the bitterness of the blacksmith’s daughter? You are Emrys. You are the present and the future. You and Arthur Pendragon are one for eternity, and your future is the future of your race. The rest of what is to come in this life…it will fall as it will. I will meddle no more. My time is done.”

He spread his wings and turned away, urgently ready for flight.

“Wait! Kilgarrah!” It was a human plea, desperate, full of fear and of pain, not the voice of a Dragonlord. Yet Kilgarrah stilled.

“Will we...? “ Merlin’s breath heaved in a sob, “Will we have time?”

Kilgarrah turned his head and looked over his shoulder at his Dragonlord, almost surprised.

“You will have eternity,” he repeated almost reprovingly.

“No.... Now. Will we have...?” He choked to a halt.

He didn’t know why he was asking; it was beyond insanity. Useless. Hadn’t he learned that lesson? Too much knowledge of his own future, of the future of the people he loved, could summon madness.

He didn’t want to know. And yet, yet, he needed to.

There was a short, aching pause, and Kilgarrah turned away again, until Merlin could no longer see anything of his face, just the back of his magnificent head.

“Yes,” Kilgarrah said softly, “You will have time.”

With two graceful sweeps of incredible power he had left the ground beneath him, and within thirty seconds more he had gone into the lovely midnight-blue dusk.

Merlin stood alone in the velvety darkness.

He was shaking, he realized, trembling from the inside out. He clenched his teeth hard and lowered his head, fighting against the tears burning at his closed eyelids.

He was so, so tired… weary of knowing too much, hearing too many secrets, bearing too much of other people’s fate.

He knew it was laughable that he felt guilt even for a future that hadn’t come to pass. But he did, somehow. Was it better Lancelot had died and been unfairly shamed, or better that he lived and brought shame on himself?

Merlin huffed a muffled sob, half a bitter laugh.
Who did it matter, in the end?

Lancelot had been flotsam… human flotsam, come and gone, and the great event he and Gwen were to have triggered would happen anyway, with or without them. The end of everything Merlin loved.

He’d always believed in his soul, that he could halt it. That was how he’d lived with it, so easily for so long. He’d told himself he’d stopped Mordred. In his arrogance, he’d believed-- known-- the worst couldn’t really happen; that something would stop it, because... it had to. Just, as it transpired, Kilgarrah had believed.

And now at last, Merlin accepted, and he felt as if the acceptance would crush his heart.

Destiny… great destiny, good or ill, could not be denied. And destiny would bring both, to Arthur and to himself.

_You have eternity._

He repeated it over and over now again like a prayer against the darkness. But eternity was just a word to him.

He was Merlin of Ealdor, who’d played in the fields and woods, who’d hated his ears for the twenty four years it had taken him to finally grow into them, who’d longed for a father he hadn’t known, who’d put up with Arthur Pendragon the turniphead, and loved him for longer than he’d ever realised.

_Arthur and Merlin_. That was what he _knew_.

That was what he couldn’t bear to lose.

He took deep, calming breaths, trying to ease his soul-deep panic, let the peace of the summer’s night seep into him. It took whole minutes and his nails had dug deep crescents in the meat of his hands, but at last he felt he could control his emotions enough to be seen by others.

He left the glade and walked back to the castle.

His rooms were welcoming when he reached them. Bran had done sterling work and his few belongings were now set around his new chambers as if they had always been there. A small fire was flickering in the grate to take any edge off the night air and a tub of water stood by his dressing screen.

Bran of course was nowhere to be seen because Merlin had drummed into him - though it had taken months to break his conditioning as a perfect manservant - that when he was late, Bran should go to bed.

Merlin shed his clothes slowly, wearily, then heated the water as he stepped into it. He relaxed in the blessed warmth, letting the buoyancy ease his muscles and ease the sweat from his pores, and he purposely didn’t think or consider or remember. He was so good at that.

He simply washed efficiently, mind blank, and rose when he felt clean, water dripping in rivulets from his drenched hair to shiver down his cooling back. He dried himself quickly and pulled on the light sleeping drawers and tunic left for him on the chair beside the fire. It wasn’t until he was tying the lace of his trousers, that he heard the new door behind him open.

He swung round at once to see Arthur peering cautiously around it, as if he half suspected people
were lurking silently out of his direct line of sight. But as he saw Merlin standing by the fire, he straightened and walked confidently into the room, closing the door behind him.

“Well… that worked,” Arthur said smugly.

Merlin tried to smile, tried to think of what to say, but he found he couldn’t find a thing, not one word to save him.

Arthur was standing before him expectantly, glorious and arrogant and vital - and all Merlin could do was stare, taking in his tousled blond hair and those familiar, slightly shabby sleeping clothes Merlin used to lay out for him himself. The acid burn of clawing, gibbering fear seared brutally through his vitals.

How long did they have? Really? Oh God... how long before he had to give him to flames, or the cold earth?

He drew in a shaky breath, too like a sob for Arthur to miss it. And inevitably, Merlin saw him frown, and move quickly toward him.

“Merlin?” he asked sharply.

“Hello. I just… I’m fine. Really.” Merlin managed to summon a shaky smile, trying desperately to pull his old powers of dissembling around him. “Just…you know…” he trailed off miserably.

Out of practice, he thought without humour.

He looked down at the rug he was standing on, totally unable to meet Arthur’s concerned eyes, mind scrabbling frantically for an excuse, an explanation.

