The Twin Thrones

by Angelike

Summary

While visiting a neighbouring kingdom for peace negotiations on behalf of King Uther, Arthur finds his attempts to seduce Merlin thwarted at every turn. Hiding in the wardrobe seemed like a good idea at the time.

View the trailer here.

Notes

This endeavour would have never been possible without the fantastic moderators, krazykipper and merelyn, who conceived of the reel_merlin challenge this story was written for. Also, I owe my undying gratitude to jillsjourney, katerina_black, and hanelissar for looking over this monster and helping me whip it into shape. Trust me when I say that it is only thru their efforts that this story was rendered readable. And, of course, I must thank katerina_black (again—because she is just that awesome) and sallyna_smile for creating fabulous art for this story. My appreciation also goes to those of you on my f-list who have been listening to me blabbering about this story for nearly three months and never once told me to shut up. Your patience is astonishing.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Arthur had presence of mind enough to wait for Merlin to set the tray of bread and sweetmeats on the table before pinning him to the wall with all the force of his maddening frustration, taking full advantage of the younger man’s muffled gasp of surprise to plunder that pretty mouth the way he’d been imagining all morning. The long hours since those first teasing kisses, with which his lover had so coyly coaxed Arthur into wakefulness, had been an agony of unmitigated arousal. Hunting that morning had been a miserable affair. Saddles were not designed with consideration for the discomfiting passions of youth. It was something of a marvel that he hadn’t managed to squirm his way into a decidedly un-princely heap under his horse’s hooves.

If he didn’t know better, he would say King Ban and his hellish progeny were bound and determined to prevent their guest from ever finding satisfaction—in the two weeks since he and his delegation had arrived in Benwick to discuss the renewal of trade agreements, not once had any liaison gone uninterrupted. It was a good strategy, Arthur supposed darkly as Merlin arched into him with a kittenish mewl, because at this point he would make just about any political concession if only he would be allowed privacy enough to debauch his manservant properly. Heaven knew the boy needed it, needed the reminder of just where he belonged after so many days of catering to the juvenile whims of the blushing young Prince Brat and his similarly Merlin-enraptured delinquent cousins.

Licking into his friend’s mouth the way Arthur knew drove him wild, he tasted honey and cinnamon—evidence of the fact that Merlin had been sneaking sweets again, insatiable glutton that he was—and felt his blood heat with the sure knowledge that this was his. After barely more than two months, the change in their relationship was still a little new and a lot amazing.

“Oh,” Merlin breathed, eyes wide and blown as he bent his head back to expose the long column of his supple neck in open invitation.

The small squeak of pleasure-pain when Arthur latched on his neck, biting and sucking hard enough to leave a mark (let Prince Brat comment on that, if he dared!), sent a thrill straight to Arthur’s groin. He loved the noises Merlin made under his ministrations, loved how he couldn’t silence his desire even when he tried. He wanted to make him whimper, make him scream—loud enough that the cries would echo down every corridor of this gods-forsaken castle and leave no one
with any doubt about who Merlin’s master was. In the interest of diplomacy, Arthur would permit his lover to charm the courtly children with his easy-going smile and innocent exuberance, but his generosity was not infinite.

Hard sucks and bruising bites gentled into soft nibbles and softer kisses peppered along a jutting collarbone (how someone who ate like such a pig could remain so disgustingly skinny was a mystery beyond comprehension). Arthur slipped his hand up Merlin’s tunic, smirking against skin when Merlin jerked and quivered when as Arthur’s cool hand met the hot flesh of his of his belly.

“G-God!”

“You can call me Arthur,” he laughed, grinning wickedly at Merlin’s huff of annoyance before capturing his lips in wet apology and then promptly dropping to his knees.

“So,” Merlin said, “your knee-walking seems to be coming along okay.”

Arthur laughed again. “And you’re still pants at it. Don’t worry. You’ll have plenty of opportunity for practice once I’m done with you.”

Now, one thing that must be understood about Merlin was that he had a very sensitive bellybutton. Arthur discovered very early on that massaging over and into the small dip of his navel with one attentive finger could bring Merlin’s cock to full hardness in minutes—and laving at the area with his tongue could reduce Merlin to a heaving, sobbing wreck in thirty seconds flat. He had a suspicion that if he kept at it long enough, he could make his lover come through that alone. It was a theory worth testing.

“Ar-Arthur…”

“You’re such a tease,” Arthur commented with affected nonchalance, pausing just long enough to secure Merlin’s erratically thrusting hips. Eager fingers clawed at his shoulders, trying to cajole him into more harder faster. A sorely neglected cock was rubbing insistently under Arthur’s chin, but Arthur ignored it. This was too much fun.

“Wh-Who’s a t-tease?” Merlin’s astonishment was too cute. Briefly, Arthur pondered informing Merlin that he seemed to have begun mimicking Gaius’ miraculous acrobatic eyebrows, but thought better of it. Bringing up Gaius (or any parental figure, for that matter) tended to kill the mood.

Arthur’s own cock wept at the thought. He’d grown accustomed to regular sex. The dry spell needed to end. He had approximately an hour’s break for luncheon before one of those dratted nobles would decide to come looking for him. He fully intended to use his time wisely. The famine was over!

“You are.” Arthur punctuated this with a definitive jab of his tongue into Merlin’s bellybutton.

“Have you been torturing me on purpose?”

“I d-don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“No? So you haven’t been tormenting me like some sort of fey creature, wrapping me in your spell only to dance out of reach each time I try to catch you? Don’t think I haven’t seen you making eyes at me during meetings—licking your lips, making those lewd gestures with the wine goblets…” The terrible wretch seemed to find Arthur’s anguish amusing. Bastard even had the gall to wear his second pair of trousers (the ones so obscenely tight around the rear that he was sure Hunith must have ordered them destroyed years ago) and using his “clumsiness” as an excuse to bend the fuck
over during Very Important Meetings. It was more than a little upsetting that Merlin seemed to be handling the situation so calmly. More annoying than the cruel taunting were the times when Merlin seemed to look right through him, like he wasn’t even there—and didn’t even have the grace to scowl when Princess Jolecia cozied up to him and did the pouty, batty-eyelash thing. Merlin liked sex, too; Arthur knew he did! So why was he the only one going crazy here?

“I’m—” Arthur sucked hard at the small depression, flicking his tongue just so. Merlin whimpered pathetically. “—s-sorry!”

“Are you really?” Arthur asked, not believing him for one second. Vindictively positioning himself so that his breath was lightly ghosting over spit-slick skin, he peered up through his lashes to survey his handiwork. Hands clutching desperately at the tapestry at his back with white-fisted determination? Check. Chest rising and falling erratically? Check. Pink lips swollen and abused from useless efforts to bite back moans? Check. One manservant on the verge of swooning like an overwrought girl? Double check. Merlin was glaring unhappily down at him, but was too far gone to form so much as a word of protest at Arthur’s strategic withdrawal. Arthur patted himself on the back and counted this as a win. It was fascinating to see how sensitive Merlin was to his touch, how easily Arthur could shatter him to pieces. No one else had ever broken Merlin apart like this, he was sure of it. Merlin was as clay in an artist’s hands: malleable and ready to be shaped as his master saw fit.

None of his previous lovers had responded quite like this. Then again, he hadn’t been so much interested in giving pleasure as taking pleasure. With Merlin, it was different. There was no sense in denying it, much as he might like to.

Arthur leaned in to press his lips back to Merlin’s exposed belly, the gesture more fond than ravaging this time. Long fingers combed through his hair in reply, and he didn’t have to look up to know Merlin’s expression had softened into something unnameable.

“Arthur—” Merlin began, but naturally someone decided to knock on the door at that exact moment. Arthur groaned and buried his face in Merlin’s belly.

“Maybe,” Merlin started in a low whisper, “they’ll go away if we don’t answer it?” He didn’t sound confident.

The knocking began again, more persistent this time and accompanied by the earnest tones of Merlin’s young admirer: “Prince Arthur? Merlin? Are you there?” Arthur gritted his teeth and rose to his feet, mollified to see his own irritation mirrored in Merlin’s pinched expression.

Resigned, they sighed in unison.

“Your swain is here to fetch you.”

“He’s twelve,” Merlin pointed out with an exasperated roll of his eyes as he attempted to put himself to rights and hide his undiminished arousal. He made sure his neckerchief covered the forming bruises. Shame, that. “You can’t seriously be jealous of a twelve-year-old.”

“Merlin? Are you in there?”

“Just a moment, Your Highness!” Merlin called out. And, in a hushed hiss for Arthur’s ears only: “You’re the one who blackmailed me into playing court jester for the children. Don’t be a prat just because your effort to humiliate me backfired!”

And, okay, yeah—Merlin had a point. When the children’s governess had taken an unexpected
leave of absence shortly after their arrival, Arthur had offered Merlin’s temporary services, ostensibly in the spirit of promoting good will between Camelot and Benwick (everyone knew that the way to the heart of Ban was through his children). He had also implied that he just might possibly let slip a few comments referring to certain embarrassing incidents (one of which may have involved a dress, a bucket of rotten produce, and his father’s prize stallion) within Gaius’ hearing if Merlin didn’t make nice with the children and cater to Arthur’s whim. But, really, he had only wanted to extract a laugh or two from Merlin’s efforts. He’d never thought that the children would take such a shine to Merlin, or that Queen Elaine would so gladly accept Merlin’s assistance. And if he’d had even an inkling that Prince Brat would try to appropriate his manservant, Arthur would have kept Merlin securely attached to his hip (or locked in his quarters). That he now couldn’t withdraw his offer of Merlin’s services without seeming a cad was fast becoming an unbearable dilemma. Illogical as it was, Arthur was starting to harbour a grudge against not only Prince Brat for making off with his manservant at every turn, but also against the whole of the royal family for accepting his offer in the first place.

Arthur collapsed into a seat at the table, wincing as the fabric of his trousers pulled uncomfortably tight against his groin. At least he wasn’t the only one in dire straits; Merlin was walking rather stiffly toward the door.

“Hello, Merlin!” Prince Brat said, beaming brightly when Merlin let him in. The boy was cute, Arthur had to grant him that: all ginger curls and emerald eyes and quirky dimples. He was short, though, and skinny—scrawny, even. Arthur had never been that pathetically scrawny. He bet the boy couldn’t even lift a proper sword yet. And he had freckles. The freckles, at least, weren’t cute. At all. In fact, they were positively un-cute.

Arthur pasted a friendly smile on his face when Prince Brat’s eyes slid in his direction. “Prince Hector,” he greeted. “I thought Lady Evaine was taking your cousins and yourself on a picnic this afternoon?”

Prince Brat’s grin widened—and dear gods! Was he blushing? “She is. But I was hoping, with your permission sir, that Merlin might be permitted to join us? I remembered that he’d said he’d like to catch a glimpse of the sea—and, well, since we’re heading that way—” With every sweetly spoken word, the standoffishness in Merlin’s stance lessoned while the tension between Arthur’s shoulders grew.

Merlin’s eyes were half-hopeful and half-remorseful. “Please, sire,” he said. “I’ve never been to the sea before. I’d like to go.”

Wistfully, Arthur watched the last vestiges of his chance to finish what he’d started go up in smoke. It was going to be just him and his right hand this afternoon. Again.

“Oh, very well,” he said grudgingly. Something fluttered in his chest when Merlin smiled warmly, mouthing a wry apology. “Just promise me you won’t let him near the water. Blundering fool that he is, he’d probably end up trying something idiotic and drowning himself.”

A snort met this announcement, which Arthur countered with an imperious frown. Merlin was unimpressed.

“I’ll take good care of him,” Prince Brat agreed, nodding enthusiastically. It was a close call, but Arthur managed to refrain from throwing down a not-so-metaphorical gauntlet when the winsome little worm took Merlin’s hand in his to tug him out of the room and down the corridor. Any day now the brat would be asking Ban to offer for his servant as part of the negotiations. Arthur could not guarantee his self-restraint would hold then.
What would Uther say when Benwick declared war on Camelot because Arthur murdered their prince for trying to steal away a lowly servant?

Arthur didn’t look forward to that conversation.

With a disgruntled growl, he poured himself a fortifying goblet of wine, threw it back in record time, and was just about to do something about the lingering tightness in his trousers when Princess Jolecia appeared.

It was official. Ban was trying to kill him.

When Arthur next saw Merlin, his hair was suspiciously damp and his clothes had been changed. Arthur shouldn’t have been surprised. Idiot that he was, Merlin clearly couldn’t resist the lure of danger—and the chance to spite him, never mind that his concern had been honest, regardless of tone.

Pursing his lips in frustration, Arthur glared daggers across the courtyard at Merlin, who was grinning, impish and vivacious, as he taunted the baffled Lionel with some admittedly impressive slights of hand while his cousin (none other than Prince Brat) and Bors the Younger (Lionel’s elder brother) laughed uproariously. If Merlin noticed Arthur’s eyes on him, he showed no sign. Fool. Arthur had half a mind to march across the courtyard and throttle him. Merlin didn’t know a damn thing about the perils of riptides or any of the other nameless threats that lurked beneath the sea’s surface. He had no business tempting fate. Trouble followed him quite enough as it was.

“M’lord? Are you well?”

Unfortunately, his ambassadorial obligations demanded that he pay special courtesy to those he effectively meant to woo, which meant that dislodging Princess Jolecia from his arm in favour of dragging a lowly servant into a private corner for a good scolding was out of the question. That she seemed inclined to seize every opportune moment to cling to him like a limpet had been annoyingly precious at first, when the habit had still been fresh enough to get a rise out of Merlin. Now it was just plain annoying.

“Not at all, m’lady,” Arthur said with the most charming smile he could muster. The girl practically swooned. “I was merely contemplating the possibility of reinstating the official position of Court Jester in Camelot. I fear my idiot manservant’s talents are being wasted.”

The princess’s lips curved sweetly as she peered in the direction of Merlin and her younger relatives. Merlin was in the process of retrieving his supposedly “disappeared” neckerchief from one of Lionel’s ears to thunderous applause from his young charges. “Yes,” she nodded with a twinkling laugh, “he is a bit of a fool, isn’t he?”

“Indeed.” Arthur mentally ground his teeth, but his smile was still firmly in place when she turned back to him. “Shall we continue on to the stables? I have heard m’lady has a passion for horseflesh to rival my own.”

“Oh, yes, let’s!”

He honestly had nothing to do with the bizarre events that led to Princess Jolecia’s royal curls becoming caked in horse manure. But he would have been lying if he claimed anything other than vindictive joy at the sight.

In the end, Arthur never did get the chance to make his displeasure with Merlin known. He tried,
he really did, but the moment he attempted to broach the subject that evening, Merlin got this *glint* in his eye and launched into a shocking elucidation outlining (in filthy, explicit detail) how fiercely he had yearned for Arthur that day; how he’d stripped down to his skivvies and lain belly down in the warm sand with the sea lapping around his ankles; he’d wished Arthur was behind him, over him, fucking into him while the sand rubbed and burned and got into ridiculous places and—

And then Merlin *just happened to recall* that he had agreed to accompany some of the servants of Ban’s household to a small gathering that evening in order to perform a little reconnaissance (“Servants have eyes and ears everywhere, Arthur. They probably know which issues the king is ambivalent toward and which will require more delicate treatment better than Ban himself!”). The fiend was looking much too pleased with himself as he beat a hasty retreat.

At that point, Arthur was too glossy-eyed with lust to care overmuch about an illicit swim. He just wanted to get laid. Was that really too much to ask?

The next morning Arthur had a plan.

It had become abundantly clear that if he didn’t take bold action, he would be remaining hopelessly chaste for the duration of his stay in Benwick, and that was simply unacceptable. He was so strung-out that he’d soiled his sheets the night before like some shamefaced adolescent. Any more of this torture and he’d be bending Merlin over the table in the great hall during dinner, and damn the consequences!

Now, let it be known that Arthur did not command the most disciplined and lethal band of knights in all of Albion just because people were intimidated by him (as any sensible person should be, proving once and for all that Merlin had all the sensibility of a turnip) or because he was the best fighter (which he was) or even because he was the king’s son (though that didn’t hurt). No—what gave him his edge was one thing and one thing only: strategy. He had a natural affinity for it. On the battlefield, being capable of reading the nuances of a situation, gauging the possibilities, and responding accordingly needed to be instantaneous and reflexive.

For all that the vicious assault on his sex life differed from the usual battle scenarios, it was also very much the same. Once he’d made up his mind to launch a counterattack on the forces of evil keeping him celibate, it all fell together rather quickly. A few carefully placed questions here, some mild flirting there, and he was ready.

His good humour might have come across as slightly maniacal. Merlin looked decidedly nervous all through breakfast and dragged his feet through his morning chores, shooting Arthur wary looks whenever he thought Arthur wasn’t paying attention. His expression was mulish when one of the servants under Prince Brat’s command arrived to see what was keeping him. Arthur tried to feel guilty for worrying him, but failed.

Merlin would forgive him. He always did.

Luncheon that day was a family affair—that is, it consisted of Ban, his brother, their wives and children and Arthur. Possibly this was symbolic of an invitation to the family, but beyond seating Arthur across from his daughter, Ban gave no indication of interest in his current marital status. Princess Jolecia simpered in his direction. Merlin—who, it was understood, would always serve his master during meals—had the gall to smirk at Arthur’s misfortune as he poured the wine.

“It’s not too late to have you sacked,” Arthur grumbled lowly, not meaning a word of it.
“Of course not, sire.”

Then, because Arthur was feeling wicked and saw no reason to avoid embarrassing his cheeky servant, he grabbed Merlin’s wrist as he started to pull back. “Merlin, I have been meaning to speak to you,” he said loudly enough to catch the attention of his neighbours. He grinned inwardly, putting on an outward show of long-suffering. “You seem to have forgotten that whatever your other duties, you remain my servant. I have borne your incompetence patiently, but do you know what I found when I decided to spar with Sir Bors this morning?”

Arthur paused for effect.

Merlin blinked.

“Mud in my chainmail.” Sir Bors and King Ban emitted derisive grunts, expressing what they thought of such carelessness. Arthur glowered, enjoying the way Merlin’s mouth dropped open, making a remarkable impression of a fish.

Awful servant though he may be, one thing that could be said for Merlin was that he was always careful with Arthur’s armour. Very careful. Careful bordering on obsessive, actually. A few months past, Merlin had seen firsthand the consequences of poorly kept metal and the corrosive power of rust. It had been a gruesome spectacle—and Merlin had been close enough to the tourney field to taste blood. Communing with Arthur’s armour became a compulsive itch in Merlin’s routine after that.