“Right. Well. I hope that’s not the same ‘you know’ as earlier,” Arthur said lightly, but he was trying to duck down a little to meet Merlin’s lowered gaze. When Merlin darted a glance up, Arthur was still frowning. “It’s not meant to make you want to cry.”

“I’m not… crying!” Merlin snapped back with a kind of irritable relief. Because that –anger- was a fluttering straw to grasp at. And that accusation, the taint of tears and weakness, had always been explosive between them.

“Yes, you are. Your eyelashes are all damp, like a girl.”

Merlin’s head jerked up and he glared into Arthur’s bland eyes. “There you go again. I’m not a girl!”

“But you’re a girl!” Arthur returned obnoxiously. “See? They’re all sort of …clumped up.” Arthur reached out a finger and poked near his eye, hitting the bridge of his nose instead.

“Stop! Just… Stop looking at my eyelashes! You’re the girl!” Merlin glared back while even as he said it, acknowledging the childishness of it.

But he realised he needed something, something to make Arthur real and solid to him, even if it was a stupid squabble.

Arthur, he noticed then, had settled into a lopsided smirk. He looked so stupidly pleased with himself, Merlin thought achingly; clearly considering himself incredibly clever for hauling Merlin out of his melancholy, even with anger. He probably even thought he’d been subtle.
Merlin knew Arthur hated dealing with sadness, hated seeing it in those he cared for. Hated causing it.

“I’m simply pointing out,” Arthur began, with lofty, provocative satisfaction. “That…”

Merlin’s mouth was pressed urgently against his before Arthur could move a muscle in reaction. Merlin hadn’t planned it. He simply hadn’t been able to stand not touching for another second. All that greed, all the vicious, starving greed he felt inside him, couldn’t be denied… scratching for satisfaction beneath the fear of all the times ahead. The times he would plead and howl to the skies, for want of this.

Arthur’s surprise lasted only an instant, and then he was kissing back, mouth open with gleeful cooperation as their tongues battled for dominance, all Merlin’s hunger reflected back to him. Merlin realized abruptly, dazedly, that this was the first time he’d ever initiated a proper kiss between them himself; the first time he’d ever taken the sexual initiative with Arthur, rather than being swept along by Arthur’s determination. And that seemed to have hit home with Arthur too. His response was overwhelming, arms holding Merlin against him like iron chains, even as Merlin’s hands gripped his golden hair to steady him for the eager probe of his tongue.

Merlin’s arousal was overwhelming, his cock rigid, agony in his thin trousers, his mind already half demented with all he wanted, all he needed. He wrenched his mouth away.

“Maybe… you need proof,” he said roughly. “I… am not a girl.”

Arthur’s eyes opened, fighting to understand, widened, then narrowed, and Merlin could see the battle raging in him.

He began to pull back and Arthur let him, but it was obvious that reluctance almost defeated curiosity. He wanted to take control; that was Arthur. But Merlin wasn’t going to allow that - not this time. He wouldn’t use his magic but he wouldn’t need to. This was man to man.

He began to push his body forward with steady force, forcing Arthur to give ground or stumble, and that was how they backed to Merlin’s new bed, falling together onto the rich purple cover. Out of nowhere Merlin’s mind flashed stupidly to the image of the two pretty girls smoothing it on the bed that morning, and he wondered how they’d feel to know he was going to have the young king naked on it.

The thought made him moan with arousal, wild with the idea of what he was about to do. To Arthur. God. To Arthur.

He set about it at once, hauling at Arthur’s sleeping tunic until he sat up and took it off impatiently himself, leaving his hair in even more disarray. Then Merlin’s campaign moved to the tie of Arthur’s light trousers, pulling until it gave and the fabric gaped open. He didn’t touch Arthur’s beautiful erection though. Not yet. He stood instead, and dispensed with his own tunic and trousers, as Arthur, after a second of wide eyed staring, wriggled out of his own.

When Merlin crawled back onto the bed they were both naked and feverishly aroused, Arthur on his back, Merlin crouched over him on all fours.

Merlin stayed there for long seconds, his blood-tight erect cock hanging almost parallel to his tense stomach, the weight pulling on his swollen balls, as he tortured himself with looking. Anticipating.

He thought he’d never seen such beauty as this sight: Arthur lying bare and aroused and apprehensive on his bed, waiting for him. His skin was that even, smooth, light gold that Merlin
adored, his chest hair and the hair at his navel and groin, a darker blond. Merlin’s eyes raked over him greedily, drinking in his loveliness, so blinded by it, that it was only when Arthur reached up suddenly to touch the medallion dangling and swinging from Merlin’s neck that Merlin remembered to dart his gaze to Arthur’s throat to look for its twin.

All he could see was the chain, because the medallion had slid to the side, out of sight, behind Arthur’s shoulder when he lay down, but Merlin recognized the antiquity of it; the rich burnished yellow of the gold. He stared at it, mesmerized and frozen, and suddenly they were both outside the bubble of sexual need; joined instead in fascination of the ancient physical proof of who they were.

Arthur caught the medallion between two fingers and he was looking at it as if he’d never seen it before while Merlin, balanced on his knees and one hand, gently reached out to pull the other circle of metal from the pillow behind Arthur’s shoulderblade.

He slid it round on its chain and let it drop onto Arthur’s chest and turned it and yes, it was exactly the same. A coin with the same two sides as his own. But while his medallion, he’d noticed, tended always to fall with the dragon facing outwards on display, however he twisted it, Arthur’s seemed to face the opposite way, showing the image of the falcon. The merlin.