The point, of course, being that Merlin would never have left his mail unattended. Ever. This was why Arthur had taken particularly perverse delight in smearing the dirt into the links that morning, all the while looking forward to seeing his friend good and riled. They hadn’t had a proper row in ages, which was a shame because Merlin really was something to behold whilst caught in the throes of sputtering indignation.

Unfortunately, here and now wasn’t an appropriate time or place to indulge in manservant-baiting. If he let Merlin’s mouth run away with him, he would be forced to have him punished or risk losing face, neither of which were tolerable outcomes. Not to mention the fact that Merlin could be as vindictive as any girl and pressing his luck too far would result in a case of blue balls that even a return to Camelot might not be able to cure.

“You’re lucky there was no rust.” Well, okay. Arthur couldn’t help himself. Surely a few jibes were warranted? No one would buy his act if he sugar-coated it. He had a reputation to maintain.

“But, sire!” Merlin was positively outraged. Blood was pooling in his cheeks, flushing down his neck in a most becoming manner. Arthur, having conducted several highly scientific investigations into the matter, knew just how far down that blush extended. “I would never—”

Arthur suppressed a grin.

“I’m sure you did not intend to risk my life in your carelessness, but such behaviour really cannot be borne.” Arthur turned to Queen Elaine with an apologetic nod and the woeful smile of the long-suffering. “I hope my lady will not be put out if I offer instead one of the maids, who is in service to a member of my delegation, while I attempt to correct my manservant’s deplorable work ethic.”

“Not at all. It is, of course, your right to discipline him as you see fit.”

“Very good. I will have the girl report to you early this afternoon. As for you, Merlin, I have gone through the trouble of compiling a list of chores that most urgently need to be seen to.” Arthur
procured a small scroll of parchment from the inner pocket of his coat and waved it in Merlin’s direction, who accepted it with a pinched scowl. “Forgetfulness does not justify negligence.”

“Yes, sire,” said Merlin in a tone that very much suggested that by “sire” he did, in fact, mean “you great toad-spotted blaggard!” or something similarly insolent. Then he unrolled the parchment with an angry jerk, blinked at it, looked at Arthur, blinked down at the scroll again, and finally settled for staring at Arthur with a mixture of astonishment and disbelief. His mouth opened and closed a few times, but no sound issued forth.

Arthur patted himself on the back. He could count on one hand the number of times he’d managed to render the cheeky bastard speechless (without occupying that mouth with other, more mindless, pursuits, that is). “Let us hope,” he said coolly, quirking one brow in challenge, “that henceforth you will attend to your master’s needs with greater diligence. You will not like the consequences if I have to speak to you of this again.”

Merlin nodded, swallowing thickly.

“Excellent!” Arthur exclaimed, turning a blinding smile on Princess Jolecia, who choked on her wine in surprise. “Oh, dear! Are you quite all right?”

She coughed and spluttered.

Merlin spent the duration of the mid-day meal fidgeting uselessly and blushing every time Arthur so much as twitched in his general direction. Prince Brat sulked and pouted until his mother banished him to his rooms in exasperation.

It was shaping up to be a wonderful day.

Being the absolute girl he was, Merlin emitted a high-pitched squawk when Arthur threw open the door, grabbed his arm in a vice-grip, yanked him into the room he had been impatiently lurking in for more than a quarter of an hour, and attacked his parted lips with only a huskily growled “You’re late!” as warning. Merlin was stiff with shock for a few worrying moments before he melted in recognition, fingers fisting in Arthur’s shirt in welcome acknowledgement. There was something like relief in the gesture.

Arthur wondered who else Merlin could have possibly thought would be accosting him in an abandoned corridor; especially when he’d made his intentions so explicitly clear previously. Something protective and cold pitted in his stomach. He made a mental note to compel Merlin into some lessons in self-defence, because if frozen compliance was how Merlin could be expected to react to a stranger’s surprise attack on his virtue, then he had good cause for concern.

His cross musings did not last long.

Quite suddenly Arthur found himself pinned to the door in a mirror of his own passionate assault on Merlin from the previous day. Ye gods. Merlin sucked Arthur’s tongue into his mouth in full earnest, and Arthur lost all ability to think of anything but that sweet suction and the aggressive press of his lover’s lanky body crowding demandingly close. Arthur would never admit how much he liked it when Merlin took control.

“Prat,” Merlin chuckled with a playful nip at Arthur’s bottom lip. “Riling me up with that blatant lie in front of everyone—making it clear that I was yours for the day. Luring me to an unused wing of the castle even the servants don’t venture into with that filthy note. You have some nerve.”

The note had been a stroke of genius really.
Merlin,

Upon the third hour past noon you are to meet me in the western-most corridor beyond the old fourth floor chapel. You have been most derelict in attending to your master’s needs. I require the following:

- A good, proper snog. I want it wet. I want my tongue so far down your throat that you can’t breathe. And I want you begging for more.

- Your mouth on my cock. Those perfect lips never look prettier than when they’re stretched wide around me. They were made for it.

- My cock in your arse. I’ll bet you’ll be tight for me. It’s been so long. But don’t worry—I’ll work you open for me, first with my fingers. One, then two, then three. Maybe, if you’re suitably compliant, I’ll give you four. And then, just to make sure you’re good and ready for me, I’ll give you my tongue. By the time I come inside you, you’ll be so dizzy with pleasure that you won’t even remember your name.

In the future, I should prefer not to have to go to these ridiculous lengths to get a little relief. I’m sure we can come to an arrangement beneficial to the both of us, yes?

—A.P.

P.S. Bring oil.

Arthur would forever treasure the memory of Merlin’s frazzled, glassy-eyed expression upon seeing those words. Truth be told, he’d been nervous about that letter and had worked his way through many sheets of precious paper in crafting his proposal before accepting that Merlin had no head for subtleties and only making his meaning inescapably plain would yield the desired results. They both ran the risk of a scandal should anyone else ever discover it, but he trusted Merlin would dispose of it safely.

“I’m the prince,” he said, and did not tremble under Merlin’s heated gaze. “I have nerves of steel. And I believe there are better things you could be doing with your mouth than rambling.”

“Oh, yeah?” Merlin smirked, brushing a trail of teasing kisses along his jaw line. “Did you have something in particular in mind?” He slipped his hands up Arthur’s shirt and over his chest, one hand scraping roughly along sinewy muscle while the other teased over the sensitive scar tissue that marred his left pectoral in long deep lines, which spliced through his nipple and curved down his ribcage.

Against his will, Arthur shivered.

Merlin smirked. The impudence!

Arthur swallowed thickly, staring blindly across the room at the elaborate wardrobe dominating the far wall. It was the only piece of furniture in the room, which Arthur had initially found odd before realizing that moving something of such immense size would have been an endeavour hardly worth the effort. Now he was glad of its looming presence, of the calming distraction it offered as his lover exacted cruel revenge upon his person. He refused to fall apart due to mere kisses and a few well-placed caresses.
“On your knees.” The words were more a plea than a command. He really was in dire straits, wasn’t he?

Merlin opened his mouth to respond, probably with a comment that would get him thrown in the stocks under ordinary circumstances, but cut himself off when the sound of a soft feminine call echoed down the corridor, followed by the faint rustle of skirts and the opening and closing of creaking doors. “Prince Arthur? Are you here?”

Princess Jolecia.

Arthur cringed.

“So,” Merlin said balefully, “what exactly did you tell her when you left her earlier?”

“I didn’t say I was coming up this way to fornicate with my manservant, if that’s what you’re implying!” Arthur shifted guiltily. “I didn’t actually tell her anything. I just gave her the slip. One of the servants must have seen me come this way.”

“Arthur?”

She was coming closer.

Merlin pulled away, mutinous, but Arthur caught his arm before he could get too far and glanced meaningfully between him and the wardrobe.

“You must be joking.” His lover’s hushed tone was strangely plaintive, something wary flickering across his face, but Arthur was already hustling them both over the barren floorboards. Whatever Merlin’s grudge was against organized closet spaces would have to wait.

“Quick!” said Arthur, “there’s nowhere else,” and flung open the wardrobe. The both of them bundled inside it and sat there, breaths mingling, in the dark. Arthur held the door closed but did not shut it; for, of course, he knew, as every sensible person does, that you should never shut yourself up in a wardrobe.

His fingers found Merlin’s.

One of them had to be sensible.

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“Arthur! Merlin!”

Morgana jerked awake with a start, heart fluttering like the wings of a hummingbird. She felt breathless, afraid, drowning beneath wave after wave of apprehension. The images in her dreams flashed before her eyes, refusing to grant her peace, even in waking.

“My lady?” Gwen said, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. Placing her own hand over Gwen’s, Morgana breathed deep and forced herself to relax. It was odd that she should dream so vividly when she’d only laid down for a short mid-day nap, but it didn’t mean anything. It was just a dream, nothing to worry about. “Are you well?”

“Yes,” Morgana assured her with a strained smile. “Yes, of course. Just—just one of my nightmares. I’ll have to talk to Gaius about changing my dosage again.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“I—no,” Morgana said. “It was nothing. Just odd.” She laughed, a little wryly. “I hardly think this
dream is a portent for the future. Somehow I doubt Arthur and Merlin will be climbing into any wardrobes to do battle with witches tyrannically ruling over the magical forests hidden behind moth-eaten old coats.”

Gwen snorted, startled, lips curling into a relieved smile. “Oh, no. Probably not.”

Shaking her head at her own foolish fears, Morgana grinned and reached for the embroidery basket she had earlier abandoned in favour of a short rest. There was no reason to worry. None at all.
“This is absolutely insane,” Merlin whispered fiercely, scowl obvious for all that his features were shrouded in shadows. Arthur rolled his eyes heavenward, batted at the fur coat tickling his nose, and stifled a sneeze. Trust Merlin to pitch a fit over a little excitement. Honestly, the boy hadn’t an adventurous bone in his body. “Being caught skulking around together in a closed off portion of the castle is one thing, but even you would have trouble explaining—Mmph!”

Silenced with a kiss.

It worked like a charm every time.

Merlin put up a token resistance, of course, because he was stubborn and a bit of a birdbrain (Hunith had named him well, in that regard, although Arthur still maintained that a sissy name like ‘Robin’ or maybe ‘Lamb’ would have been more fitting). When Arthur refused to be pushed away, Merlin started inching back, which really seemed a marvellous idea—the thought of pinning that lithe body to the back of the wardrobe and having his filthy way with it sent made him dizzy with want. Never once releasing his hold on Merlin’s mouth, Arthur gave chase until Merlin was scrabbling back out of sheer desperation.

“Ar—Arthur!”

The sudden chilling draft failed to register in his senses until he was tumbling down a slope after Merlin and landing in a bank of snow.

“Cold!” Arthur yelped and leaped to his feet, dancing (quite gracefully, thank you very much!) in a hasty effort to shake out the freezing globs of snow that had slid down his shirt.

When at last the snow had been dislodged, leaving behind an uncomfortable dampness, Merlin had
already risen to his feet and brushed the snow from his own clothes. His expression was odd as he cast his gaze around. As it should be.

They had fallen into a winter forest. Through a wardrobe in a spare room.

How was that even possible? Well, it was magic, obviously, but it certainly wasn’t any magic Arthur had ever heard of. He glanced back up in the direction they’d come from. He could see the fur coats through the mess of tree branches. He could even make out the barest shred of light marking the opening in the wardrobe door. Astonishing. He turned circled slowly, soaking in the impossible landscape with growing awe. Magic may not be something he approved of, but he could appreciate the power (and, likely, madness) it would take to squeeze an entire forest into the back of a wardrobe, of all places. If he had a forest in the back of his wardrobe...

“Merlin? Do you see what I see?”

“That depends,” Merlin hedged. “What do you see?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Arthur waved his arm in a wild encompassing gesture—and ended up with a face full of pine needles for his trouble. “Umph! There are trees, Merlin.” He batted pointedly at the offending branch that had tried to take off his face. “Trees. And snow—and—and—”

Merlin shuffled, chewing his lip in an age-old sign of guilt.

Arthur’s eyes widened—and narrowed. Some niggling oddities were starting to make a lot more sense. Almost since the moment they had arrived in Benwick, Merlin had been distant—easily distracted. Arthur had come to expect a certain level of absentmindedness in his friend, but the strange, thoughtful silences had been—well, perhaps not unheard of, but certainly unusual. He had written this off as a normal reaction to their new circumstances, but perhaps he had been too hasty. Come to think of it, had he not spotted Merlin emerging from this corridor before? He hadn’t thought much of it, then, as it was no secret that the children were fond of playing hide-and-seek, usually with a dismayed Merlin left to scour the grounds in their wake. Vacant spaces would be a logical starting point for a search. Now, however…

He thought of Merlin’s nervousness during luncheon. He thought of the way Merlin had stiffened when he’d pulled him into the spare room. He thought of Merlin’s reluctance to enter the wardrobe.

“Merlin,” he said placidly, “is there something you would like to tell me?”

“I—I—” Merlin avoided his gaze. “Um. Like what, sire?”

“Don’t you sire me! You knew about this! You knew that King Ban was hiding a magic wardrobe in his castle, and you didn’t tell me.”

“Arthur—”

“How could you keep this from me? Didn’t you think I ought to know?”

“I… It’s just…” Merlin rubbed his neck, eyes shining suspiciously. “It’s magic, Arthur. How could I tell you? Assuming you had believed me, what would you have done? Accused Benwick’s royal family of harbouring sorcerers? From what I’ve observed, it’s unlikely that they even know about this, much less have been actively seeking to keep this from you. But that wouldn’t have meant anything, would it? Not once your father found out.”
“Bite your tongue,” Arthur warned coolly. “You’re coming very close to speaking treason.”

“I’m sorry,” said Merlin, but they were only words.

The problem with Merlin was, of course, that he had grown up outside of Camelot—specifically, in a godforsaken village well out of the way of any place resembling civilization—and, therefore, his only exposure to magic had come in the form of a very highly-strung young man who’d died before he could prove himself a threat. In many ways, Merlin remained stubbornly innocent of the horrors of magic. He didn’t understand that a fertility potion was step below a heart-manipulating love potion or that the same farmer casting charms for a bountiful harvest could easily be cursing the crops of his neighbours. Magic could not be allowed free rein. Privately, Arthur felt the death penalty was perhaps too harsh for often petty offences, but the law was the law. No one, least of all a servant should be above the law.

“You should have told me.”

“I know. And I swear to you, if I had thought for one moment that this magic was dangerous, I would have,” Merlin hurried to explain. He reached out to grasp Arthur’s hand, expression hangdog and pleading. Arthur accepted the gesture grudgingly. It rankled that someone he had trusted so implicitly could have kept such a big secret from him. “But this place… Arthur, it’s amazing. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“Oh, because you are such an experienced and world-wise man,” Arthur snorted. “Your basis for comparison isn’t all that exotic. There are trees, Merlin. Trees and snow. We have them in Camelot. You have them in Ealdor. It’s interesting, I’ll give you that, but it’s not something to wax lyrical about.” The hunting might be more promising than the landscape, however. What sort of game might one find in a magical forest?

“I don’t think you understand. There’s a lot more than that.” Merlin chewed his lip, hesitant. “Arthur, there are people here. Only they’re not people like you or I.”

Arthur’s breathe caught in his throat. People? That was not what he wanted to hear. There was only one sort of folk who would consider hiding in a magic wardrobe: the sort that inevitably meant trouble. “What,” Arthur ground out, praying he was wrong, “do you mean?”

“Arthur, I’ve met a faun.”

“A fawn,” Arthur repeated, lips twitching as the tightness in his chest loosened considerably. Leave it to Merlin to make friends with a baby deer. Trying to make a man out of him was like trying to make a proper lady out of Morgana: simply hopeless.

Only Merlin was shaking his head vehemently. “No, not a fawn,” he corrected, “a faun.”

“Okay, a faun.” Arthur scrunched up his face in deep thought, trying to figure out what in the world Merlin could possibly be talking about. Clearly he expected Arthur to know what he was talking about. Arthur drew a blank. “What the hell is a faun?”

It was Merlin’s turn to frown. “You know…” he said waving his hands in a haphazard manner that was probably intended to indicate something significant but only succeeded in making him look demented. Well, more demented than usual. A small smile tugged at Arthur’s lips, and with an inward sigh he realized that he had already forgiven Merlin his folly. “A faun. Half human, half goat. Like… Like a satyr!”

“A satyr, you say…” Arthur’s mind drifted to the images he’d seen in books of mythology as a
young man, particularly to the graphically sexual images of part-beast men with voracious sexual appetites slaking their lusts for the flesh on many an unwary young woman. He remembered looking upon those images with horrified fascination, both intrigued and repelled by the twisted sensuality of it all. The thought of Merlin meeting such a reprehensible creature—it was unconscionable! Arthur tensed. If one of those things had dared to lay so much as a finger on him...

Merlin seemed to sense this train of thought and shook his head violently. “No, not like—!” His face twisted in a mixture of disgust, one brow rising in rebuke. “I’ll have you know that Mr Tumnus has been a perfect gentleman and a very generous host. We had tea.”

“Tea.”

“Yes, tea.” He nodded definitively, daring Arthur to argue. “A few times. He bakes excellent pastries.” That gave Arthur pause—and confirmed a suspicion that had been nagging at him.

“You’ve been here more than once.”

Merlin ducked his head, peering up at Arthur in that whimsical way that conquered him every damn time. “I... I like it in Narnia, Arthur.”

“Narnia.”

“That’s the name of this country.”

Arthur squeezed Merlin’s fingers. Of course this strange place would have a name. It was a good name, he supposed, for a land that shouldn’t exist—one inhabited by non-human creatures that his father would order exterminated if ever they wandered into Camelot. Oh, Merlin. “You realize that I can’t allow you to come back here. When we return, I will have to discuss the nature of the wardrobe with Ban. It will be destroyed.”

“I know,” said Merlin. Then, with a worrisome stammer: “Would you... I mean, could we... Possibly...”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Arthur rolled his eyes, “spit it out!”

“I want to say goodbye to Mr Tumnus. Please? He’s been such a good friend to me, and I... I want you to meet him.” Merlin’s eyes on him were wistful and wide. How could Arthur deny him?

“Very well,” he allowed grudgingly, though not without some sympathy. Merlin loved freely. It was one of the traits Arthur cherished most in him. Faulting him for it now would be the worst kind of hypocrisy. “But only for a little while.” Then, because it was cold enough that he could make out Merlin’s hardened nipples through the flimsy fabric of his shirt, he trudged back to the obscured opening into the wardrobe and pulled out two of the moth-eaten fur coats. He shrugged on the first and held out the second with a small smirk. “Here, put this on. You’ll catch your death.”

“But that’s a girl’s coat.”

“I know.”

The effectiveness of Merlin’s scowl was considerably diminished by the affection tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Merlin led the way through the maze of trees and snow and past an extraordinarily peculiar metal
post randomly protruding from the ground to hold up what seemed to be some sort of lamp (an interesting contraption, really, that Arthur took mental note of for possible implementation in the city streets). The surety of his steps betrayed the fact that he had walked this path more than a few times. Arthur wasn’t sure how he felt about that. This situation seemed to indicate some harsh truths about their relationship that he didn’t much care to contemplate.

The way Merlin incessantly babbled about this Mr Tumnus fellow as they walked in no way helped Arthur’s sour mood. It was on the tip of his tongue to say, “Well, if you like the creature so much, then why don’t you just stay here and marry it?”—but that would have been juvenile and petty. He wasn’t jealous of some half-man, half-goat freak of nature, even if Merlin did light up in the wholly familiar way normally reserved for him when he spoke of the thing. Arthur was the Crown Prince of Camelot. He had absolutely nothing to be jealous about. And, anyway, Mr Tumnus would be little more than a flimsy spectre of the past very soon.

“His house is just through these trees,” Merlin said. He shot a happy grin in Arthur’s direction and shouldered through a dense copse of branches—and stopped so suddenly that Arthur stumbled right into him.

“Hey, what—” Arthur’s broke off mid-complaint, his eyes going wide when he saw just what had startled Merlin so badly. At the foot of the hill, inset into the side of a cliff, was the door to what he could only assume was the dwelling of one Mr Tumnus. It was in shambles—torn off its hinges and splintered beyond repair.

“Oh,” Merlin breathed heavily, “no!”

Then he was racing down the incline, and Arthur was shouting worried epitaphs and chasing down after him. They burst through the entryway within seconds of each other, pausing to take in the damage in tense silence.

Furniture was upturned. Dishes were shattered. Tapestries were in shreds. Stuffing was bulging out of unusual plush chairs. Several decorative pillows had been torn to pieces, scattering a mess of feathers in every direction. The place was in utter shambles. Evidence suggested that whatever had happened here had occurred days ago, possibly more than a week.

He’d been sure he’d misheard when Merlin had slipped into his ramblings that time flowed differently in Narnia. Clearly not. Here was the proof.

Quietly, slowly, Merlin approached the slashed remains of a portrait that must have once borne the likeness of a faun. Hands quivering, he ran his fingers over a particularly deep gouge. “Who would do something like this?”

Arthur frowned, at a loss for what to say. That’s when he noticed it: the parchment pinned to the wall near the entryway by a glinting dagger.

“Look here,” he said, pulling the parchment free, “a message.”

Reading aloud for Merlin’s benefit, his anxiety grew:

The former occupant of these premises, the Faun Tumnus, is under arrest and awaiting his trial on a charge of High Treason against her imperial Majesty the Queen of Narnia, Chatelaine of Cair Paravel, Empress of the Lone Islands, also of comforting her said Majesty's enemies, harbouring spies and fraternizing with Humans.

signed MAUGRIM Captain of the Secret Police LONG LIVE THE QUEEN!
“Who is this queen, Merlin? Do you know anything about her?”

“She isn’t a real queen at all,” answered Merlin. He snatched the bit of parchment from Arthur’s hands with an outraged glower. “She’s a... Well, a witch—a horrible one. Everyone—all the wood people—hate her. For the past century she has kept all of Narnia under an enchantment so that it is always winter here and never Christmas.”

“What is Christmas?” Arthur inquired incredulously, but quickly shook his head and jumped back to the point with a flare of temper. “No, never mind, don’t answer that. What I want to know is why you didn’t mention that there is an evil witch here? One who seems to have a particular grudge against humans? You really do have a grave mental disease, don’t you?”

“Arthur—”

“We’re leaving. Now, Merlin.” It was one thing to go tramping through a magical forest to have a farewell tea or whatnot with a faun, but there was no way Arthur was going to risk himself or Merlin by lingering around to be captured by an ancient and powerful witch with a grudge. No way, no how.

“Oh, but we can’t,” Merlin protested, “we can’t! Don’t you see? We can’t just leave poor Mr Tumnus at her mercy! He’s a good man—”

“He’s not a man.”

“Person, then! He’s a good person! And it is all on my account that he has got into this trouble. He hid me from the witch and showed me the way back to the wardrobe. That’s what it means by comforting the queen’s enemies and fraternizing with humans. We simply must try to rescue him!”

“Rescue him? Don’t be ridiculous!”

“I’m not being ridiculous. If you’d just listen—”

“Silence! We’re going back the way we came. Now.”

“You’re not being fair!”

“Life’s not fair. I would have thought you’d have learned that by now.” With that Arthur grasped Merlin’s arm in a vice-like grip and dragged him over the debris and back into the late afternoon light. Merlin resisted, of course, but Arthur was in no mood to be denied. It was a shame about the faun, but that wrong was in no way their responsibility to right. Narnia wasn’t Camelot. This world, he suspected, wasn’t even their world.

They didn’t get far before being thrown off course by some peculiar wildlife behaviour—namely being waylaid by a robin, which seemed very intent on getting their attention, flitting from branch to branch and making a sound that sounded all too human.

“Did that bird just ‘psst’ at us?” asked Arthur, flabbergasted.

Wide-eyed, Merlin nodded. “I think it wants us to follow it...” The notion was impossible, but Arthur found himself humouring the impulse to do so anyway, Merlin close behind. It didn’t lead them far, just into a small closed off copse just out of sight of Mr Tumnus’s house. Then it was gone, leaving them alone—until, that is, another woodland creature decided to lumber cautiously out of the shadows.

“Is that a beaver?” Arthur said, mouth dropping a little. It was a rhetorical question, of course. He
was a hunter. He well knew what a beaver looked like. What threw him was that this beaver was not only larger than any beaver he’d ever seen, but was also standing on its hind feet and... Well, it was waving at them. The animals in Narnia were not normal.

“Greetings, Sons of Adam,” said the beaver, bowing with remarkable grace.

Arthur’s mind boggled. “You can talk!”

“Well, of course I can talk. Why wouldn’t I?” The beaver cocked his head to the side in a fashion that bizarrely reminded Arthur of Gaius. If beavers had eyebrows, this one’s would probably be attempting to crawl right off his face.

“Didn’t I say the people here were different?”

“You mentioned a faun,” Arthur corrected flatly. Merlin was looking entirely too pleased with the situation. “You failed to mention talking animals. You’ve failed to mention quite a lot of things lately.” Chastised, Merlin ducked his head.

“The animals don’t talk where you’re from? How strange!” declared the beaver in a tone that was equal parts disbelieving and amused. Then, after scanning the area surreptitiously, he added in softer tones, “Which one of you is Merlin?”

Both humans were stunned into silence, exchanging startled glances.

“I am,” said Merlin, after a long moment, licking his lips nervously. The beaver nodded personably, produced a blue bit of fabric from an out-of-place pouch at his hip, and drew closer so as to slip the fabric into Merlin’s hand. It stood and waited patiently as Merlin curiously held the offering up for inspection, expression brightening with dawning realization. “It’s my neckerchief.”

“Mr Tumnus gave it to me before they came for him,” the beaver explained solemnly. “He said that if anything should happen to him I should keep a lookout for you and let you know what had become of him.”

“Is he alright?”

A high-pitch screech rent the air. The beaver looked to the skies, twitching nervously. “Best not talk here. It’s not safe. Follow me.” It turned and fell to a more natural position on all four legs to guide them away. Merlin—being Merlin—started to follow immediately. Arthur put a halt to that.

“This is crazy,” he hissed, jerking Merlin back harshly. “You can’t really be considering following a talking beaver to some unspecified place!”

“Please, Arthur. I need to know what happened to Mr Tumnus.” Merlin’s eyes were wet, his speech thick. Gods above, Arthur hated seeing him like this. Were he anyone else, Arthur would have no trouble denying him. But Merlin wasn’t just a servant, a friend, or a lover. He was more than all that. He was important. It mattered that he was guilty, and unhappy, and in pain. Arthur may not be willing to take stupid risks where magic was concerned, but sticking around long enough to learn the faun’s fate was a small concession. He doubted that any explanation could ease Merlin’s heart, however. The cold, hard truth would probably only torment the young man further. “I don’t think I could bear never knowing...”

“You’ll be the death of me.”

Arthur clearly needed to work on his ability to say “no” to Merlin. He was going soft. So much for being sensible. Sentimentality would get them both killed.
“Here it is. Home sweet home,” the beaver said with a proud flourish.

The two humans studied the dam rising from the frozen river before them, noting the glass windows with curtains and the smoke rising from the chimney with awe. It didn’t take a genius to guess that the inside of the dam would be hospitable, quite possibly sporting many of the same creature comforts as had been evident in the home of the faun. Curiouser and curiouser, Arthur mused, and (because he had been raised with manners, however much Merlin scoffed at the claim) said, “Your dam is really quite impressive.”

The beaver beamed happily. “Merely a trifle! Merely a trifle! And it isn’t really finished yet.” Ah, false modesty. How charming!

“Is that you Mr Beaver?” a distinctly feminine voice called out from the opposite side of the dam. The beaver (whose name was, apparently, as unimaginative as they come—a comforting revelation, actually) sighed the sigh of the long suffering, but shot his guests a wry grin as a second beaver waddled into sight, brandishing half-hearted threats that were born of habit more so than any real ire. “If I find out you’ve been out with Badger again I’ll...” She froze, having noticed that Mr Beaver was not alone. She rose onto her hind legs, nose twitching with barely-restrained excitement. “Oh, they’re not badgers. I never thought I would see this day!” Her joy dimmed for a minute as she turned to her husband with her hands on her hips. “You couldn’t give me ten minutes warning? Look at this fur!”

“I would have given you a week if I thought it would help.”

“Well, I never!” she huffed, turning her bucktoothed smile back on the humans, “Please, come in, come in! I’ll put on some tea and you can enjoy some civilized company while Mr Beaver fetches some fresh fish and beer from the barrel. It’s nearly dinnertime. I hope you like fish and chips.”

Exchanging rueful glances, Arthur and Merlin acknowledged that females (and marriage) were evidently the same in any world.

If Arthur had been holding any delusions about Merlin’s likelihood of being any more amenable to leaving once he’d ascertained the details of the faun’s fate, they were quickly dispelled once the news was actually acquired.

“Turned into stone!” Merlin exclaimed in abject horror. “Do you mean to tell me that Mr Tumnus has become a garden ornament in the queen’s courtyard? That’s barbaric!”

No wonder Mr and Mrs Beaver were positively mum on the subject until well after dinner. Arthur’s stomach was roiling dangerously. The good food and light conversation had lulled him into a false sense of complacency.

“How cruel. Arthur had seen perceived criminals harshly punished before, but not like this. Traitors burned. Witches lost their heads. Murderers rotted in the jails or met the hangman’s noose. Thieves were lashed. Insolent fools like Merlin became very intimate with the stocks. Torture tended to be tame unless some poor wretch deeply offended the king. Even the witches were allowed the
dignity of a swift execution, with few exceptions where it proved necessary to raise the stakes and command a burning. To turn a man to stone and cage him inside his own mind—the very thought of it sent chills down his spine. Magic was a terrible thing, indeed.

“Oh, please,” Merlin gasped, “there must be something we can do to save him!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” came the vehement reply, and Arthur blinked—because the words hadn’t been his own. Mrs Beaver was on her feet, wringing her hands in distress. “You would only get yourself killed. I don’t doubt that you would save him if you could, but you’ve no chance of getting into that house against her will and ever coming out again.”

“But we can’t just leave him like that!” Merlin argued. “There must be some hope.”

“Well, of course there is hope, dear,” Mrs Beaver said kindly. “There is always hope.”

Nodding in agreement, Mr Beaver set aside his pipe and leaned over the table, adding in a conspiratorial whisper, “Hope lies to the west, my friends. They say Aslan is on the move.” And a very peculiar thing happened then, at the mention of that name. Neither Arthur nor Merlin had any idea who Aslan was, but the moment the beaver spoke those words, they were filled with such wonder and joy that it was many long moments before they were able to speak again. There was a wealth of meaning in that name. It felt almost as though he had heard it before, Arthur thought, a long time ago—in a dream, in another life. But try as he might, he could not remember...

“Who’s Aslan?”

“Aslan?” said Mr Beaver. “Why don’t you know? He’s the true King. He’s the Lord of the whole wood, but not often here you understand. Never in my time or my father’s time. But the word has reached us that he has come back from across the sea once more. He is in Narnia at this very moment. If anyone can save Mr Tumnus, he can.”

“Is he a man?”

The beavers both looked at Arthur as if he’d grown another head. “Aslan a man?” Mr Beaver sternly. “Good heavens, no, Son of Adam! Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”

Somehow this revelation did not strike Arthur as odd at all. In a magical forest inhabited by fauns and talking beavers and who knew what else, it made sense that a great oversized feline would be the immortal ruler. He had seen lions once, when he’d sailed with an old friend of his father’s, the Merchant Lord Brendan, for about a year during his youth. There had been a whole pack of them, lounging around in the hot afternoon sun. Even in their laziness, they had been magnificent, the male most of all, with his enormous size and noble mane of fur. He should have liked to see them hunting. That would have been a sight to see!

Merlin, of course, had neither seen nor heard of a lion before.

Taking pity on his friend’s obvious confusion, Arthur attempted to describe the beast. “A lion is like a large cat—a very large cat. You’ve seen the old Roman tapestries in the library, yes? And the beast on Sir Cador’s shield?”

“Yes.”

“Those are lions. As for size, think of that stray you were feeding despite Gaius’ warnings not to —”
“I was doing no such thing!”

“—and consider what that cat might look like if it weighed almost as much as a bear.”


“Safe?” said Mr Beaver. “‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you. You’ll understand when you see him.”

It was Arthur’s turn to look alarmed.

“See him?”

“That’s right, Son of Adam,” said Mr Beaver, bringing his paw down on the table with a crash that made all the cups and saucers rattle. “So you shall. Word has been sent that you are to meet him, tomorrow if you can, at the Stone Table.”

“We’ll be doing no such thing!” Arthur exclaimed at the same time Merlin anxiously claimed, “You’re sure he’ll be able to help poor Mr Tumnus?”

Proceeding as if he had not heard Arthur’s protest, Mr Beaver said, “The quickest way you can help Mr Tumnus is by going to meet Aslan. Once he’s with us, then we can begin doing things. There is a prophecy:

When Adam’s flesh and Adam’s bone
Sits at Cair Paravel’s in throne,
The evil time will be over and done.

So you see that your coming is a great blessing for us! It’s a saying in Narnia time out of mind that when two Sons of Adam sit in the two thrones of Cair Paravel—that’s the castle on the seacoast down at the mouth of this river, which really ought to be the capital of the whole country if all was as it should be—then it will be the end not only of the White Witch’s reign, but of her life! That is why we had to be so cautious as we came along, and why Mr Tumnus was victim of the queen’s rage. So long as you live, you are a threat to her. You will save us all.”

Arthur had heard quite enough.

“You think we’re the ones?” he said incredulously. “You think we’re here to—what? Ally ourselves with a lion? Kill the witch you live in terror of? To rule this country ourselves?”

“Well, you had better be! Aslan’s already fitted out your army!”

“I think you’ve made a mistake,” he stated coolly. “We won’t be saving anyone. You’ve got the wrong people. First off, my father’s name is Uther, not Adam. And I doubt even Hunith knows the name of Merlin’s father—”

“Hey!”

“—but I’m willing to bet it isn’t Adam either. I didn’t say anything sooner, because it seemed such a silly thing to fuss about considering the circumstances, but it seems we’ve been misleading you, and I apologize. We have nothing to do with this prophecy of yours and will not be involving ourselves with your witch.”

“Actually,” Merlin growled, brow furrowed in offended and self-righteous anger, “the people here are simply in the habit of referring to all humans as ‘Sons of Adam’ and ‘Daughters of Eve.’ It has
nothing to do with our parentage. We very well could be these prophesied men.”

Arthur watched his easy out flit away with a longing stare, but refused to back down. “Be that as it may, we came to learn Mr Tumnus’s fate. Now we know—and we’ll be returning to where we belong post haste and not coming back. I’m sorry that we can’t help you, and wish you the best of luck, but we must be on our way. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Arthur nodded stiffly at their mortified hosts and wished he didn’t feel like such a selfish cad when he heard Mrs Beaver’s mournful lament as he brushed by her to retrieve the fur coats. He was trying to keep himself and his lover alive. There was no shame in that. This wasn’t their fight, regardless of whatever any silly prophecy said. “Oh, dear...” she whispered. “What are we to do?”

“Come along, Merlin. It’s time to go.”

“No,” Merlin said mutinously, refusing the coat Arthur was trying to press into his hands. He was going to be stubborn again. Didn’t that just figure? Why did Arthur always have to be the bad guy?

“That wasn’t a suggestion.”

“Didn’t you hear them? It was destiny that brought us here. They need us. We can’t just leave.”

“I don’t believe in destiny,” Arthur snarled. Something in Merlin’s eyes flashed—and then his expression caved, going drawn and wane. Regret niggled at his conscience. He couldn’t fathom why. “I’ve humoured you thus far, but no farther. Obey me.”

“Yes, sire,” Merlin said tiredly, without even a trace of sarcasm, and pulled on the coat.

When they went to open the door to leave, the wind was blowing so hard that even Arthur—with all the muscle borne of long years of knight-training at his disposal—had a little trouble forcing it open. The blast of ice and snow that assailed his senses was a shock after hours of amicable talk by a blazing hearth. Between the darkness of night newly fallen and the density of the falling snow, Arthur could hardly see more than a foot in front of his face.

Mr Beaver cleared his voice loudly behind them.

“If you would,” Mrs Beaver said hesitantly, “you are welcome to remain for the night, while the storm passes. Mr Beaver can help you find your way back in the morning.”

They would never find their way home through that mess. To be honest, Arthur wasn’t even sure he would have been able to navigate back to the wardrobe were the night perfectly clear and calm.