“You’re wearing it,” Arthur commented softly but there was no teasing in him. He sounded almost reverent, as if the sight of Merlin’s necklace perhaps, had renewed his wonder about his own.

Merlin gave a tiny amused smile.

“So are you,” equally soft.

“Myrthryn told you? About… of course he did.”

Merlin sighed and nodded, trying so hard not to think about it, what Myrthryrhn had told him about their enemies, what Kilgarrah had added.

But the fear of inevitability hit him like a blow between the eyes, harsh and breath-stealing and overwhelming.

“Don’t take it off,” he whispered suddenly, urgently, so urgently that Arthur’s eyes snapped up from the dangling medallion to meet his own, startled. “Ever. Don’t ever…”

*Keep it on. Keep it on. Keep it on when you have to go to the fire, or the earth! Keep me with you!*

He knew his distress was obvious again, all over him, for Arthur to see. But it was as much a part of him now as his skin, just as impossible to shed.

“I’m just… just being…” he choked off.

“A great girl.” Arthur said with an attempt at world weariness, at ‘typical Merlin,’ but his eyes were alert, searching, worried.

“Promise me?” He shouldn’t ask it. Gwen would see, would know probably. Certainly. But he couldn’t help it. “Promise?”

Arthur held his stare with a small puzzled frown creasing his forehead, then it slowly cleared.

“I promise,” he said indulgently at last. Then, “You too,” he demanded gruffly.
Merlin gave a sobbing kind of half laugh. “I promise.”

It felt ridiculously like a wedding, he thought stupidly, with no witnesses, no officiator, no ring. Bran would be furious he’d missed it. He laughed again, but this time it felt and sounded almost real.

Arthur’s full mouth quirked.

“So…” he said, eyebrow raised. “We were discussing your utter girlishness…”

Merlin shook his head half hysterical amusement. He realised his erection was still near to full, incredibly, but the bursting urgency of imminent orgasm was gone, blurred by the reality of fear.

“We were?” He let himself lie down at last, all his naked weight on top of Arthurs’ prone body, skin to skin, like two real lovers. His knees pushed Arthur’s apart and there Merlin was, lying between his king's spread thighs.

They both drew breath sharply, minds again very clearly snapped back to focus on sex.

Arthur’s half smile deepened, eyes challenging, baiting, and he raised his hips and pushed them against Merlin’s. Merlin’s response was humiliatingly instant. The moment his prick rubbed against Arthur’s still stiff cock, he felt as if his spine began to melt.

He whimpered, “That’s… oh…” and helplessly rolled and pressed his lower half down in return. He heard Arthur groan too as he arched up into the movement, head back on the pillow, throat stretched and vulnerable.

“Oh. God,” Merlin moaned. “What can I do to prove you’re wrong?”

He’d meant to make it seductive but it had emerged blurted with desperate earnestness. Because he wanted above all to give Arthur pleasure; show him how a man could make another man feel.

Arthur’s eyes were blue slits in his flushed face and he looked blissed out with each tiny, helpless jerking movement of Merlin’s hips.

“What d’you…? Ahhh… You … Could … Just keep on…” he panted.

Merlin chuckled breathlessly.

“I was going to suck your prick,” he announced, with no seduction technique at all.

Arthur’s eyes shot wide open.

He stared at Merlin with a mix of shock, panic, doubt, disgust and yes, unquestionably, lust. But Merlin, as he stared mutely back, saw the instinctive depth of rejection in Arthur’s eyes and his heart sank.

He remembered sinkingly the apprehension that had taken hold that first time as Arthur’s lover. Remembered again that until now, all they’d done had involved Merlin bending over, taking Arthur’s fuck like a woman would. Was that all Arthur would ever want…? All he could cope with?

A man for women. Would he ever be anything else, at heart?

For a moment, hurt as he was, Merlin almost allowed Arthur to decide for himself, go with his gut reaction and his upbringing. But that lasted only a moment.
Then he thought viciously, *No! He wants me.* And he wouldn’t waste another second of their time together, with self doubt.

He circled his hips again, ruthlessly.

“You asked me to show you. What I do …with Gwaine..?” He trailed off delicately but he saw with a kind of wry satisfaction, the moment doubt and disgust flipped over into jealousy and anger and determination. “Arthur?” All innocence. “I mean I don’t have to… D’you still want…?”


Merlin smiled. “Right then. All you have to do…” He began to squirm down Arthur’s sturdy, muscular body rubbing deliberately all the way. “…is lie there and…” His mouth reached the bush of Arthur’s pubic hair and he blew on it gently, grinning at the resulting full body jerk of reaction. The fierce, dirty thrill of control shot through him. “…enjoy it. I’d think that’ll come easily to you,” he added, slyly. “Letting me do all the work.”

That seemed to get through, because Arthur raised his head and peered down the length of his body to glower at Merlin indignantly. But then he seemed to truly take in the sight of the other man crouching naked between his spread thighs, mouth hovering over his swollen groin, and his eyes shot up to meet his lover’s, hot and desperate.

He gave a deep groan and let his head fall back onto the pillow, as he threw a forearm over his eyes.

The invitation for Merlin to go ahead and do his worst couldn’t have been clearer.

Merlin grinned, heart hammering against his ribs with happiness and adoration and that tenuous power.