“You’re too kind,” Arthur said, and meant it. “Thank you.”

Later, as they lay side-by-side on the rug near the hearth, covered in blankets and waiting for sleep to take them, Arthur marvelled at how a potentially good day had become a bitter memory that would stand between them for a long time to come. Merlin’s body was barely a handbreadth from his own, close enough that he could feel the precious warmth of him, but even that distance felt like miles and miles.

“I’m just trying to take care of you,” Arthur whispered into the silence. “Is that so wrong?”

For a long moment Arthur feared Merlin was going to feign sleep and ignore him, but after a considerable pause, he finally replied, “No, not at all. I want to protect you too. But this is greater than you or I. These people need our help. Maybe they’re not human. Maybe they’re not denizens
of Camelot. But that doesn’t make them any less deserving of salvation. Are you so selfish that you could walk away, even though you know we could do something to help?”

Arthur swallowed thickly. “I’m sorry.”

“I know. But an apology won’t make this better.”

Arthur desperately wanted to reach out, to pull Merlin into his arms, but when he imagined how Merlin might push him away, his heart froze. Instead he pulled his blanket tighter around himself and fell into a fitful sleep.

Merlin would forgive him. He had to. Right?

Arthur woke with the vague sensation that something was wrong.

The place beside him on the makeshift bed was empty and cold. Rubbing his eyes, Arthur propped himself up into a sitting position, squinting against the flickering lamplight to locate his wayward lover. He was nowhere in sight. Probably went to relieve himself outside. Poor bastard. At least the wind had died down outside. The worst of the storm seemed to have passed.

Yawning, Arthur lay back down and closed his eyes, though he kept his ears sharply on alert for the creak of the door signalling Merlin’s return. He waited. And waited. And waited.

“Good lord,” Arthur muttered after what seemed like ages, “has he gotten lost?”

Unlikely. Even Merlin wasn’t incompetent enough to get lost so easily. Most likely he was just mourning outside. He had lost a friend, after all.

The idea of his lover hovering outside, tearful and alone, cut him deeply and before he had a chance to think about it he was pulling on his boots and the coat and braving the weather.

It was still freezing outside, but the wind was no longer sharp as daggers and the snowfall was comparably tame. Peering out into the gloom, he glanced down to find Merlin’s tracks—and his heart plummeted. The tracks were not so old that they had been wiped completely clean by the fading storm, but neither were they fresh. And they didn’t lead around to the rear of the dam, where a makeshift outhouse had been constructed or, indeed, in any direction Merlin had business heading; no, those tracks lead well away from the dam and toward the pass between the two great white hills jutting up in the distance. Arthur wanted to believe Merlin had just gone for a short walk to ease his unrest, but he knew better.

Gods, he’d been such a fool!

“He’s gone to her,” Mr Beaver said, appearing in the doorway behind him, voice dark and morose. The words confirmed Arthur’s greatest fear. “The house of the White Witch lies between those hills. I had wondered why he asked last evening... He’ll be killed.”


“Then you’d best hurry,” Mr Beaver advised, but Arthur was already racing along Merlin’s trudging path, the only sounds registering in his mind being the wind’s whistling taunts and a constant mantra of, “Merlin is mine,” and “She can’t have him.” Meanwhile, his heart thumped a painful rhythm, its beat spelling out one solitary truth: “I can’t lose him.”

Pursuit was no mean feat: slipping and sliding on icy patches, tripping over buried roots, trudging
through mounds of snow waist-high and deeper, struggling to find the right path where the tracks had been covered—all brought him closer to despair. What if he was too late? What if Merlin reached the witch’s house before he did? What if one of the witch’s loyal followers intercepted Merlin on his way? What if?

He did not know how long he ran—only that he was running out of time.

Then, by some miracle, he realized that the tracks were becoming more distinct than ever. He was close; but, then, so too was the witch’s house. When he broke through the trees to see what could only be his lover’s destination—a great gloomy construct of brick and mortar that set his hair on end for no reason he could readily divine—and a dark silhouette just beginning to brave the incline down into the dead valley that cradled it, he did not allow himself a moment even for a sigh of relief; instead, he merely grit his teeth and launched himself through the air, catching his shocked lover around the waist and taking them both hurtling into the snow. They rolled a few yards before coming to a stop, Arthur pinning Merlin’s tense body beneath his and glowing down into that petrified pink face.

Merlin was alive. Arthur had made it in time.

“Arthur, what are you—"

Rage churning in his veins, he settled back onto his knees, reeled one white-knuckled fist back, and delivered a black-eye Merlin would not soon forget.

“Arthur!” Merlin cried out, hands flying to his injured eye in a flurry of agony and disbelief.

“I gave you an order, Merlin. I told you this wasn’t our fight. And what do you do?” Arthur jerked Merlin forward by his shoulders, shaking him hard and merciless, deaf to the muted sobs of pain the smaller man was emitting. “You waited until I was asleep and you slunk away like a two-bit criminal. You could have gotten yourself killed! You fool! You horrible, terrible fool! Don’t you ever do that to me again!” It wasn’t until long, cold fingers stroked down his cheeks, blue eyes peering wetly up at him, that Arthur realized that the blur in his vision was not from anger, but from his own sickly tears.

The boiling fury drained out of him.

Pulling Merlin more gently into his arms in unspoken apology, he buried his face in the damp fur at his lover’s neck and let his vulnerability show—because it suddenly occurred to him that honesty might help here, more so than accusations or ranting or violence. “I was so afraid that I’d lost you. Please, Merlin, I couldn’t stand it if you...” He couldn’t finish, couldn’t bear to give voice to his fear. So many times Merlin had risked himself, usually for Arthur. They had been lucky so far. That luck wouldn’t hold out forever.

Maybe it was pathetic of him to feel this way.

Maybe deepening their relationship had been a bad idea.

He never used to hurt like this, fear like this.

“Arthur,” Merlin was saying through hiccupping sniffles, arms tight around his back. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” They remained like that, locked in each other arms, for countless minutes, until the trembling bled from both their bodies, and Arthur felt in control enough to pull back.

Arthur winced when he looked down into Merlin’s face, seeing the already swelling discolorations forming around his right eye. Reaching out, he pressed gently along the edges of the damage. At
Merlin’s pained hiss, he hastily pulled back, hating himself just a little. “I should not have done that,” he said quietly. “I am stronger than you and there is no way you could have defended yourself. I’ll understand if you won’t forgive me.”

But Merlin was already shaking his head, smiling—or trying to, as the ache in his face made it more of a grimace. “No, Arthur. It’s alright. I deserved it.” But it wasn’t alright, not at all. Merlin was his friend and his lover. In many ways, striking him just now had been very much like striking a woman—absolutely deplorable. Arthur wanted to argue the point, but on some level he still felt that Merlin did deserve it, however much the rest of him railed against such base retaliation. He kept silent and let Merlin’s rasping apologies wash over him. “I’m sorry. So very sorry. I shouldn’t have left you like that. I just...”

“Just what?” Arthur snapped bitterly, some of his earlier ire returning, though he managed to calm himself quicker this time. “Just thought I wouldn’t notice you’d left? Just thought I’d go on without you?”

Merlin chewed his lip, refusing to meet Arthur’s eyes.

“Just what were you thinking, going after this witch on your own? You’re brave, Merlin, I’ll give you that, but you’re not a warrior. Is this Mr Tumnus really worth dying for?”

“He’s my friend. I can’t just leave him.”

“Well, you’re my lover. I can’t just let you march to your death.”

Merlin looked at him sadly. “Then help me,” he pleaded, voice breaking just a little. “We can go to Aslan, like the beavers suggested. We can beat this witch, I know we can. We can save all of Narnia, not just Mr Tumnus. Together. We can do anything together.”

Arthur snorted, but looking into Merlin’s eyes—shining hopefully, despite the unsightly swelling and the lingering redness from his tears—he could not bring himself to refuse outright. It was apparent that Merlin would stay and do as his conscience demanded, whatever Arthur said. This suicide mission proved that. Short of knocking the younger man out, trussing him up like a pig set for slaughter, and hauling him forcibly through the wardrobe, Arthur would have no choice but to return alone if he continued to deny Merlin’s pleas.

If left to his own devices, Merlin would surely die.

If Arthur helped him, perhaps they could both make it out of Narnia alive. Arthur was a knight of Camelot and the champion of his realm. He was no stranger to sorcery. He could assume any part required of him to get through the brewing war, save the kingdom, and restore Mr Tumnus—all the while keeping an eye on Merlin, who had a penchant for trouble that defied logic. No sweat.

They were doomed.

“You,” Arthur groaned tiredly, “are an optimistic fool.”

“And you’re a prat,” Merlin beamed, sensing his victory. “But you’re a good prat.”

“Yes, well, we had better find our way back to the beavers’ dam and let them in on the good news. I suspect we’ll want to get an early start in the morning.”

“Yes,” Merlin agreed happily, slipping his hand into Arthur’s as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Arthur wasn’t sure which one of them was more of a girl in that moment: Merlin, for daring the sentimental gesture in the first place, or himself, for allowing it. “Let’s hurry. I’m
Maugrim couldn’t help but snap his jaws at the queen’s henchman—a pitiful black-bearded dwarf that he had never cared to learn the name of—and chuckled in a low, rumbling growl when the creature scuttled back with a high-pitched yelp. The scent of sickly fear (always present with this one) spiked pleasantly and Maugrim had to wonder how Her Majesty could bear to have such a spineless wretch in her presence. Dwarves had been useful once, back when the Narnians had still respected them for their distant human blood, but those days were long past.

The only things the Narnians knew to respect now were the powers of tooth and claw—and the Queen’s fury, of course. Always, they respected the Queen’s fury. There was not one of the would-be traitors and half-hearted rebels who had not wavered in the face of Her divinity. They all knelt before Her throne, in the end.

Even the faun had kneeled, though it had taken shattered bones to see it done. The fool had been disgustingly loyal to the human vermin it had strived so hard to protect. How disappointed it would have been to learn that all his efforts had been in vain.

“Maugrim,” the Queen said icily as he bowed low in subjugation and shivered under Her chilling scrutiny, “I expect you have a compelling reason for demanding an audience at so late an hour.”

“Yes, my queen,” Maugrim said with a toothy grin that earned him a puzzled—but not displeased—frown in response. The prospect of Her displeasure daunted even him, but what he had to say would see Her well satisfied. “I bring urgent news. We have caught the scent of the Son of Adam not far from here.” Just the memory of its sweet stench made his nostrils flare with the desire for the hunt. Soon. “It was not alone. Another was with it. Also male.”

The Queen’s eyes grew impossibly wide, lips curling into a sneering grin. “So, the time has come at last,” she said to herself. Then, for his benefit, she added, “Excellent work, my darling wolf. Your instructions are to take the humans alive and await my arrival. Any who dare to aid them are traitors and fair game.”

Maugrim licked his lips, salivating at the thought of a fresh kill.

“Be fleet of foot,” she commanded. “Go.”

He went, racing through the Queen’s hallowed halls and out into the snowy night with no thought for anything but the thrill of the hunt.
The beavers were already bustling hastily about, packing up anything they would need, anything they could carry, into large rucksacks. Their relief was palpable when they looked up to see the two humans had returned, safe and well. Neither mentioned Merlin’s wretchedly battered face.

“You made it,” Mrs Beaver smiled, clapping her paws together. “Oh, my dears! I was so very worried.” She narrowed her eyes at Merlin in motherly accusation, and Arthur didn’t bother to suppress his grin when Merlin shifted guilty and tried to hide behind him. “You shouldn’t have gone off like that. You could have been hurt. You really must be more careful.”

“Yes,” Merlin said. “I’m sorry.”

“He won’t be doing anything like that again, I assure you,” Arthur offered with a weary yawn. “Now what’s all the fuss about? It’s the middle of the night. Surely you’re not planning to travel now?”

The beavers exchanged harried glances.

“You’ve ventured too near the base of the queen’s power,” Mr Beaver said at last. “Her police will learn of your presence soon, if they haven’t already, and track you here. It is too dangerous to
Arthur’s blood went cold.

Merlin collapsed on the stairs behind him with a muffled moan. “I’m sorry,” he whispered brokenly. “I wasn’t thinking.”

Reaching back to rest a hand on Merlin’s head, stroking soothingly through tangled locks, Arthur willed him to calm. What was done could not be undone. There was no use crying over spilt milk.

“We would have been leaving in the morning, regardless, Son of Adam,” Mrs Beaver offered with forced cheer. “We’re just getting an earlier start than planned, that’s all.” The sentiment was kind, but offered no comfort if the way Merlin stiffened under Arthur’s hand was any indication. He pretended not to notice the strangled sniffling.

“The snowfall has eased enough that we should be able to find our way without much trouble,” Mr Beaver noted. “Will you boys be able to find your way back home if we take you as far as the Lantern Waste, do you suppose?”

Lantern Waste?

Arthur shrugged. “Actually, we have decided to seek out Aslan, after all. You are headed to his camp, I presume?” At Mr Beaver’s dumbstruck nod, Arthur asked, “You do not mind if we tag along?”

“No, not at all!” the beavers burst out simultaneously, ecstatic. “Not at all!”

After that there was nothing to do but finish the packing, the men exchanging increasingly exasperated glances as Mrs Beaver kept on thinking of new items that simply must be brought along, and the minutes ticked agonizingly by. Arthur had nothing against being prepared, but there was a sense of growing urgency descending upon them, and he had no desire to learn what would happen once that urgency reached a fever-pitch.

Thankfully Mr Beaver put his foot down when Mrs Beaver began to eye what she described as her “sewing machine” thoughtfully. The object resembled an elaborate instrument of torture much too closely for Arthur’s peace of mind. No doubt it was better than a simple needle and string when it came to the mending, but there was no way any of them would have been able to carry that great metal monstrosity any distance.

Mrs Beaver looked like she wanted to argue, but stopped, eyes going wide and panicked.

That’s when they heard the howling.

Wolves. Arthur hated wolves. He especially hated wolves when he was unarmed and defenceless. Gods be damned, he didn’t even have his customary dagger on him, because it was considered rude to wander another man’s castle armed. To hell with propriety! In the future, he was going to worry much less about niceties and a good deal more about being prepared for any eventuality.

“They’re here!”

Mr Beaver threw upon a hidden door in the floor that led down into a dark tunnel. “Hurry, Sons of Adam,” he said, passing a lantern to Arthur and taking one for himself as Mrs Beaver scurried to blow out all the other lights in the room. “This tunnel leads further into the forest, to the Badgers, and should get us onto the right path to Aslan and the Stone Table.”
“And here I thought it led to your mother’s,” Mrs Beaver commented sardonically, staring down her abashed husband. She reminded Arthur a bit of Morgana at her worst right then: positively terrifying!

They all piled into the tunnel, Arthur in the lead with Merlin and Mrs Beaver close behind while Mr Beaver took the rear, their loads over their shoulders. It was slow going, mostly because the ceiling was so low that Arthur and Merlin both had to hunch uncomfortably over to avoid bumping their heads or snagging their hair in the roots dangling above. Fear kept them silent, the only sound that of their too-loud breaths as they strained their ears, waiting for the sound of howling to echo down the narrow tunnel in signal of the end.

Arthur kept reaching reflexively for his sword in the flickering dark, hands grasping at air.

“Would now be a bad time to mention how much I loathe confined spaces?” Merlin muttered tersely behind him. Truth be told, Arthur was a little surprised by this revelation as he would have thought the younger man would have been accustomed to tight spots, considering the way he had grown up. Hunith’s quaint little hovel must have seemed very tiny and confining, indeed, in the dead of winter with no end in sight. Still, he was no stranger to inexplicable phobias, and he remembered how understanding Merlin had been when he’d had his embarrassing brush with a spider in his chambers last week. So rather than offering the thorough mocking he was certain Merlin was expecting, he merely reached awkwardly back with his free arm. This time it was him taking Merlin’s hand in his.

I’m here, he said with a silent squeeze of his hand, and I’m not going anywhere without you.

It seemed they walked like that for miles, muscles screaming against the awkward angles. It was an incredible relief when they finally crawled out of the small opening in the ground at the end of the tunnel, though Arthur ended up being assaulted by another blasted tree in the process, this time coming away with mouthful of pine needles. The taste reminded him of gin –positively revolting!

He spat and gagged even as he helped the groggily chuckling Merlin out of the hole. “Those trees really don’t like you, do they?” Merlin mused. “What did you do to offend them, I wonder?”

“Nothing,” Arthur grouched murderously, and shot a withering look at the innocently swaying tree. “Though I’m sorely tempted to take up a new hobby. Harvesting timber sounds like smashing good fun.”

Naturally, the wind chose that precise moment to pick up and Arthur only just narrowly escaped being mauled another merciless branch. This, of course, set Merlin off into a fit of sputtering hysterics that ought to have rankled, but didn’t. Merlin had been so quiet and morose since their most recent fight that it was a relief to hear him laugh, even if Arthur was at the butt of the joke. They were going to be okay. Or they would be just as soon as Arthur could look into Merlin’s face, at the unsightly bruise he’d caused, and stop feeling the ache of his hand when his fist connected with flesh and bone and the ache in his own chest when he remembered the tears. He’d never struck Merlin in anger before. Gods willing, he never would again.

They all paused only long enough to stretch and lament their lack of sleep before pressing on, in a lighter mood, despite their already oppressive exhaustion.

The beavers led the way this time, which was fine with Arthur as he hadn’t had much time to study the map he’d stumbled upon as they packed. He had his hands full keeping Merlin upright as it was. Although Arthur by no means enjoyed going without sleep, he could manage just fine for days without proper rest if the situation called for it. He was a knight and a prince. Years upon years of strength and endurance training were on his side. Merlin, on the other hand, had no real
reserves of strength to call upon. Whatever resilience he may have had in the harsh peasant life he’d led during his youth in Ealdor had vanished, softened by the ease of court life.

Clearly he was going to have to toughen Merlin up a bit once this nightmare was over, and they were finally back where they belonged. The thought of Merlin’s tormented face glaring at him through the opening in his irreparably dented practice-helmet cheered Arthur immeasurably. It would serve him right after dragging them both into this mess!

Besides, he’d already resolved earlier that some lessons in self-defence were in order.

And maybe, just maybe, if Merlin had the right training he could stop Arthur if he ever threatened to lose control of his temper like that again.