He knew all too well that Arthur loathed being passive in any part of his life; he needed to be in charge. But for all his instinctive rejection of it, he was allowing it now, for Merlin. Yes, Merlin knew realistically, it was pure possessiveness and competitiveness and actually the opposite of passivity, but in the end… in the end it gave Merlin the chance to show him that giving up control wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Maybe?

He took his time now, concentrating, studying Arthur’s body minutely.

This close, he could see how silky his pubic hair was, more so than Merlin’s own or Gwaine’s; he could follow the fine veins on his cock; weigh with his eyes the big balls lying between muscular, lightly-haired thighs.

Perhaps he indulged himself too long.

He heard a desperately impatient muffled, yet still threatening, “Merlin!” from behind Arthur’s arm, in something close to the tone in which he’d demanded his manservant get on with cleaning his armour, or bringing his dinner. Which Merlin almost pointed out.

But he was finished with teasing.

He lowered his mouth and went to work.

With the greatest pleasure he licked and sucked everywhere he could reach as Arthur moved restlessly, convulsively beneath him, grimly silent, but absolutely responsive. He mouthed at Arthur’s incongruously soft, smooth inner thighs, which fell open helplessly wider in response; he kissed and licked the crease between his legs and his trunk; his belly and his navel. He reached
underneath and gripped Arthur’s splendid backside, as, he realized only then, he’d wanted to do 
forever. And he mouthed at his sac, the line behind his balls, brushed dangerously, tantalisingly 
close to his hole, until, finally, he allowed himself the prize of his lovely cock.

He considered it carefully, amazed anew by its prettiness, by how swollen and desperate it looked 
even so, dribbling a steady stream of first weak seed from its tip.

It had given him an astonishing amount of joy already, he mused, but it had been doing all the 
work. Only fair to return the favour, properly.

When he pulled the cock’s helmet voraciously into his mouth, Arthur at last let loose a sound of 
desperation Merlin had never heard him make before; not through any extremity of pain or 
pleasure. Merlin smiled around the cock in his mouth and began a light sucking then, as Arthur 
settled into tiny, muffled, incoherent noises from behind that concealing forearm. His whole body 
seemed to be trembling.

Merlin took pity at last and began to bob his head, sucking hard, using his hand to caress the base 
of the big, rigidly hard erection, pulling off and squeezing when he thought Arthur was close. Even 
so, Merlin could tell that he wasn’t going to last long.

How was he coping with it? Merlin wondered suddenly, and with that dip back to reality, worry 
slid back in, unwelcome and cunning. How shocking must it be to experience this, if Arthur was 
used to straightforward lovemaking he always controlled; quick, enjoyable fucking… at most a 
swift suck-and-come in his past with that camp follower? Had he ever been worshipped like this 
before?

God… what would he think of Merlin for doing it? Why hadn’t Merlin worried about that before? 

He bent further to the task as he thought and panicked, suckling and tonguing automatically, going 
deeper, until his jaw began to ache just a bit too much. He knew Arthur was past ready.

He pulled off and looked up the length of Arthur’s torso, but Arthur’s arm was still hiding his face, 
hiding himself; hiding Merlin from his view. Merlin wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Arthur,” he called softly, then when there was no response, “Arthur!” louder.

Arthur pulled his arm away slowly and Merlin saw what he’d been hiding. He looked dazed and 
disorientated, his mouth bitten, his eyes hazy and bloodshot and desperate; his face flushed a 
bright, violent red. He looked wrecked, stunned, and Merlin didn’t think he’d ever seen him so far 
from commanding himself; not wounded, not ill, not in agony, not grieving, not excited.

Arthur hated losing control, Merlin thought with sudden sinking alarm, hated having his body or 
his mind defeat him.

“Look at me,” Merlin said urgently.

Arthur, after a second, obeyed but he focussed on Merlin’s swollen mouth with a kind of 
mesmerized fascination, as if he were looking at some object he had never before even imagined 
existed.

He still looked hazy, but Merlin thought, he could see awareness and self consciousness beginning 
to set in. He bit his lip hard.

“Do you… d’you want me to stop?”
Arthur’s eyes shot up to his and the utter defenceless horror in them was answer enough. Merlin felt something hard and scared inside him uncoil, relax. He wanted to grin with relief but he had enough sense to hold it in, not give Arthur any chance of believing he was being laughed at. “Or …” he said with sudden, mad daring, “…would you like to come in my mouth?”

Arthur’s eyes squeezed closed, hiding again. Merlin knew better than to try to force agreement after that, not when Arthur seemed to feel so vulnerable, so he leaned forward and gently kissed the crown of Arthur’s cock. Arthur’s whole body jerked as if he’d been stabbed, and Merlin hid his grin against the length of Arthur’s erection in his hand.

“Arthur,” he pleaded softly. Arthur at least responded, but he seemed to force his eyes open only with the greatest effort. “When you do it. Watch me.”

Arthur visibly gulped but his wide eyes fixed obediently on Merlin’s as he lowered his head, gazing up through his lashes, and sucked the swollen prick in again. Merlin never broke their incendiary stare as he ducked down and up, and down and up, and then finally deployed one of Gwaine’s best tricks: he hummed and sucked at the same time.

He saw Arthur’s final rapturous disintegration, heard his desperate groan, “Fuck! Merlin!” and felt the cock in his mouth swell and begin to spurt hard, so he pulled back slightly to let the squirting semen hit the back of his tongue and the roof of his mouth. He didn’t care about the taste; it could have tasted of anything. It was Arthur - Arthur’s seed, a lot of it, and all he wanted was more.