His amusement dimmed like the sun at dusk. Why couldn’t he forget about all that? Why couldn’t he just pass it off as a stupid mistake that would never happen again, and have done with it?

“Arthur? Is something wrong?”

He glanced at Merlin, huddling close beside him, breaths coming in soft puffs of frost, snow flecking his dark hair and lashes like diamonds, and spared a single glance at the beavers trudging along heedlessly in front of them before stopping to press one tender kiss to the mottled skin at the corner of Merlin’s damaged eye and then another to chapped lips. Merlin smiled a little sadly, but seemed to sense Arthur’s desire not to talk about it and simply leaned in closer when they started walking once more.

They stumbled across a fox before too long.

The shocking glow of its eyes when they caught the flickering light of a lantern gave them all an unpleasant scare before they realized that canine though it may be, it was much too small to be a wolf. Besides, were it an enemy, surely it wouldn’t have hastened out of the shadows murmuring apologies and bowing at Arthur and Merlin’s feet as it addressed them with such awe and reverence that even Arthur found himself humbled. It was positively disconcerting how it insisted on calling them “My Kings” or “Your Majesties,” but Arthur hadn’t the heart to inform the creature that they would not be remaining in Narnia long enough to sit in any thrones, whatever the prophecy said. Even if the “magical kingdom” bit hadn’t made his hackles rise, Arthur already had a kingdom to worry about, and Merlin—well, Arthur wasn’t leaving without Merlin. He was hardly king material, anyway. Merlin seemed to go green around the gills just thinking about taking up a kingship and kept shooting Arthur pitiful looks whenever the fox addressed him as if he already were one, which made Arthur chuckle.

More important than the pleasantries was the fact that the fox introduced itself as a servant to Aslan (“—and to Your Majesties as well, of course—”), assigned to spread the news of the Lion’s arrival and gather more loyal soldiers to the royal army. He had come directly from the Stone Table and was therefore able to offer valuable advice regarding a place they might be able to bed down for a few hours and warn them against travelling certain paths guarded by those loyal to the White Witch.

The fox did not linger long, too urgent was his mission, but the meeting left it all feeling so much more real. He was actually doing this, wasn’t he? He was actually considering allying himself with a Lion, of all things, and a bevy of talking animals and who-knew-what-else to fight a battle against a witch—and not just any witch, but specifically one harbouring some sort of inexplicable passion for winter and who apparently thought decorating her garden with people she’d turned to stone was classy. Was this really his life?
It was all Merlin’s fault.

Things like this never used to happen before Merlin had stumbled into his life.

They found the obscure little cave that the fox had described in the side of a hill in good time. Regrettably, it was more of a hole in the ground, really, than a proper cave, but at least it was dry and out of the wind. They’d had to cross a frozen lake to get there, which had been considerably nerve-wracking. With every step they had taken over that ice, Arthur had been keenly aware of how exposed they were, how vulnerable. All it would take was one enemy creature spotting them and reporting back to the queen, and it would all be over.

It did not help to recall that even the trees could be a potential foe.

When every tree could house a corrupt dryad, when every branch could host a spying bird, when every shadow could hide a menacing beast, was it even possible to travel safely? Could caution really make a difference? How does one hide from the land itself?

He was still uneasy when they bedded down, thankful for the extra blankets Mrs Beaver had insisted upon. Merlin curled up beside him beneath the covers and their removed coats without a thought for the head-to-foot rule they still maintained in mixed company, just as he had earlier, in the relative comfort of the beaver’s dam—and just as before, he couldn’t bring himself to argue. It wasn’t as if they had been keeping their relationship much of a secret here. The beaver’s hardly looked surprised, even when Merlin threw his arm over Arthur’s chest and burrowed into his shoulder. Being the incautious innocent (and unrepentant cuddler) that he was, Merlin dropped off almost instantly and proceeded to drool unreservedly into Arthur’s costly brocade shirt. Arthur, on the other hand, lay awake for some time after, restless and uncertain.

He woke to the feel of firm length of Merlin’s body stretched over him, pressing down on him—and his cheek still stinging from a shocking slap. Bloody, buggering hell! What on earth could he have possibly done to deserve such an ignoble wakeup call? He’d been sleeping, for heaven’s sake! Sure, maybe his dreams may not have been entirely innocent... Okay, so his dreams had been positively filthy and had involved Merlin doing deliciously obscene things to his royal personage from the vantage point of his father’s throne as the entirety of the court of Camelot looked on with envy. So what? If he couldn’t have Merlin properly (and it rankled that the gods themselves seemed to be fucking with him in that regard—there was no other explanation), then he was entitled to a few wet dreams, by all that was holy!

Arthur blinked indignantly up at him and parted his lips as if to berate the frustrating little wretch, but a sweaty palm clamped over his mouth, silencing him—and Merlin’s eyes were an unsettling storm of blue, face bloodless and worried. The paleness of his skin was stark in contrast to the vibrant shades of colour darkening that one, swollen eye. That’s when Arthur noticed the bells, the soft jingling drifting in from outside their haven, too close for comfort. So, Merlin hadn’t awoken him just to be spiteful after all.

“The witch’s sleigh,” Merlin whispered, lips close enough now to brush against Arthur’s ear, sending inappropriate sparks tingling down his spine. “She never travels without her bells.” This seemed a stupid rule for a supposedly fearsome witch. How could one ever hope to catch one’s enemies off guard if one insisted upon so blatantly announcing one’s presence? Something of his incredulity must have shown on his face, because when Merlin pulled back and took in his expression, a small smile tugged at his lips.

It was something of a miracle that Merlin hadn’t yet noticed how aroused Arthur was.
He wasn’t ashamed of his bodily reaction, not at all. It was a perfectly natural response to being woken from a very erotic dream to find himself pinned beneath a body he knew so very well. And if the thought of fucking Merlin into the dirt, the icy chill pebbling his lover’s warm skin as he drove into him, while an evil witch searched for them not a stone’s throw from their hiding place had him biting his lip against a moan—well, it wasn’t as if he was going to act on it. Though he wanted to. Really, kind of, a lot.

Yes, so, if the beavers hadn’t been right there, he might have tried something. But they were there, so it was a moot point.

He breathed deeply, willing himself to calm, until at last Merlin’s body was a welcome comfort rather than a torturous tease. Not a word passed between any of them for what seemed like ages. Even after the musical ringing of the bells had faded, they all remained frozen, hardly daring to twitch let alone speak. It was grating.

Finally, “Maybe she’s gone,” Merlin mumbled doubtfully.

Rolling carefully to dislodge Merlin, briefly lamenting the loss of warmth, Arthur said, “I’ll go and have a look.” It would be better than waiting around forever, nervous and wondering. He wasn’t accustomed to hiding from his enemies. Granted, he was unarmed and likely wouldn’t be much of a challenge for this witch, but he could be stealthy, and there was no reason why he shouldn’t put his long-standing (albeit rusty) scouting abilities to good use. If the witch had passed, they were wasting valuable time.

The beavers were not enthusiastic about this plan. With a wordless apology to his wife, Mr Beaver hissed, “You’re no good to Narnia dead,” and scurried out of the hole before Arthur could argue.

Silence again, so thick and oppressive that he couldn’t breathe. Mr Beaver was just that—a beaver. He was more than a dumb beast, yes, but he wasn’t a warrior. The thought of him being attacked, turned to stone, while he waited down here like a frightened child made his stomach turn. This wasn’t right.

Suddenly there was a strangled yelp.

And silence again.

The witch had not gone.

Mrs Beaver covered her mouth with a shocked sob as Merlin scooted over to offer what comfort he could. Meanwhile, Arthur steeled his resolve and inched closer to the entrance. If Mr Beaver was not already lost to them forever—and he had to believe there was that chance—then he had a moral responsibility to attempt to save him. Maybe if he—

“Ah!” Arthur cried out (not at all like a screeching girl) and jerked back, blinking rapidly at the hyperactive Beaver that had just leapt into the burrow and was now dancing around and babbling like a mad—well, like a mad squirrel, actually.

“Sorry, did I scare you? Nevermind, nevermind! Just come now, follow me. I hope you’ve been good, because there’s someone here to see you!”

“Been... good?”

Arthur and Merlin exchanged mirror looks of astonishment (would the surprises never stop coming? Being in a near-constant state of confusion was becoming tiresome) and, with twin shrugs, pulled on their coats to follow their companions out into the early morning sunlight, blinking
against the glare. They stumbled a few steps, stretching the cramps out of their legs, and scrambled up the steep bank toward the trees the beavers had disappeared into, pushed their way through the branches—and stopped.

There, in the centre of the path, was a great red sleigh pulled by eight brown reindeer—yes, of all things, reindeer. He’d seen them before, well north of Camelot, but they were far from common and he’d certainly never heard of anyone domesticating the creatures for pulling sleighs. How extraordinary!

Even more extraordinary, however, was the man sitting in the sleigh, glittering mirthfully down at the two happily laughing Beavers on the ground beside him. He was a huge man in a bright red robe (bright as holly berries) with a hood that had fur inside it and a great white beard that fell like a foamy waterfall over his chest. Looking at the man, he appeared very human, but there was something about him that sang other and more and magic. His senses said sorcerer, but they also said friend, and so Arthur found himself torn as the beavers hailed them closer (“Come on! Come and see! This is a nasty knock for the Witch! It looks as if her power is crumbling!”). Merlin marched to greet the man with nary a moment’s hesitation, but Arthur stalled. When he looked at this man, he wanted to trust him. It felt like something was bubbling up inside of him, simultaneously happy and solemn and so very strange. A part of him seemed to recognize the man, as if they’d met before, though he knew it could not be true. He would have remembered had he met anyone like this.

The old man’s eyes rested on him, crinkling knowingly behind wire-rimmed spectacles, and he smiled. “Ah, young Arthur Pendragon,” he said, voice a merry rumble. “It is a pleasure to meet you at last. Come, I bring you gifts.” The man’s smiling eyes flitted to the rest of the group. “I bring gifts for everyone.”

“But who are you?” Merlin asked.

“Why, he’s Father Christmas, of course!” Mrs Beaver exclaimed.

“Good Beavers,” said the old man pleasantly, “I’m afraid people do not yet celebrate Christmas in the world from which they come.” The man explained about Christmas then, or tried to. What was understood was that Christmas was a special holiday celebrating peace and joy, that traditionally involved lots of food and the exchanging of gifts with loved ones. The old man—Father Christmas—generally travelled to each person’s household in one night (yes, by magic) to deliver special gifts to those deserving of them and a lump of coal to those undeserving. It all seemed very silly to Arthur, but Merlin appeared intrigued and he had never been one to refuse a gift. What was really important here was that the Witch’s magic had prevented Father Christmas from entering Narnia for a hundred years. That he was here now was, as the beavers insisted, a sign that the Witch’s power was weakening. Arthur wasn’t ready to underestimate the Witch or put all his faith in a great over-sized cat, but the suggestion gave him some hope that he wasn’t making a terrible mistake in allowing himself and Merlin to become involved in this mess.

“And now for your presents,” Father Christmas continued, concluding explanations. “There is a new and better sewing machine for you, Mrs Beaver. I will drop it in your house as I pass.”

“If you please, sir,” said Mrs Beaver, making a curtsy. “It’s locked up.”

“Locks and bolts make no difference to me,” said Father Christmas. “And for you, Mr Beaver, when you get home you will find your dam finished and mended and all the leaks stopped and a new sluice-gate fitted.”

Mr Beaver was so pleased that he opened his mouth very wide and then found he couldn’t say
anything at all.

“For you, Merlin, Son of Hunith.” He reached back, arm plunging deep into the great red sack behind him and pulled out a long staff, solid and strong. Intricate vines curled up and around the staff in a brilliant display of workmanship that put the best of Camelot’s artisans to shame. More astonishing and eye-catching than the carvings, however, was the blue stone atop it, shining the very colour of Merlin’s eyes at dawn—shocking blue flecked with gold. Arthur was reminded of the staffs the Lady Sophia and her father had carried into Camelot, but even those prime works of craftsmanship would have been put to shame by this beauty. “I give to you this staff, that you might be able to defend yourself in the coming battle.”

Arthur couldn’t quite suppress his snort of amusement when he realized even this stranger knew how dangerous it could be to hand someone as hopeless as Merlin a proper weapon. Maybe he wasn’t as bad with a sword as Arthur liked to tease, but he still wasn’t to be trusted unsupervised with sharp objects. A staff, now... He wished he’d thought of it. This one seemed rather too ostentatious for use on the battlefield, but a staff would suit Merlin well, provided he could be trained not to brain himself at the first opportunity.

When Merlin’s hand wrapped around the offering, he jerked, lips shaping an “oh” of amazement as he tested his grip and found it pleasing. “Thank you,” he breathed, beautiful and open.

Father Christmas smiled indulgently. “There is one more thing,” he said, and this time he pulled a small book from his bag and pressed it into Merlin’s hands. “This will keep your secrets well, for so long as you desire.” Merlin opened it, flipping through the pages with awe. Arthur caught sight only of a few blank pages, before Merlin shot a wary glance in Arthur’s direction and hastily bundled the book into his coat.

Arthur rolled his eyes. “A diary, Merlin? I knew you were a girl, but this takes the cake.”

Merlin blinked owlishly for a moment, and then flushed deeply, burrowing deeper into his coat. “Shut up,” he sniped, but sounded more delighted than offended.

Arthur laughed and was still laughing when Father Christmas turned to him said, “For you, Arthur Pendragon, the tools you will need to defeat your enemies. Bear them well, Son of Adam.” With these words he handed to Arthur a shield and a sword. The shield was the colour of silver and across it there ramped a red lion, as bright as a ripe strawberry at the height of summer. The hilt of the sword was of gold and it had a sheath and a sword belt and everything it needed, and it fit comfortably in Arthur’s hand, as if it had always been there. Laughter faded into solemn determination as he accepted his gifts and knew the time would soon come to use them.

Unsheathing the sword, he tested its sharpness, the balanced weight of it, and noticed an inscription etched into the blade. On one side, “When Aslan bares his teeth, winter meets its death,” and on the other, “When Aslan shakes his mane we shall have spring again.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Rhindon there,” Father Christmas nodded at the sword, “will serve you well, I think, though it is not the weapon destiny forged for you.” Arthur nodded, pretending he understood—he was becoming quite accustomed to cryptic statements. He grinned at Merlin, flashing his new sword in show, but was disheartened when he noticed his lover was poking tenderly at his black eye. Merlin ceased at once when he noticed Arthur was look at him, but that wasn’t much comfort.

Father Christmas was looking all-too-knowing when Arthur turned back to him.
Then the man pulled a delicate chain from his pocket, holding it out in front of him. Dangling from it was a clear vial that looked like glass, but might have been diamond. “In this bottle,” he said, “there is a cordial made of the juice of one of the fire-flowers that grow in the mountains of the sun. If you or any of your friends is hurt, a few drops of this will restore them.” Arthur palmed the vial, following Father Christmas’s gaze back to Merlin, and was glad of it.

Father Christmas summoned breakfast for them then, a large table laden with every mouth-watering breakfast dish anyone could possibly want appearing out of thin air with the promise that all trace of it would vanish once they had finished. The smells wafted up to them beckoningly, and by the time the old man took his leave (“So much to do! Spring is coming!”) the two humans were already gobbling down steaming sausage and eggs like they hadn’t eaten in weeks while the beavers drifted toward some dishes that smelled suspiciously fishy. The food did them much good. By the time they had finished, they were wholly refreshed and eager to set off once more.

“To Aslan and the Stone Table!”

Arthur quietly offered Merlin a bit of the precious healing juice Father Christmas had gifted him while they walked, but Merlin merely shook his head and pressed the vial back into Arthur’s hands. “But your eye,” he had argued, “must surely hurt.”

“Yes,” Merlin nodded, “but not as bad as all that. I’m not in mortal peril, Arthur. You shouldn’t spend something that valuable so frivolously. It’s a terrible waste. There will be others more in need of it than I. I can manage a little pain.”

The trouble, of course, was that Merlin shouldn’t need to “manage” any pain at all.

It didn’t occur to any of them that the weakening of the witch’s power might mean trouble for them until they were standing at the edge of a great frozen waterfall. The snow was sticky and wet beneath their feet, the frozen columns of ice jutting downward were slick and dripping, and the path before them was littered with puddles of melted ice and snow. Further down the river, too close for comfort, the ice was already breaking, snapping portentously as the current swept away ice floes that had held solid for a hundred years. Spring had arrived, just as Father Christmas had predicted, but it had come too fast and too soon.

“Do you suppose it’s safe?” Merlin asked, tugging nervously at the edges of his coat, which was hanging open and dangling a bit off his slumped shoulders. Arthur had abandoned his own coat already, of course, the heat having made him sweat and chafe under the weight of all that fur. Why should he care when the coat was not technically his to lose? It was not as if he had ever even taken it out of the wardrobe. Besides, he’d been glad for the warmth of the sun on his face and the pleasant spring breeze rustling his clothes. He had no fondness for winter.

Suddenly, however, he was feeling very fond of winter. He desperately desired its return.

Because the path wasn’t looking safe. Not at all.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Arthur lied, but turned to the beavers anyway and said, “Are you absolutely sure there is no other way?”

“There is a bridge farther south,” Mr Beaver replied, “or there was about ten years ago. But there is no way to know if it still stands and it would take us out of our way by full near half a day.”

Half a day. That was half a day too long. They had eluded trouble thus far, but they were still being
hunted. He was armed now, but he held no delusions that he could take on a pack of wolves and a witch on his own. Merlin wouldn’t be much help. The idiot had been tripping over that blasted staff of his all morning—had almost bashed Arthur over the head with it more than once in the midst of his unbalanced flailing to boot!

What was the greater risk?

“Right,” Arthur said with a decisive nod. “We’ll have to press forward then.” He shot a grin in Merlin’s direction. “Hope you can swim.”

“Not. Funny.”

Oh, but it was. It really was.

The beavers led the way again, this time testing the path with their lighter weight and the strength of their tails, which they slapped heavily against the ice in search of weak spots. Beavers were natural swimmers. If they fell through, they would be fine. Humans might not be so lucky. The ice made uneasy, groaning sounds beneath their feet, but it held.

By the time they reached the centre of the wide river, Arthur was starting to feel sure of his steps and confident enough in their chance of reaching the other side intact to aim a few mocking remarks in Merlin’s direction. He had only intended to distract Merlin, who looked conspicuously green around the gills, from his worries. Instead he hit on a sore spot without intending to.