But when he looked back up at Arthur he wasn’t looking any more at the man worshipping his cock; he was gone, lost in pleasure. His head was thrown back again, digging into the pillow; jaw, Merlin could see, clenched hard against the noises he might have made, and his whole body was an arch of ecstasy.

Merlin took in the sight and revelled in it, rubbing his own erection restlessly, mindlessly against the soft purple covers; loving the feeling of Arthur’s cock and slippery spend in his mouth, hating the slow loss of his own short-lived power over him.

For just that long, he’d been the centre of Arthur’s world. Nothing else had mattered but Merlin’s mouth. Nothing else had mattered but Merlin.

He swallowed and suckled gently until the tumescence in his mouth began to deflate, then reluctantly he let it slide out, before pleasure could turn its edge to pain. Only then did he pull back and rise to his knees to begin to pump urgently his own desperate erection. Until then his own need had seemed almost unreal to him. Everything had been focused on Arthur.

Perhaps it was the rhythmic shaking of the bed that woke the other man from his sated stupor, because his eyes suddenly sprang open, totally himself again. Merlin moaned helplessly and his hand sped up.

He watched Arthur take in what was happening in front of him with what looked like a mixture of shock and uncertainty. At least no disgust though, this time, Merlin thought with grim, desperate humour, as his pumping hand gripped harder, more frantically. He wasn’t sure in truth if Arthur’s curiously innocent eyes were bringing him closer or further away from relief. But he wanted it over; his own need disposed of and out of the way.

He truly wasn’t expecting Arthur to reach out, grab his jerking arm and pull him down to lie beside him with a rough tug. And he certainly wasn’t expecting Arthur to push Merlin’s hand back onto his own cock and tentatively place his own hand over it, as if asking how Merlin liked it done.
But all it took was this: Merlin looked at Arthur’s disheveled hair and bitten mouth and dazed blue eyes, and he felt Arthur’s calloused hand in truth hindering his own, clumsy but determined on his prick, and he began to spurt copiously over his own knuckles and Arthur’s, whimpering his lover’s name.

Well, he thought uncertainly as he lay stunned and wrecked afterwards on the bed beside Arthur, that had certainly not been the smooth seduction he’d have dreamed of, if he’d thought about it. It had been a dirty, complicated, awkward, embarrassing mess. And real.

He closed his eyes, exhausted, his head resting on the same pillow as Arthur’s, bodies pressed together side by side, hot and sticky.

When he felt Arthur move though, a few seconds later, he was instantly alert, feeling the prickling urge to cling on, instinctively and embarrassingly, if he tried to leave yet. But Arthur didn’t try to get up; instead he only raised his own semen-covered hand and contemplated it as if he’d never seen a man’s seed before. Merlin thought painfully as he watched his profile, that the expression of fastidious, vaguely shocked distaste on his face would have seemed eminently funny under other circumstances.

He wouldn’t allow himself to feel hurt. He was determined on that. It wasn’t fair.

It would take a lot of small steps he knew… he couldn’t expect miracles.

He braced to push himself up, to grab his sleeping shirt from the floor to clean them both off, but before he could move, Arthur lifted his hand to his mouth and furtively, curiously licked his finger. Merlin jerked in a breath, wide eyed, and he told himself the expression of mild revulsion on Arthur’s face when he pulled his finger back didn’t disappoint him or hurt him. Not at all.

At least Arthur’d tried. It was a small step wasn’t it? Maybe even a big one.

But, “No one’s tastes of honey and wine, you know!” he snapped peevishly, quite unable to help it.

Arthur froze, clearly having imagined himself unobserved, and his expression wiped to diplomatic blankness, the face he presented to the court more often than not. If Merlin could have crammed those wounded, defensive words back into his mouth he would.

But Arthur, after a mortified second, turned his head on the pillow to look at him. Merlin blushed, to his horror, as he tried to look steadily back.

He could only imagine what was going on in Arthur’s head after what they’d done. What Merlin had done. To Arthur. What Merlin had asked to do to Arthur. Internally he was moaning with mortification and shame. Did Arthur think he was a slut, now? A male slut? Who else did those kind of things in Arthur’s world? Had he lost any respect he had? His heart began to pick up pace again.

“Well. I’m sure mine does,” Arthur said with familiar, matter of fact arrogance, designed to aggravate. “Whereas yours tastes of…”

On the whole Merlin thought, it was as well he was lying down because the relief he felt could have weakened his bones to mush.

“…Unwashed peasant?” he managed with a fair imitation of calm.

“Well you said it,” Arthur said fairly, but he was expecting the poke to his armpit and so repulsed the attack effectively and efficiently.
When he’d subdued Merlin, he tucked him under his arm. The seed on his hand had long since been lost to the struggle. Merlin beamed, staring contentedly out into the room across his broad chest.

They lay, exhausted, and drifting happily, in the soft bed, for long, contented minutes, a light sheet covering them, the purple cover a wrinkled mass at their feet.

Merlin, though he was as tall as Arthur and very determinedly not a girl, loved his position, curled up with his head on the strong chest, listening with religious focus to Arthur’s heartbeats.

He wondered idly if he should magic the bedding straight in the morning, thus have Bran asking questions at his sudden neatness, or if his manservant would buy the explanation of a restless night when he saw the bed. Or if the morning was the time for honesty.

“You’ll have to go, before Bran gets here. In the morning,” he volunteered lazily. “But… I think I’ll tell him tomorrow. I don’t think I could hide it from him for long anyway. Is that ok? Arthur?”

Arthur sighed, but he didn’t seem to feel at all as reluctant as Merlin to have the situation explained to anyone else. “Yes. Tell him. You’ll need him. William’s been a help already.”

Merlin pulled back to aim a glare at him.

“Yes. I’ve experienced William’s help. When did you tell him?” Despite himself, he felt instinctively irritated that Arthur had shared their secret with his manservant. He was vaguely aware of his own hypocrisy, but doggedly ignoring it.

“He worked it out, Merlin,” Arthur returned wearily, humouring the moron again. “He’d have to have been pretty thick not to know what was going on when he saw so much, and he’s anything but thick. He’s totally loyal.”

Merlin sniffed, still clinging hard to his grudge. “Yes, I know that. Loyal to you, anyway.”

“Yes. I’ve experienced William’s help. When did you tell him?” Despite himself, he felt instinctively irritated that Arthur had shared their secret with his manservant. He was vaguely aware of his own hypocrisy, but doggedly ignoring it.

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“Then he will be to you,” Arthur said as if it was obvious. Merlin felt his indignation deflating like a wrinkling balloon. Sometimes Arthur said things…

“Did you explain… about the prophecy and everything?” Because somehow Merlin couldn’t stand William - anyone - thinking they were just out for a fuck.

“He was in the hall when Myrthryn had his first audience. Really, I didn’t have to do much explaining.”

“Oh.” Merlin fell silent, working through his interactions with William in his head in this new light, cringing anew at the memory of the other man’s face when he’d walked in on Gwaine in Merlin’s bed.

“You can help me with my armour, tomorrow morning,” Arthur declared into the silence. He phrased it as an order, but his tone said he thought it was a gift.

Merlin grinned, totally diverted. “Miss me, did you? All that ‘most incompetent manservant’ thing… it was rubbish, wasn’t it?”

Arthur pushed his head back onto the pillow and looked down his nose at him. “I was actually thinking it would give William a bit of entertainment to repay him for his loyal service. He could do with a laugh.”
Merlin made an indignant noise and tried a bit more pushing and shoving but his heart wasn’t in it. He wanted to take Arthur up on it very badly actually. He’d missed it so much, the simple intimacy of helping Arthur with his armour. And suddenly he didn’t care if William was there; it might be nice to have someone with them who knew and accepted.

“All right. *Cabbagehead.*”

Arthur snorted.

The peace between them was clean and beautiful, just like the glade, and Merlin felt a surge of pure untainted happiness. All he feared, all the pain to come; it was worth it for this, for Arthur.

It was Arthur who broke the silence finally.

“So,” he cleared his throat, “That’s what you did when you... when you’re... for... ...Gwaine.”

Merlin stiffened but he didn’t look up at Arthur, stared instead into the flickering darkness of the room.

“Yes,” he said cautiously. "One of the things." He had a sudden mad urge to mention that he fucked Gwaine on a reasonably regular basis too, but he battled it down.

“Right.” Arthur returned stiffly. He didn’t sound pleased. “And.. he… did *that*… to… for you?” Merlin decided to ignore the past tense to address the more immediate issue.

“Yes. But... *you* don’t have to.”

There was a short silence. “*Gwaine* did though,” Arthur said. He sounded, Merlin thought, like a sulky boy.

“Well to be fair,” he returned. “*He* *has* had a lot of experience. I mean… *he* was the one who taught me.”

He wasn’t completely sure why he said it; impatience with Arthur’s attitude to Gwaine perhaps; or, unworthily, to use the weapon of Arthur’s jealousy again?

Either way, it had certainly worked.

He waited, still, as Arthur pulled back to glare down at him.

“You should be grateful to him, really,” Merlin continued provocatively as their eyes met and held.

Arthur stared him down. But Merlin was sure he saw the familiar look of a challenge accepted, before he was told to, “Shut up, Merlin,” cuffed on the head and tucked back under Arthur’s arm.

“Do you remember,” Merlin said idly, beginning to drift again, “The first time we met, you said you could take me apart with one blow.” He giggled, a high pitched sound of over-tired amusement, “and I said…”

“Yes, believe it or not, I can remember what you said, Merlin.” Arthur snapped back. “It’s a curse. I’d rather forget it all.”

“And here we are,” Merlin finished innocently. *So who was right?* the silence asked.

Merlin grinned against Arthur’s skin.
“I’d never have thought when I came to Camelot that I’d end up in bed with the king.”

He felt Arthur raise his head from the pillow and crane down to squint at him but he didn’t have the energy to look up to meet his gaze. He knew what it would be.

“Quite a bit happened between then and now, you know. You make it sound like you walked in the gates and the king hauled you off to have his wicked way.”

Merlin sniggered against chest again. “Wicked way?”

He heard an embarrassed huff. “What? You’d rather ‘you know’?”

Merlin poked him in the ribs, Arthur cuffed him and they settled again.

Sleep began to creep up on them, and Merlin could feel the miasma of sadness and melancholy just on the edge of his mind, trying to feed on the end of his distraction; seep into his peace, like ink into water.

But he wouldn’t let it. He wouldn’t ruin what he had, while he had it. He’d sacrificed so much to gain this over the years… seen and caused and felt so much pain, lost so many people he loved.

“Yeah…,” he said softly, absently. “A lot happened. You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right Merlin.” Then, after a beat or two, awkwardly, “I’m glad though.”