“Would you just shut up!” Merlin snapped, pausing mid-step and waving his staff in tremulous warning. “There is nothing funny about this! I’ve seen what happens to people who fall through thin ice, okay? People fall through, and they don’t come back up. They stay down. And maybe, with luck, you might find the remains of a decaying body washed downstream after all the ice has gone.”

“Merlin—”

“And even if, by some miracle, you managed to pull the person back out, you could be too late. Once the water is in the lungs, it’s too late. It’s too late! Do you have any concept of what it’s like to pull someone’s limp body out of a cold river? Have you ever put your ear to someone’s chest and listened for a heartbeat? Don’t laugh about it, Arthur. Don’t you dare laugh! If anything ever happened to you…” Merlin stopped, eyes wide and distant. Trapped in a memory.

For a moment Arthur closes his eyes and imagines Merlin falling through the ice, Merlin’s lifeless body in his arms, Merlin’s heart silent under his ear.

“Hey,” Arthur coaxed, “I’m sorry. It’s alright. We’re not going to fall through, not either of us.” He cracked a helpless smile, unsure of what to do, what to say. “Besides, I think you’re forgetting something here: I’m the prince. Princes don’t sink.”

Merlin’s laugh was much more shattered than Arthur would have liked. “That’s what you say. You don’t know anything.”

He reached out to touch Merlin, to rest a hand on his shoulder, but he never made contact.

“Well, isn’t that just precious,” came a sinister voice in a low, rumbling growl.

Merlin and Arthur jerked around, and there they were: a pack of beady-eyed, slavering wolves pacing slowly onto the ice, hackles raised and ready to strike. “Oh no,” Merlin breathed beside him. Someone shouted “Run!”—maybe even him—and Arthur’s fingers fisted around Merlin’s
wrist and suddenly they were racing toward the opposite shore, slipping and sliding and tripping across the ice. The prospect of falling through a weak spot was now the least of their worries. Better to fall through and drown than to be torn apart, piece by agonizing piece.

The wolves caught them before they reach the opposite shore.

They were surrounded. Two humans and two beavers against no less than seven full-grown wolves. Mr Beaver was pinned beneath one massive paw, claws digging dangerously into his fur as one gaping maw hovered over his jugular. Brandishing his sword, Arthur shoved Merlin behind him and eyed the wolf that seemed to be in charge—the largest and foulest of the lot—in warning. “Tell your minion to release the beaver,” he demanded with more bravado than he felt, “and let us be on our way. You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

The beast laughed, or made a sound that might have been a laugh but, in fact, could have made fresh milk curdle in its pail. “Put that down boy. Someone might get hurt.”

“Don’t worry about me!” cried Mr Beaver. “Run him through!”

“There is no need for violence,” said the wolf, tongue lolling in mocking amusement, “My Queen is most eager to meet you.”

“I’m sure she is,” Merlin muttered.

“Follow me willingly and no one will be harmed. My Queen merely wishes to speak with you. She is not your enemy, whatever you have been told.”

“Don’t listen to him! Kill him! Kill him now!” The wolf pinning Mr Beaver growled and lunged down, teeth pressing into the enraged beaver’s throat in clear warning. Arthur tightened his grip on his sword and tried not to think about poor Mrs Beaver, who was sobbing softly at Merlin’s side. If he had to, could he move fast enough? Was it a risk worth taking?

“I am not in the habit of indulging the wishes of witches.”

“Is that so?” Mr Beaver choked out a strangled cry as his captor’s fangs dug farther into his flesh. This time there was blood. Not a lot, but enough to drive home the point. “Are you sure you won’t change your mind?” Merlin flinched, jerking angrily as he tried to plunge forward in what would have been a most madcap display of harebrained heroics had Arthur not wrapped his free arm around Merlin’s waist and forced him back. He was too aware of the escalating danger of the situation for gentleness. More bruises would mark Merlin’s skin come the morrow. At least he would still be alive—with a little luck.

“This isn’t your war. There is no need for you to get involved.”

“No, Arthur, don’t listen to him,” Mr Beaver shouted. “Narnia needs you.”

“Arthur,” Merlin whispered plaintively.

“Shut up. I’m trying to think!”

“What’s it going to be, Son of Adam? I won’t wait forever. And neither will the river.”

Arthur breathed deep.

And the waterfall behind them creaked and groaned, commanding the attention of all. Horror filled him as the ice began to shudder and crack, water spilling forth, slowly at first—but then the cracks
widened and a single, jagged icicle spun menacingly down, shattering with the force of its impact as it struck the ice mere feet from the wolf pinning Mr Beaver down. It was just the distraction Arthur needed.

Arthur leapt forward, sword arching with terrible accuracy, and then Mr Beaver was free, and more icicles were falling, and the wolves were howling and snapping at their heels, and the ice beneath their feet was giving way, and the world was breaking apart. All Arthur could think to do was shove Rhindon into the ice at his feet and shout “Hold onto me!”—but Merlin apparently wasn’t listening. When he looked back to see why the idiot hadn’t obeyed him, he cried out in shock—real fear freezing his veins. Merlin wasn’t right behind him as he had supposed; rather, he was far out of reach—prone and bloodied on the ground, covered in the tell-tale remnants of an icicle. Two of the wolves—the leader and one other—had their fangs deep in Merlin’s trousers and were tugging him ferociously along.

“No!” he shouted wretchedly, and tried to tug his blade free of the ice, but the blade stuck stubbornly and then the waterfall was surging free and there was no time to save him no time no time—

Merlin!

They found the sopping fur that had once been Merlin’s coat washed ashore a fair distance downstream and the staff farther still. But there was no trace of Merlin.

“The wolves will take him directly to her.”

“I have to save him.”

“And so you shall. But you’ll need Aslan’s help for that.”

Arthur draped the sodden fur around his shoulders, heedless of his own discomfort, and clung to the staff like a lifeline. If anything happened to Merlin...

Every time he closed his eyes—every time he blinked—he saw the image of his lover deadly still on the ice, battered and bloodied and so very helpless. Unshed tears burned like acid at the corners of his eyes, and terror swelled his throat. What good was he, if he could not even manage to protect the people he loved?

Spots danced in front of Merlin’s eyes as he blinked blearily into wakefulness. The shock of pain when he shook his head in a colossally stupid attempt to clear his vision had him rolling over and retching violently into the welcoming cool of the snow beneath him, the entirety of his body seizing up in trembling agony. He was both hot and cold—feverish, he noted hazily—and his muscles were cramping from the awkwardness of his position: wrists and feet both tied firmly behind him and attached together by a cruelly short bit of rope. He’d been hogtied. And he couldn’t feel his toes. And his head wouldn’t stop throbbing.

He was in trouble.

“By the power of Avalon,” he cursed hoarsely, straining to remember what had happened, how he had come to be in this position. He recalled the waterfall, and shouting, and Arthur brandishing his sword like some grand hero straight out of the fairy stories his mother had told him when he was younger—and then nothing.

He had been captured. That much was obvious. But where was Arthur? And the beavers? Were
they all well? Had they managed to escape?

Straining against his bonds, Merlin managed to roll back onto his side. He craned his neck, taking in his surroundings with wide eyes and terror bubbling in his stomach. Two wolves loomed into sight, baring their teeth at him in menacing amusement. Just beyond them was the witch’s empty sleigh.

But no Arthur.

And no beavers.

And the witch was nowhere in sight.

Relief washed over him like a gentle breeze in summer. His companions were free. And if they were free, then they had to be in good health and well on their way to Aslan—he refused to so much as consider the alternatives.

It would be much easier to extricate himself from his predicament now that he only had himself to worry about. Perhaps he could even manage to save them all some trouble and take care of the White Witch himself as he had originally intended. Although he was not entirely confident of his ability to take on a witch of indeterminate power, the odds were probably good, provided he managed to catch her by surprise. He’d had fair luck in dealing with wicked sorcerers in the past. He didn’t see why this one should be any different. Her loyal followers would probably stand against Aslan and the new order to come in spite of her death, but he was confident of Arthur’s ability to bring them to heel and Aslan would probably be no pushover either.

Explaining how a mere bumbling manservant had managed to off a witch all on his own would take some doing, but Arthur had always been astonishingly blind when it came to such inconsistencies, and the people of Narnia would probably be too busy celebrating her death to wonder overmuch about the how’s of it.

So. Yes. Right.

Parting his lips, Merlin quietly incanted the spell that would release his bindings—but nothing happened.

He tried again. Still nothing.

And then again, louder this time. Still. Nothing.

“Oh, Merlin,” a softly lilting voice said with amusement ringing clear, “you should know me better than that. Did you really think I wouldn’t take precautions? Those ropes bind more than just your body.”

It was the witch, of course. And she sounded... familiar. He had heard that voice before, that gloating tone. He had heard it almost every night in his dreams—his nightmares—for far too long.

Merlin raised his gaze.

No.

It couldn’t be.

It wasn’t possible.
“Nimueh,” he whispered, “but you’re dead.”

Cold red lips curled disdainfully. “Not,” the witch sneered, “quite dead enough.”
Aslan’s camp was a marvel of colour, song, and joyous revelry, but Arthur’s troubled mind observed only garish excesses and shamelessly incongruous behaviour unbefitting a wartime situation. Even before they passed through the outermost borders of the camp, he was bristling with frustrated indignation. Were these people really so sure of their victory? They had been enslaved to the witch’s will for a century and lived in fear of her long before that. Did this mean nothing to them? He could not be sure of what could be considered a normal lifespan for any given creature in Narnia, but it seemed obvious that the witch was not only exceptionally long-lived (possibly immortal, which was something he really didn’t want to think about), but also very hard to kill. After all, the people of Narnia would have surely risen up before now if there had been any hope of defeating her. Perhaps this Aslan fellow truly would make the difference, but the mere arrival of spring and the shattering of a single spell hardly justified such foolishness.

If Arthur knew anything about sorcerers—and he certainly ought to, considering how frequently they attempted to destroy him and/or his kingdom—then it was likely that the witch was only
biding her time and waiting for the right time to strike. There would be a battle. And these foolish revellers would be caught off guard, because they were too busy celebrating their good fortune to realize the danger.

Merlin could be hurt now, even dea— Arthur stumbled, shying away from the thought with a sick feeling heavy in his belly. Merlin could be bleeding for these people at that very moment, and yet they had the gall to laugh and dance in Arthur’s wake as he led the beavers to the centre of the camp atop the gradually sloping hill, where he knew Aslan and any of his appointed advisors must be waiting. All manner of talking beasts and creatures straight out of storybooks and more recent nightmares (dear heavens!—was that a unicorn prancing behind that griffin?) lined his path, as if observing a spectacular parade. It took all his willpower not to lose his temper. The only creatures that looked even remotely sombre and moderately aware of what was to come were the strange half-human, half-horse hybrids (centaurs, he mused, recalling the Greek tales travelling bards had entertained him with as a boy) with their massive bows and freshly-filled quivers of arrows on hand and ready; however, even they looked on Arthur with a sort of vacant awe and unjustified hope that left him bristling and unaccountably angry.

He was here for Merlin. That was all.

By the time he reached Aslan’s pavilion, stationed by what must have been the infamous Stone Table (which didn’t look like much—why it was spoken of as if it held any great significance was well beyond his comprehension), Arthur was so twisted up inside that he was caught off guard when the great Lion emerged from within and looked at him with such ancient, knowing eyes that he suddenly found his knees had gone a bit trembly. This was no ordinary lion, no talking beast as the others in this strange world. In those eyes he saw the rise and fall of nations, of worlds, and of entire universes. He saw all the sins and virtues of life: modesty and extravagance; chastity and lust; temperance and gluttony; charity and avarice; diligence and sloth; forgiveness and wrath; kindness and envy; humility and pride; hope and despair. He saw all the wealth and wisdom of a god.

His knees hit the ground before the Lion’s massive paws of their own accord, the shock of the impact jerking him back to his senses. When he looked up again, the Lion did not seem nearly so oppressively larger than life—in fact, it seemed really quite ordinary, or as ordinary as a talking lion could be. The beast’s eyes were laughing at him.

Arthur scowled inwardly, and might have jumped to his feet (he was a prince of Camelot—he kneeled to no one!) had he not noticed that all the other people around them were in various stages of prostration around them. He needed this Lion, however much he might dislike admitting it. He could swallow his pride for Merlin’s sake. It rankled, but he could do it.

“Welcome, Arthur, Son of Adam,” the Lion invoked, voice rumbling deeply through the still air. “I have been waiting for you. But I had expected two of you. Tell me, where is the second.”

“He has been captured by the White Witch,” Mr Beaver said gravely.

“That is grave news, indeed,” said Aslan.

The hush that had settled over the camp when Aslan had emerged became thicker, almost cloying, as the news settled over the crowd like a fresh blanket of frost. Perhaps now they would begin to take their predicament more seriously. Not that a change of attitude would much improve Arthur’s mood now.

“Sir,” said Mrs Beaver, “surely there is something that may be done.”
“All that may be done shall be done,” Aslan murmured cryptically. His eyes seared into Arthur, as if he could read all his secrets. Arthur shivered, feeling exposed, and pulled the still-damp fur tighter around him. “In the meantime, let a feast be prepared for our new arrivals.” The crowd thankfully began to break up then, though Arthur was not best pleased to find he’d been left alone with a beast that could potentially strike him dead with a single blow of his paw before Arthur even had a chance to recall the sword at his hip. Nice kitty... “Come, Son of Adam,” the Lion rumbled, amused, “and I will show you a far-off sight of the castle where you are to be king.”

And Arthur, for lack of any other options, followed the Lion to the eastern edge of the hilltop. There a beautiful sight met their eyes. The sun was setting behind their backs. That meant that the whole country below them lay in the evening light—forest and hills and valleys and the winding tail of the great river leading to the sea. At that very point where the river met the sea was a great shining beacon, almost like a star, but Arthur quickly realized that it was not a star at all. It was a great white castle, standing tall and proud in the light of the setting sun, the fading brightness reflecting from its many windows.

“That, O Man,” said Aslan, “is Cair Paravel of the two thrones, in one of which you must sit as High King. The other throne, as you must surely know, is for your companion, Merlin, who shall rule under you.”

So, that was Cair Paravel.

There must have been some magic in the castle itself that it could be standing after what Arthur assumed must have been at least a hundred years of disuse. He recalled that the beaver had mentioned once as they walked that the White Witch had never once dared to hold court there. Even at this distance, Arthur found it enchanting. He very much would have liked to see it up close, only...

“I think there has been a misunderstanding,” Arthur said with a tired sigh. “I have no intention of being king in this place—and certainly Merlin is not suited to ruling, were I willing to part from him. I am here because Merlin asked me to be here.” And Arthur explained about the faun Tumnus, how Merlin had been so terribly desperate to save his friend, and how Arthur had not the heart to refuse him, though he should have. Then he went on to describe his newfound hatred for the witch, and how she had made this fight personal when she stole away his truest friend. “So you see,” Arthur finished, “this kingship and prophecy business is of no interest to me. Because I made a promise to Merlin, I will see this thing through and do what I can to help you defeat this witch, but beyond that I will not be so bound. My main priority is to see that Merlin is rescued and to return us both to where we really belong. I am the only son of Uther Pendragon, King of Camelot. I have a duty to my father and my own people to return. Surely, as a king yourself, you understand the importance of duty.”

“Well spoken, Son of Adam,” said Aslan. “I, too, wish to keep my loved ones—my people—safe. Though I wonder if you do not speak so hastily when you claim young Merlin would be unsuited to ruling. As you describe him, he seems a kind and compassionate man—”

“He is a fool,” Arthur interrupted. “A kind one, yes, but a fool nonetheless. And regardless of Merlin’s capabilities, the fact remains that I am not willing to part from him.”

“You love him.”


“If you do not love him, why are you so intent on keeping him, regardless of his own wishes?”
Arthur bristled. Surely Merlin would never really consider leaving him. He wouldn’t stay, if given half a chance, would he? A sarcastic voice in the back of his head that sounded very like Morgana piped up assured him that no, of course, Merlin would never choose a life of luxury and respect over an occupation that routinely saw him being thrown in the stocks, mocked for a mental disease called kindness, and forced to do any dirty job that a certain spoiled royal could think of. Flexing his fingers tensely, Arthur stared at the castle on the horizon wistfully. “Do you really think he’d be happier here?”

The Lion was silent a moment. “I cannot know your friend’s heart,” Aslan said at long last, “but I suspect he feels much the same for you as you do for him. He would likely be happy to follow wherever you may choose to go. Though I think, perhaps, you might reconsider your decision. I fear I have not made myself entirely clear: there is no need for you to choose one kingdom over another. Time flows differently in Narnia. No matter when you choose to leave us, when you return to your world you will find that no time at all has passed since the moment you stepped into Narnia. You will not have aged. You will not have failed in your duty to Camelot in any way. On the contrary, I think your time here will have made you better prepared to rule, when the time comes.”

“I...” Arthur wet his lips, uncertain how to react. “That is...”

“There is no need to decide now. Think on it.” The Lion’s eyes were kind and sad all at once. “Think, also, on the fact that a love that would never be condoned in your world would be most welcome here. You could have your Merlin openly as your lover and your equal here, without fear of ridicule or retaliation. Should you choose to wed him, not a soul would gainsay you. Narnians are a simple folk. They will accept and adore you both as you are. For whatever time you remain with us, you will have no reason to hide.”

Arthur struggled for words, mind whirling. To think he could hold Merlin close without fear of consequences, to sit beside him on twin thrones, to marry him and make his claim legal and binding. These were the things he had wished for in his heart of hearts. Could it really be within his grasp? Could he trust this Lion? Was there some hidden catch?

He would have asked questions, but just as he found the words to express his hopeful incredulity, the sound of a blaring horn reached his ears. “What is that?”

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“The Queen’s scavengers have scouted us out at last,” replied Aslan, and began a slow loping gait along the outskirts of the camp at a pace that Arthur could comfortably keep up with.

There were three wolves.

The alarms had been sounded before they could do much damage. A cursory scan of the area suggested that the beasts had intruded upon the privacy of some bathing nymphs (now sobbing quietly into the shoulders of their dryad cousins, shaken but unharmed), taken a bite out of the faun that had sounded the alarm (his leg was in bad shape, but he seemed in no imminent danger), and proceeded to kick up a mighty fuss. Toothy grins met their arrival. Inhuman glee glowed in their eyes.

All along, their purpose had been to stir up a commotion and bring their enemies running to greet them. Such arrogance.

Arthur recognized the one that lazily introduced himself as Maugrim as the leader of the very pack that had attacked at the waterfall and stolen Merlin away. Reflexively he discarded Merlin’s coat and staff and reached for Rhindon, but a meaningful look from Aslan stilled his hand.
Right, then. Negotiations first. Personally, he would rather strike down the villainous scum and ask questions later (what capacity for patience and mercy he might have otherwise offered had been stripped of him when Merlin had been stolen), but this was not his army and he was not the one in charge here.

“Why have you come?” Aslan demanded.

The wolves seemed to find this amusing. “I should think that would be obvious,” Maugrim said, tongue lolling mockingly. Yellow eyes settled on Arthur. His grip on Rhindon tightened. “We are here for the remaining Son of Adam.” The crowd twittered in outrage. Arthur gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes. The stupid wolf proceeded as if he did not notice the outcry. “He is no good to you alone. The prophecy is as good as thwarted. Give him over to us, and My Lady will be merciful.”

“We,” Aslan said coolly, “shall make no such concession.” The Lion went on to say more, but Arthur did not hear a word of it. In his mind, seven terrible words echoed in a terrible refrain.

The prophecy is as good as thwarted.

“Do you mean to say that Merlin is dead?” he interrupted, heart thudding painful in his chest.

Silence settled over the area. Aslan’s eyes were sad on him.

The head wolf’s lips curled into a laughing sneer. “No,” Maugrim growled, “but he may be soon. Come with me, Son of Adam, and he will be returned to you—”

“Unharmed?”


Arthur flinched. Gods, Merlin. “What has she done to him?”

Maugrim shrugged as his companions snickered wickedly behind him. “That is neither here nor there. The point is that if you come now, My Lady will allow you to take him and return to your world. Provided that you swear never to return.”

“Liar!”

“Deceiver!”

“Don’t believe a word of it, Son of Adam!”

The crowd roared its disapproval, and Arthur took a deep, steadying breath. “How do I know you speak the truth?”

“You don’t. But can you really afford to deny me?” His voice went hushed and cruel. “If you refuse, I can assure you that your precious Merlin will die slowly and in great pain. Moreover, when it is all over, I have been promised the first taste of his soft, succulent flesh. I wonder: will he taste as delicious as he smells?”

That was all it took for Arthur’s self-control to break.

“You will not touch him!” he cried, and Rhindon did sing in his hand as it sliced through the air.

“Stand back,” Aslan called. “This is the Son of Adam’s fight! Back! Back!”
He and the wolf circled each other cautiously in the circle that cleared for them. He could hear the crowd chattering and sense their unease, but anger burned through his veins—and fear, too—and he knew he had to win this. For Merlin, whose faith in Arthur had never once faltered. For the beavers, who had been kind. For all the people of Narnia, who had bowed to him despite his own reluctance.

Merlin was alive. He felt it in his bones. So, too, was he certain that once the Queen had her matched set of would-be saviour-kings, that this fact would no longer hold true. He was no stranger to political games and pretty lies. She would kill them both—and gladly. And this wolf and his kin would defile their carcasses with ravenous greed.

He thought of Merlin, prone on the ice and being dragged to his doom.

He leapt forward just as Maugrim lunged for his throat.

They landed in a painful pile of steel, fur and aching limbs in the centre of the clearing. It was over quickly. A mangy dog was no match for a man of his skills.

“You should not have touched him,” Arthur whispered as the wolf’s eyes rolled into the back of his head and its thrashing body stilled. “I’ve been trained to kill since birth,” and to preserve the life of his friend and lover, he would do far worse than kill. Pushing the heavy body off himself with a muted grunt, he found the crowd staring at him in startled awe.

The remaining two wolves cowered under his glare and fled.

“Shall we pursue?” a centaur piped up, brandishing his spear pointedly.

“Yes,” Aslan said. “They will go to their mistress and lead us to the other Son of Adam. A rescue is in order.” Then he called forth all matter of winged creatures—a pegasus, a griffin, several other beasts Arthur didn’t recognize—which immediately gave chase.

Arthur was disheartened at being left behind. If anyone should be haring off on an insane mission to rescue Merlin, it should be him. He might have followed, but Aslan positioned himself meaningfully in his path and refused to budge.

“They will bring him back safe and well, if they can,” Aslan said. “Have some faith—and get some rest. Tomorrow will be a new day, and we have much to do.”

Arthur ate only because he could feel Mrs Beaver’s worried eyes on him. The feast laid out before him could have put the kitchens of Camelot to shame, but even the sweet cakes and ripe fruits were bland and tasteless on his tongue.

When he was led to a resplendently furnished pavilion by a few giggling nymphs, pretty and wide-eyed, he could not bring himself to feign any interest in the comfort they wordlessly offered. Slumber embraced him quickly, but his rest was fitful and plagued by horrifying visions of Merlin broken and crying out for him.

Arthur stirred several times in the night to find his pillow damp and eyes burning with something other than exhaustion.

With the dawn’s first blush, Arthur found himself rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and wandering toward the edge of the camp with no particular purpose or destination in mind. The camp’s early risers offered wordless nods of acknowledgement as he ambled on his way, and one grinning faun
tossed him an apple as he passed, but he otherwise remained unmolested. Perhaps they sensed in
him the unsettled nervousness quivering beneath the surface. Or perhaps they knew where his feet
would take him, even when he did not.

He found Aslan and a select number of followers gathered on the hill where Aslan had shown him
his first glimpse of Cair Paravel the evening before. Settled in the tall grass at their centre was a
familiar silhouette. The rescue party had returned. More importantly, against all reasonable
expectations, they had been successful.

“Merlin,” he gasped, and broke into a run. Shoving carelessly between two of the nameless
onlookers—or, rather, healers he soon realised—he fell to his kneels at Merlin’s side and would
have pulled the startled young man into his arms with no regard for their audience had it not been
for the bruises and the blood. “You look awful.”

“Thanks,” Merlin rasped thickly. He attempted to grin at him through cracked lips, only to break
into a fit of coughs, the hacking sound wet and grating to the ears. Arthur had heard coughs like
that before. It never boded well. Long hours of screaming and torture could do that to a man.

Certainly Merlin looked well worked-over. Not only was he too pale by far, but new bruises had
joined the ghastly green-tinged one Arthur himself had bestowed. Four long, thin cuts ran scabbed
and bloody down his right arm. His left hand curled uselessly against his shuddering chest, fingers
twisted into unnatural angles. And those were only the obvious injuries.

“What did she do to you?” Arthur said, wetting his lips anxiously.

“It’s not as bad as it looks.”

It was official. Merlin truly did have a grave mental affliction.

Arthur glared balefully. “Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?” Running gentle hands down
the body he knew so well, he identified at least three fractured ribs (a fourth had likely only been
severely bruised), some grotesque burns at Merlin’s right hip that the fool had so valiantly tried to
hide from him, and a (thankfully clean) break in his left femur. “I’m going to take her apart,” he
hissed lowly, once he was sure the worst of the damage had been identified.

The healers behind him murmured their grim approval of this plan.

Merlin’s blue eyes just looked sad. “Arthur...”

Arthur silenced him with a kiss, fingers cupping Merlin’s cheeks carefully as he ignored the
younger man’s startled gasp at such a public display of affection. He cared not one whit who saw.
If Aslan had not lied, their audience would not be overly offended. And if the opposite were true—
well, he had not yet accepted his place as their king. Let them judge him if they would.

Pulling back, he noticed that the healers had all politely averted their gazes—but Aslan was
looking directly at them with all the compassion and understanding in the world. It was unnerving.

“Have you not the juice of the fire-flower?” asked Aslan.

Arthur’s hand flew to the vial still dangling around his neck. The cordial! Of course! Hastily, he
unscrewed the vial and pressed it toward Merlin’s lips with a determined glare. “Argue all you
want,” he said. “Maybe you’re not at death’s door, but there is no way I’m leaving you like this for
a moment longer.”

Merlin looked rebellious, but obediently parted his lips and swallowed down the drops Arthur
poured onto his tongue with nothing more than a disgusted cringe at the taste. “That’s disgusting,” he whined, but already the colour was flowing back into his cheeks and his voice was not nearly so raw. “Why must medicine always taste like cat piss?”

“Know a lot about the taste of cat piss, do you?” Arthur snorted, a small smile playing over his lips as the bruises aged and faded, the cuts stitched easily together, the burns faded to nothing, and the bones settled back into place of their own accord. He could approve of magic of this sort.

It was something of a relief to see all evidence of the violence of two nights past gone at last, though he would have rather seen it healed under other circumstances.

Fascinated with the suddenly, blessedly whole state of his body, Merlin pushed himself into a sitting position and flexed his no longer shattered hand before him with a slow blink. “Huh,” he said. “It only hurts a little. Like the muscles are too tight. But I... I thought I’d never use it again.”

“I thought the fire-flower was supposed to heal him completely.” Arthur bit his lip and glanced at Aslan, but it was one of the healers that broke in.

“I’ve never seen the fire-flower in action before,” the centaur explained solemnly, “but I have been led to understand that it is less than perfect at healing bones. Some residual pain and tenderness is to be expected. These symptoms are nothing to be concerned over and should heal with the fullness of time.” He darted his eyes to Merlin. “I would recommend that Your Majesty rest your body well in the mean time. Any undue strain may exacerbate any lingering issues. Bed rest and light exercise are in order.”

“But the battle—” Merlin started to argue in another clear fit of idiocy.

Arthur clapped one hand over Merlin’s mouth. “I’ll see to it that he doesn’t overexert himself,” he promised. If he had it his way, Merlin wouldn’t be going anywhere near the coming battle. He had failed to keep his friend safe before. He would not fail again.

The witch would pay dearly for her transgressions.

Arthur slept better with Merlin beside him. He did not stir again until well nigh noon.

It was well into the afternoon when the witch’s messenger—a pinch-faced dwarf—entered the camp. He sought to arrange a meeting between his mistress and Aslan. His request was granted.

Arthur didn’t like the way Merlin shrank back behind him when the witch stepped into sight, the once jovial people parting fearfully in her wake. She didn’t look like much—or, at least, she appeared human enough. Her skin was perhaps a few shades too pale and her eyes unnaturally blue, sparkling eerily in the sunlight, but otherwise she had the appearance of any ordinary lady of the court save that her flowing white gown was far too pristine given the amount of filth and mud she must have been exposed to in her travels. There was something disconcertingly familiar about her, but Arthur supposed that once you have known one witch you knew them all. His father had often said as much.

Frankly, Arthur didn’t give a damn that she was young and pretty and carried herself like a well-bred maiden. When Merlin fingers fisted the back of his shirt anxiously, all he wanted to do was strike her dead. The impulse almost got away with him when she met his glare with a sweet smile that slowly curled into a vicious sneer before she turned her attention to Aslan, pointed fiercely at the trembling youth still cringing behind Arthur, and cried, “You have a traitor there!”
“Are you still so intent on vengeance?” Aslan asked quietly. “Has the boy not suffered enough?”

“It will never be enough,” the witch seethed.

“My Lady Nimueh—” Aslan began placatingly, but the usurper queen would have none of it. Arthur frowned, baffled and confused, and reached back to grasp one of Merlin’s clammy hands in his. Nimueh. He had heard that name before. But where?

“Have you forgotten the deep magic?”

“The deep magic from the dawn of time?”

The witch smiled coldly, gesturing past Aslan to the Stone Table. “You know what is written there, on that very table of stone. You know the magic that was put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey; and that for every treachery I have the right to kill. You know that,” her finger waved accusingly, “human creature is mine! His life is mine!”

“Arthur,” Merlin gasped behind him, squeezing his hand tight. “I am so sorry.”

Arthur shook his head, taking a few angry steps toward the witch, who eyed him with arrogant satisfaction. “I don’t know anything about your filthy blood magic,” he spat, “but Merlin is no traitor! Whatever claim you imagine you may have on him is purely false! I have known this man for two years. I know his heart well—and I have never encountered anyone more loyal and true than him. He could no sooner contrive treason than—than perform sorcery!”

White teeth flashed as the villainous woman threw her head back and shook with laughter. “Oh, you poor, blind fool!” she snorted. “You have no idea, do you?” She approached him with a sly pout, leaning forward so that her body was pressed along the length of his and whispered breathily in his ear. “I was not always of this world. I was once of yours. I knew your mother, your father.” Slowly, he pulled back, so that he was staring directly into her uncanny blue eyes. “We’ve met too, remember?”

“No,” he said, flat and unmoved.

“Oh, no?” she tutted, shaking her head sadly. “I’m hurt. We had such an enlightening meeting, didn’t we? You were so gallant, rushing to the rescue of a lost damsels in distress—trusting her to help you travel through a cave that she shouldn’t have known anything about.”

Arthur gasped in realization. “You!”

“Yes, me,” she laughed, cat-with-canary smug. “Such a foolish boy you were. I see that much hasn’t changed.”

“Why, you—!”

“I knew Merlin well, then,” she interrupted, brushing aside Arthur’s exclamation with a casual wave of her hand. “Better even than yourself, some might say. Merlin is twice a traitor. He betrayed me when he went back on a bargain and struck a blow intended to kill me,” her pink lips curled, “never mind that he got the magic all wrong and sent me to another world instead; and your people when he refused to ally himself with the Old Ways and stop your dear father’s reign of terror. And he betrays you each day he uses the very magic you so callously execute others for.”
Arthur’s breath caught in his throat. “No,” he insisted. “You’re lying.”

She pulled away, smile still locked in place even as her unnaturally blue eyes swirled with rage and hatred. “That man,” she said loudly, “is a warlock and a traitor. If you don’t believe me, then why don’t you ask him yourself?”

Arthur turned slowly, looked into Merlin’s shattered expression, and knew. “Merlin.”

“I’m sorry,” Merlin whispered. “I am so sorry. I wanted to tell you...”

“Shut up!” Arthur shouted. He couldn’t deal with this. It couldn’t be true. It couldn’t. “Shut up! Do not speak again until I bid it!”

“You see,” the witch said, running slender fingers teasingly down Arthur’s chest. “A traitor, like I said. Your princely duty demands that he be executed anyway. Why not let me have him and save yourself the trouble?”

“You will remove your hand from my person, witch,” Arthur said through clenched teeth. “And you will leave unsatisfied. Merlin’s fate is none of your concern. I will determine due punishment. You will not have him.”

She laughed again and stepped around Arthur to address Aslan once more.

“You know the law. The traitor’s blood is forfeit to me, as the law states; else the whole of Narnia will be overturned and perish in fire and water!”

“It is true,” rumbled Aslan. “I do not deny it.”

“I will not permit him to be taken,” Arthur said, aware of Rhindon at his side. Traitor or not, sorcerer or not, Merlin was his. No one would be allowed to harm him without his permission.

Aslan nodded thoughtfully. “Wait, all of you,” he demanded, “I will speak to the witch alone.”

The witch followed Aslan into the Lion’s pavilion, leaving behind a crowd of anxious and fearful people. Arthur returned to his place at Merlin’s side and refused to acknowledge the quiet, crocodile tears.

“Arthur,” Merlin tried once, reaching for him, but Arthur shook him off and glared him into silence.

Merlin did not try again.

The witch looked entirely too pleased when she and Aslan emerged from the pavilion; however, she had relinquished her claim on Merlin—and that was enough for now.

When Aslan insisted that the encampment relocate into the woods, well away from the Stone Table, he suspected that something strange was happening. After Aslan called him forth for a private discussion, he knew it was so.

“The witch and her army will almost certainly fall back to her House and prepare for a siege,” Aslan said without preamble. “You may or may not be able to cut her off and prevent her from reaching it, so you must have two battle plans ready. One plan is for assaulting her castle. The other is for fighting her and her army in the forest, for it will be difficult to know where she will
decide to engage.”


“You must post scouts at all outlying points so that she may not catch you off guard.”

“I had considered that,” Arthur said. “But you speak as if you will not be there yourself, Aslan. This is your army.”

“Circumstances may arise to prevent me from being present for the coming battle; therefore, I am leaving full charge of my army to you. They will serve you well, and faithfully.”

Never mind that the army consisted of peace-loving folk, most of whom Arthur doubted had ever raised a fist in anger in the entirety of their lives. “I see. If that is your wish, then so be it.”

“Come. It is time you made the acquaintance of the centaur Oreius. He will be your finest general.”

“Why?” Arthur asked quietly, pouring himself a liberal goblet of spiced wine, studying the liquid ripples with disinterest. He could hear the rustling of cloth behind him as Merlin shucked his shirt and trousers in exchange for the soft cotton pyjamas that had been left for him. For once, he had no desire to turn and pull that lithe body into his arms and ravage all that naked skin.

“I was born this way,” Merlin said, finally. “I can no more stop being a sorcerer than you can stop being Uther’s son or Camelot’s prince. The magic is a part of me. I don’t think I could live without it. Though...”

“Though?”

“I would try. For you. If you wished it.”

Arthur closed his eyes and sighed. “What am I to do with you?” Merlin wasn’t evil; of this, Arthur had no doubts. Executing him was out of the question. But could he let him go? Astonishing displays of idiocy would not distract the people of Camelot forever; in retrospect, it was amazing that Merlin’s secret had not been exposed sooner. Exile might be best. Many things were suddenly making a lot more sense. “I knew you couldn’t have knocked me out with a blasted branch.”

“Huh?”

“Sophia.”

“Oh. Yes. That.”

Arthur sighed again. “If I sent you away and commanded that you never again step foot in Camelot, would you listen?”

“Probably not.”

“Even if it could save your life?”

Merlin was silent a moment. “I could never leave you. Cast me aside, if you must, but nothing could compel me to leave you at the mercy of my less forgiving peers. You’re a stunning knight, a good prince, and one day you’ll be a great king, but for now you need my help. You’re no match for the sort of magic Nimueh and her ilk send against Camelot on a nearly daily basis. Not alone.”

He sipped at his wine and mulled this over. What should he do? What could he do? He didn’t
know. He didn’t know anything anymore. “Go to sleep, Merlin. We’ll discuss this in the morning.”

More rustling, this time of blankets and soft sheets. Then, hesitantly, Merlin said, “For what it’s worth, I do love you. I never lied about that.”

“Good night, Merlin,” Arthur said, firmly but not unkindly, and shuffled through the maps spread out before with single-minded determination. He had a lot to think about.