“Mmm?”

Arthur cleared his throat. “I’m glad you came … To Camelot.”

Merlin didn’t open his eyes, kept them tight-shut against the tears that threatened again.

“So am I,” he whispered into the darkness.

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The heat was stinking. Stifling. Thick and filthy.

And to wind the spring of his misery tighter, hair-trigger tight, a tickling drop of sweat ran disgustingly slowly between his shoulder blades down to enter the swamp at the small of his back.

Gwaine looked around him darkly at the others on the steps of the castle. All of them must be suffering equally, though few of them showed it. All of the knights and nobles and ladies standing here just like he was, wearing clothing so unseasonal only lunatics would consider it for this weather.

But that’s what he was now he supposed, in part. A courtier. And a lunatic. But he wore the mail of a knight, and today, again, it weighed heavily.

It was autumn, but the hot, hot summer was giving one last brutal kick before it departed. For weeks the sun had scorched down on fields being harvested of handsome crops; another bumper year for Camelot under Arthur’s glorious reign.

Gwaine shifted unobtrusively from foot to foot, and gazed tiredly at the scene unfolding.

The courtyard was full and chaotic in front of him: fine horses, and poorer animals weighed down with luggage and boxes, knights and squires, servants and attendants, all milling about, trying to
organise themselves into a reasonable line for travel. People were running up and down the steps to
the door of the castle shouting instructions, frantic, as the departure time approached. He ached to
take over, just to hurry things along, just to get out of the heat. Get this finished.

He glanced down at last to the foot of the part of the steps on which he and his fellow knights were
standing, in front of the rest of the court. Behind and a bit to the side of the action, but with a good
view of proceedings.

If you were nosy, like courtiers were.

Gwaine had actually been trying not to look too closely, to give some semblance of privacy, though
it was a very public farewell.

Arthur was as usual in his mail and his scarlet cloak, glowing and young and vital; Guinevere in
one of her finest gowns of jewelled dark red velvet cut to show her shoulders and bosom, her hair
flowing down her back, a jewelled band on her forehead. She looked every inch the queen;
whereas Arthur, Gwaine thought suddenly – Arthur didn’t really look any different at all from the
obnoxious princess he’d first met and saved from a bar room brawl. Gwen looked much
more royal
and grand and majestic than he did. The thought was wonderful, and he smiled evilly to himself.
No one noticed.

So he gave in and looked.

He could see Gwen’s face in profile from where he stood and he recognised easily the wide,
meaningless tooth-concealing smile that never reached her eyes. She wanted to go too. Gwaine
knew that very well; most of the court knew that. But circumstances – Fate – had stopped her.

At first it had been happy news – an heir, the kingdom thought, at last! – but the baby had bled
from her womb before it was three months there. Everyone had been devastated; Arthur had looked
like a dead man walking for weeks. And Gwen…she had kept her majestic composure, held her
head high and never showed weakness, as befitted a queen. But the whole castle heard talk of her
fits of weeping in her chambers and her need for Arthur’s efforts at comforting her. She’d lost alot
of blood Merlin had told him, and still she was suffering from cramps in her belly; she’d grown
thinner, withdrawn from many royal duties and looked frankly exhausted. But in the past week or
two, everyone thought and hoped, that at last she was on the road to recovery.

It was too soon to travel so far though, Gaius said firmly; so Gwen would stay and tend to Camelot,
and Gwaine and Leon and Bors were there to aid her for the two months or so Arthur would be
away formalising this great new alliance.

At least that was the public version. Privately… he knew Gwen had wheedled to go, and not, he
suspected, because she was desperate to see Rheged. The reason was emerging from the castle,
looking flustered and late as usual, with Bran fluttering at his heels, before visibly remembering
something and veering off back into the castle entrance, followed again by a startled Bran.

Gwaine’s mouth quirked and he gave a rueful shake of the head, hit by a wave of affection so
intense he felt his eyes begin to water with the force of it. He lowered his head, embarrassed, but
again he realised, no one was looking.

He was still in love if course; totally there, and he felt sometimes as if everything in his life now
was seen through the finest veil of sadness, where once his whole world had been sundrenched
with a mindless, taken-for-granted joy in just existing.

But he had come to finally see and understand how unimportant they all were, the people brushing
past the lives of Emrys and his Great King. Tiny figures on a player’s board; totally convinced of their own significance as they beavered around with their petty lives; entirely oblivious to the great game played out over their heads.

Gwen didn’t get it, he was pretty sure of that. He saw her lack of acceptance every day in the tight lipped smiles she gave to Merlin, in the way her mouth froze into that exact wide, strained grin she was wearing so often now when she watched Arthur squabble happily with his sorceror; follow him everywhere with his eyes. When she lost her baby, Merlin had been frantic with unreasoning guilt. But she wouldn’t let him near her, to try to help her or listen to her grief as a friend would. It was understandable, Gwaine supposed, in those gut-days of animal grief. Gwaine, and give him his due, Arthur, when he could, had let Merlin cry out his regret, and comforted him back to sense.

No, Gwaine didn’t think she saw at all the fated tale he saw now; he guessed she simply saw her king with another lover and she could not seem to stop trying to win him away.

Whereas Gwaine... Gwaine had just come to think of himself the luckiest of men to have grabbed a part of Merlin’s heart before the men of Rheged came to Camelot and showed them all how it was and had to be.

It hadn’t been immediate, of course. He wasn’t a good man, not really; as capable of holding a grudge and scheming as anyone, when pushed far enough. He’d enjoyed every minute of Caerlonn's end. So at the start, in his bitterness, he’d just plotted to hang on and chip away, until Merlin tired of being used by his old object of obsession; tired of being the King’s taken-for-granted lover, second always to his beloved queen. And of course he’d planned on rubbing Arthur’s nose in his own continuing possession every chance he got.

But then, the first night Merlin came to him as a lover again, he’d seen the medallion around Merlin’s neck. And he’d never been one to run away from truth. He’d seen its antiquity and its message, heard how Rheged had held it and treasured it for all those centuries, waiting for its owner. And just as Merlin said, he’d seen the same necklace exactly around the king’s throat when he stripped to his thin tunic, training with his knights in the scorching heat of this summer, and he’d understood his own insignificance.

On a human level of course, it was hard.

He still had Merlin’s love and his attention… they still shared Gwaine’s bed at times. But he knew where he stood and that fighting it was as pointless as trying to slay a dragon with a smile. He’d never really been much for lost causes, until Merlin came into his life.

He wondered sometimes if Gwen found it so impossible to bow before destiny because she was the queen, though god knew the kings Gwaine’d seen in his lifetime had lovers like bees made honey. Or perhaps, because she was a woman, unable to understand the love of men. He refused to believe it was because she loved Arthur more than he loved Merlin. That wasn’t possible.

Whatever drove her, in the end, he was sure it was the most merciful thing that she was held back from going to Rheged. He could only imagine the welcome, the joy, that awaited Emrys and his king. Acceptance or not, Gwaine didn’t want to see it, even if Arthur had suggested he come on the embassy - which he hadn't- and he didn’t want to imagine what it would do to Gwen.

The shambles in the courtyard had resolved itself by now, more or less, into a train of mounts and men fit to travel, and the king’s large, bay horse stood waiting, William already mounted beside it. Arthur, at last, ended his long, murmured farewell and raised Gwen’s hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles tenderly. Gwen’s brave, humourless, tight smile seemed to stretch until Gwaine thought her lips may split.
But Arthur’s smile was sincere and tender, Gwaine thought. Boyish, almost hopeful, as if he were pleading with her to understand. Then, with a last nod, he backed away and made for his horse.

The moment he settled in the saddle though, Arthur turned to look around him, frowning and focussed, and Gwaine had no doubt in his mind who he was looking for. When the King’s eyes settled on Merlin’s waiting horse, his frown deepened and his eyes narrowed. His survey of the courtyard became at once so far from casual that Gwaine wondered why no one else seemed to see his agitation.

As if on cue, Merlin trotted down the steps from the castle doors carrying a scuffed saddlebag, followed by Bran, who was still talking to the back of his master’s head and violently rolling his eyes. Merlin was smiling through it all; that sunny, sweet, happy smile with which he’d first captured Gwaine’s heart all those years ago.

“Merlin! For gods sake! Where’ve you been? You’re holding everything up!” Arthur’s impatient, imperious voice rang around the courtyard, though no one much paid any real attention. They were accustomed to the side show again.

Gwen visibly stiffened but she didn’t turn to look at Merlin, and Gwaine sighed inwardly.

“Running all the way, Sire,” Merlin said with huge sarcasm, as he reached his mount and began to clamber on, and, as he swung his leg over the saddle, he muttered a very audible “Dollophead,” before he turned a huge, innocent, comically obsequious grin on the king.

Arthur raised a quelling eyebrow, but he didn’t move his horse while Merlin began to walk his own mount forward toward him; Bran, on his own horse, plodding behind. Suddenly Merlin stopped, twisted round in the saddle and looked straight at Gwaine, raising a hand in farewell; his obnoxious grin now a soft, sweet little smile, remembering perhaps the goodbyes they’d said very enjoyably the night before.

Gwaine winked and saluted, taking in Arthur’s narrow-eyed reaction with great pleasure. There was acceptance after all, and there was rolling over with your paws in the air. *Keep you on your toes, you bastard,* he thought with a tiny, unexpected rush of pain.

Merlin nodded to Gwaine, still smiling softly, and turned in his saddle again, prodding his horse until it reached the side of Arthur’s. And only then, when Merlin was at his side, did Arthur call the procession to move out. It said everything, to anyone who cared to look, about what the king found necessary. What he found precious. It was probably as well for everyone, that so few people chose to see.

The horses moved forward at last to order, the group of knights at the front leading the way. After them came Arthur and Merlin, talking intently, with their servants behind them, followed by Percival, Bors and another group of knights, then the many wagons holding tents and supplies and gifts for the King of Rheged, and at last the substantial rearguard. It was an impressive expedition, a royal expedition, a message in itself; too large and be-weaponed, Gwaine hoped, for any sane bandit to attack. Not that they were very sane of course.

The embassy had Merlin with them though, if anyone tried to take their chance. They’d be fine.

The last wagon was trundling gracelessly out of the gates when Gwaine and his companions finally allowed themselves to relax and wilt in the brutal sun, ready to move inside again to the blessed, cool darkness of the castle.

But he saw that the queen still stood frozen where Arthur had left her, rigidly upright in her heavy
velvets, as if something as paltry as heat could not touch her. With Camelot’s knights at her back, she watched from the steps, until the last horse had disappeared from view, and even then she watched, as if she could see all along the long road ahead to Rheged.

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