The forces of darkness laughed and jeered in the flickering torchlight as their Queen’s knife first sheared the Great Lion’s golden mane, reducing him to the likeness of little more than a mangy, oversized alley cat.

Blackthorn the Dwarf, the Queen’s own personal servant, did not laugh. He had worshipped the thought of Aslan’s salvation, once—before Her Majesty had taken him into her service and given him new life, new purpose. If he were being honest with himself, he had never truly relinquished that youthful fantasy. How naive he had been to think anyone could bring joy back to Narnia.

Tonight marked the end of dreams.
A strange sense of apprehension filtered through his dreams, forcing him to wakefulness. His hand was at Rhindon’s hilt even before the ethereal shadow had fully filtered through the rustling silk of the tent flaps. By the time it had become corporeal, reshaping itself into the more humanoid form of a female dryad, Arthur was hyperaware of his surroundings and ready to respond to a prospective threat. He did not recognize this dryad from those he had thus far encountered, but that did not mean much. It was not as though he’d had the time to meet everyone—and a familiar face was hardly a guarantee of good intentions. A supposed friend could easily prove to be a foe. Not everyone was as they seemed.

Not even Merlin.

The dryad did not seem surprised to find a blade at her throat. She merely blinked at him, eyes eerily bright in the darkness, and said, “Be at peace, my lord. I mean you no harm.”

Arthur chuckled grimly. “Forgive me, my lady, for my caution, but sneaking into a man’s tent in
the middle of the night is generally indicative of just two things: sex or murder. As you were not invited, you’ll have to forgive me if I find the latter much more likely than the former. State your business.”

She lifted her hands, placating, and cautiously replied, “I bring grave news from Lord Merlin.”

“From Lord Merlin?” Arthur repeated, at which point he looked to the pile of blankets and pillows beside his own and realized it was now vacant. Sometime in the night, Merlin had slipped away. And he hadn’t noticed.

Dawn was not so distant. Were Merlin any other man, he might have assumed he had merely started his day early, but he wasn’t any other man. Merlin never dragged himself out of bed until he absolutely had to.

The first threads of apprehension that had initially woken him knotted and thrummed into full-blown anxiety. His grip on Rhindon tightened, and he pressed the point more threateningly into the intruder’s neck, drawing a thin line of blood. Holding herself very still, the dryad placidly met his gaze, and the barely-contained grief he saw reflected in those ancient depths nearly suffocated him.

“What do you know about Merlin? Where is he? What has happened?”

“This night past, Lord Aslan did meet the witch at the Stone Table,” said the dryad, “where he did trade his life for your friend’s. Lord Merlin did follow him hence and now remains to mourn what he deems a poor exchange and to see that Lord Aslan has an honourable burial. He bid me warn you of these events and inform you that the White Witch’s armies are on the move.”

Aslan dead? The dryad shook and sobbed. Arthur lowered his sword and called for Oreius, who, indeed, was already shaping up to be a fine general and reliable comrade. They had much to discuss.

“The dryad is correct,” admitted Arthur as he exited the Lion’s now conspicuously empty tent, tension building between his brows, “Aslan is gone.”

If that was true, it was very likely that the rest of the dryad’s story was true as well. Not only was Aslan gone, but he was dead. Arthur could well imagine the sort of guilt Merlin must be feeling at that moment, though he could not bring himself to regret the Lion’s sacrifice. Aslan made his choice. And Arthur would have sacrificed a lot more than the Lion to keep Merlin safe, filthy lying sorcerer or not.

“Then you will have to lead us,” said Oreius.

“Yes, I suppose I shall.” Arthur bit his lip pensively and wandered over to the map of Narnia spread out across the plotting table nearby.

“We have faith in you.”

Arthur was not so certain everyone’s faith was not misplaced, but it was too late to turn back now. If the witch—Nimueh—was a product of his father’s cruelties, then it was his responsibility to see that she was properly dealt with. More than that, there was also his promise to Merlin and his own selfish need to avenge his lover’s hurts to consider. Merlin had hurt him with his deceit, but Arthur cared for him still.

“The witch’s army is nearing, sire,” said Oreius, haltingly. “What are your orders?”
“We shall meet her army there,” Arthur said, pointing decisively at the map, past the Fords of Beruna toward the northern hills, “on the plains. If we can stake out the higher ground, we’ll be more defensible.” Oreius nodded in agreement and started to leave to wake the camp and issue orders, but Arthur stopped him with a sick feeling in his stomach. “And Oreius? Let us keep the news of Aslan’s death between us for now. Grief makes men stupid. Tell the people what lies you must, but don’t trouble them with this.”

For the first time in more than a year, Arthur was dressed and armed for battle by someone other than Merlin. He felt bereft.

The griffin landed heavily beside him, feathers ruffling in agitation, and reported his observations with the terse beginnings of true fear. Finally, the reality of the situation was striking home. This wasn’t a game. People were going to die. “They come, Your Highness, in numbers and weapons far greater than our own.”

Arthur nodded grimly. It wasn’t anything he hadn’t guessed. Already the witch’s armies were marching into view, gathering along the gradually rising slope opposing their own, more mountainous position.

A more despicable horde he had never laid eyes on. Some creatures were familiar: a spattering of talking animals, predators mostly; very few dryads that appeared somewhat deformed to his eyes, though the distance was too great to be sure; dwarves and giants, too. Others were grotesque beyond all imagining. Demons, minotaurs, and goblin-kin, he supposed, recalling the tales his nurse used to tell him, when he was being particularly stubborn and ill-tempered, about the creatures that liked to steal naughty children away and gobble them up. He’d scoffed at her, then. The jagged, gaping maws he could decipher through the “spyglass” Oreius had procured (an ingenious invention, really, that he would have to remember when he returned to Camelot) now made his nurse’s monsters very real, indeed. Even without the weapons they brandished for slaughter, the lot of them would have been a force to be reckoned with.

Arthur was glad Merlin had not returned in time to insist on accompanying the troops. There was no reason he should see the massacre that would soon be upon them.

“Numbers do not win a battle,” Oreius insisted lowly, but even he did not sound optimistic.

“No,” agreed Arthur, “but they certainly help.”

The focus of his spyglass settled on the witch. Garbed in chainmail, plated with golden armour, and crowned with what Arthur realized with horror must be Aslan’s mane (hopefully the troops would be too occupied to understand the significance of this), she looked every inch the warrior queen she claimed to be. She had strategically placed her chariot on a particularly high mass of rocks where all her soldiers could easily see her. At the head of her chariot were the most massive bears he had ever laid eyes on; their fur as white as the snow their mistress so favoured.

The two armies stood silent for one endless moment.

Arthur felt the unicorn under him quiver nervously, and he spared a moment to pat its neck comforting before casting his gaze back to his army. Their faces were clouded, some a little pale. But there was a set to their jaws that told him all he needed to know: never again would they subject themselves to the witch’s tyranny. They would win their freedom today or die trying.

Turning to face his enemy once more, Arthur tucked away the spyglass and drew his sword. The
blade hummed in his hand as he held it aloft, pointing forward. Horns blared in response to his signal, and his makeshift soldiers let loose their battle cries in a steady rumble that he felt right down to his bones.

The witch’s army roared in response, and the first of the troops started racing toward them, across the plain separating them. The battle had begun.

Arthur stared fiercely at the witch, who held herself calmly back with half her army in reserve, at ease on her safe rise of rocks, and he cut his sword in a downward arc, sending his griffins into the sky in a screeching mass of fury. A slow smile curled his lips as the griffins dropped the first barrage of stones on the witch’s unsuspecting army, briefly halting their forward charge in the confusion. It was not long before the enemy regrouped, directing their archers to the skies as the charge pressed forward once more, but the assault had been enough to hearten his own army. The Narnians behind him were quiet, but he could sense their hope, their determination.

The opposing army drew nearer.

“Are you with me?” Arthur said, looking to the centaur at his right. A small part of him felt lost, devoid as he was of his own trained knights and stalwart warriors. Another felt strangely honoured to stand beside this noble creature, this Oreius, and to lead these people against a common enemy. They did not know him, yet they trusted him. He prayed they would not regret their faith, though common sense whispered that it was the most probable outcome.

Perhaps sensing Arthur’s doubt, Oreius replied with solemn clarity, “To the death.”

Arthur breathed deep, held his sword aloft once more, and shouted, “For Narnia and for Aslan!” The unicorn beneath him lurched forward, smooth and strong, with little prompting, and Arthur led his soldiers to meet the witch’s attack at the centre of the plain. In his mind, his silent battle cry was, “For Merlin!” Always for Merlin.

Everything was a blur of aggression and screaming and steel striking steel—or sinking into flesh. Arthur pressed on tirelessly, defending his comrades when he could. He was impressed by their valour. Their lack of skill was obvious, but they all pressed on relentlessly, aware of the dismal consequences of failure; however, no one’s strength could last forever. By the time the White Witch led the remaining half of her troops onto the field, even Arthur was beginning to tire. His experiences had been limited mainly to border skirmishes and tactical displays. Never before had he faced warfare on such a grand scale.

A blazing phoenix soared from the sky, setting the field aflame in front of the witch and her reinforcements, but that did not slow her for long. He could feel her cold eyes searing into him, freezing him from across the divide. She blasted through the flames like they were nothing, her power banking them in an instant.

Time for stage two.

“Fall back!” he commanded, signalling to his lookouts, who sounded their horns obediently, “Draw them to the rocks!”

His troops obeyed, falling back with what limited order could be expected from the untried rabble. The witch and her people gave chase without hesitation, pursuing them directly into the firing range of the archers that had been stationed at the height of the surrounding cliffs. Volleys of arrows spiralled down like rain. Those soldiers that managed to get past chased them into ravines and along narrow pathways, where small numbers could be used to a greater advantage.
But there were too many of them.

Arthur’s sword never stopped moving, never ceased its deliberate hack-slice-chop motion (there was little time for finesse, here, only room for slaughter). His blade gleamed ruby red to match the unicorn’s horn. There had been strategy, it seemed, in not appointing one of the talking horses to carry him into battle. Majestic unicorns may be, but not innocent. What would that blasted Anhora say of this revelation?

Still, it wasn’t enough.

As soon as one foe fell, another took his place.

Arthur was leading his forces deeper into the rocks, racing at speed, when an enemy arrow shot from the shadows to take his steed down. His shoulder hit the dirt with agonizing velocity. The unicorn lay yards away, wheezing its death rattle.

Blinking dizzily, he looked back the way he had come. The witch was heading straight for him, expression sneering and smug. The horde crowded behind her, crowing threats and profanities.

Most of Arthur’s own people had already passed him by, taking refuge as he’d ordered. Stumbling to his feet, he turned to attempt to flee—he could not take on so many alone. That’s when Oreius and a rhinoceros stampeded past him in an ill-advised charge.

“Stop!” he cried, but it was too late.

They made it farther than Arthur expected before a well-aimed axe to the jugular took down the rhinoceros—and Oreius—

It was the witch herself that took down Oreius.

A simple jab of her wand, and he was nothing but stone. She met Arthur’s horrified stare with a meaningful smile before breaking the statue into a million irreparable pieces.

The witch was on foot when they met again.

He sensed her before he saw her. Shivering under the weight of all her hatred and malice, he peered through the writhing mass of bodies and flashing weapons to meet her gaze. The battle was going badly. Aslan’s army, his army, was losing. Slowly they were being pressed further and further back. Soon it would become a full-blown rout. She knew it.

Stepping forward in an unspoken challenge, she started picking her way toward him.

What choice did he have but to accept?

“There are too many of them,” he whispered. Killing her was the only way this battle would end in their favour. He feared her. Only a fool could disregard such power as she wielded. Arthur would not fight her hand-to-hand were there any other possibility for success, but he was running out of options.

The witch struck down his people without a care in the world as she picked her way toward him. Somehow her people must have sensed that Arthur’s life was spoken for, and so he was allowed to meet her unmolested—until the minotaur shot out of nowhere, hulking and practically frothing at the mouth as it attacked.
Arthur’s shield-arm ached under the force of his blows. Rhindon’s hum was as frantic as the
beating of his own laboured heart. Parry-strike. Parry-strike. There was no room in his mind for
anything but this. No distractions. Just the haze of blows, the huffing of uneven breaths, and the
wet sensation of sweat trickling down his neck and back. Someone had trained this beast to kill and
trained it well.

“You won’t win, little princeling,” the minotaur taunted gruffly. “If I don’t kill you, my lady shall.
And when she’s done with you, she’ll execute every last one of your followers. The rivers will
flow red before the day is through.”

“We’ll see—” Arthur panted and, seeing an opening, pierced the minotaur’s side, sending it
gurgling to its knees, “—about that.” With one sure blow he put the creature out of its misery.

That’s when he heard it—the all too familiar sound of Merlin on the verge of doing something
both very brave and very stupid.

Arthur didn’t have a chance to wonder how Merlin had come to be there. He turned just in time to
see Merlin leap down from an overhang, bringing down the jewelled end of his staff to meet the
startled witch’s wand. A blinding flash of light followed the contact. When the light faded, Arthur
saw that the witch’s wand had shattered into dust but for the jagged remains clutched in the
witch’s fisted palm.

Merlin, idiot as usual, just stood there in stunned astonishment as he took in his handiwork, giving
the witch plenty of time to react. The rage on the woman’s face was truly heinous. But Merlin’s
wide-eyed expression as the remains of that wretched wand sliced into his belly like a knife into
soft butter was a thousand times worse.

“Merlin!” Arthur cried, or thought he did. He could feel his lips moving, his throat working as he
launched himself at the waiting witch with passionate fury.

She killed him, he thought wildly. She killed him. She killed him.

With sudden clarity, he knew how a man could execute hundreds and institute a near-mad reign of
terror in bitter recompense for the loss of a loved one. Newfound compassion filled his heart for
the father he had never truly understood.

She met him with twin swords at the ready. She was fresher, less weary both physically and
emotionally. It showed. His blows were deflected easily.

Initially, she seemed content to take the defensive, but when one careless move left his shield arm
lowered and too-much exposed, she took an offensive stance of her own and drove one of her
blades into his shoulder with a shrill yell. The shield fell to the ground from his useless arm. He
could no longer carry it.

Scrabbling back, he lured her farther up into the rugged crags, searching desperately for
inspiration. He couldn’t die here. Not yet.

She stalked leisurely after him, sure of her victory.

When he found himself standing at the edge of a rocky overhang, a long drop below him, Arthur
admitted that he was pretty sure of her victory too. When a poorly thought-out manoeuvre left him
unarmed and utterly at her mercy, he knew it was all over. He had failed.

“Ready to die, little prince?” the witch asked.
“You once told me that it wasn’t my destiny to die by your hand,” Arthur said.

“Destiny doesn’t mean much to me these days,” she said, and raised one of her swords to issue the killing blow. “I spent a thousand years trapped in stone on a desolate planet and a thousand more waiting for the day you would be drawn to this place. Waiting for the day I could exact my vengeance against the traitor that exiled me; the man that condemned my sweet Ygraine to death and massacred my people in his ignorance and greed. Destiny can rot for all I care.”

At that very moment a deafening roar echoed through the rocks and crags. The sound vibrated between Arthur’s ears, shook the ground beneath his feet, and it granted him the spark of adrenaline he needed to spot an opening and act.

The witch faltered, her sword arm lowering as she stared over Arthur’s shoulder at some unknown terror. The blood drained from her face. “Impossible!” she whispered.

Sparing not even a moment to wonder what the witch was seeing, Arthur took advantage of her distraction to lurch forward with all his strength to grab her arms, twist her around at great speed and shove. The witch flew over the edge with a blood-curdling scream.

Peering cautiously over the edge, a little stunned that his ploy had worked, he saw the witch’s body twitching on the bottom of the gorge, not far from where Rhindon had fallen. Somehow she still lived, but the impact had twisted her body in such a way that he was certain she would not be going anywhere anytime soon.

Raising his gaze, he looked across the gorge to take in the sight that had thrown the witch so off-balance. There Aslan stood, as majestic and full-of-life as ever.

Arthur nodded respectfully in his direction, brushed back his sweaty locks, and turned to scrabble back down the way he had come.

Merlin was alive, but only just.

Mr Beaver had pulled him to a sheltered position away from the fighting just as Aslan’s reinforcements had arrived. He was hopelessly fighting to slow the bleeding, paws slick and red, when Arthur found them. He pulled respectfully away when Arthur dropped to his knees beside them, removed his gauntlets, and slipped his own hands probingly over the wound.

It was mortal. Only Merlin’s innate stubbornness was keeping him alive now.

Through a haze of pain, Merlin blinked up at him, trying to smile.

Arthur worked his throat, mouth dry. “Merlin, you idiot,” he choked out. “What were you thinking? You were supposed to stay away from the battle.”

“I wanted to tell you about Aslan,” Merlin rasped, shuddering with effort. “I wanted to tell you help was coming. But then— Nimueh, she was going to k-kill y—” He broke off into a fit of coughing, blood spattering his lips with each gurgling hack.

Arthur’s heart broke. “Shhh,” he said, bowing his head to press a kiss to Merlin’s fevered brow. “Don’t speak. You’re going to be fine. Just—don’t speak, yeah?”

“Arthur,” Merlin said, shaking his head, cheeks wet with their mingled tears, “I love you.”

“Shut up.”
“I know I hurt you. I’m sorry for that. I would have served you happily to the end of our days.”

“Shut up!” Arthur sobbed, shaking his head furiously as if denying reality would make this nightmare any less real. “Shut up, damn you! You’re not going to die. I forbid it. You hear me? I forbid it!”

Merlin hummed, eyes going distant and dreamy. “Such a... prat...”

His eyes fluttered shut. They did not open again.


“Son of Adam,” Aslan rumbled quietly, walking slowly toward them.

Arthur tensed and glared. “What do you want?” he said, bitter. “Have you not taken enough from me?”

“Merlin is not yet dead,” said the Lion, “merely unconscious.”

Arthur’s arms tightened around his precious burden. “What difference does it make? It’s over. He’ll never wake again.”

“Have you lost the juice of the fire-flower?”

Arthur froze, breath catching in his throat. Of course! How could he have forgotten?

Carefully laying Merlin back on the ground, Arthur fumbled to pull free the life-saving vial from under his armour and mail. The chain caught on something when he tried to pull it over his head and would not pull free, so he snapped it. With trembling fingers, he unstopped the vial, gently lifted Merlin’s head, and poured a few drops on his lover’s tongue—as much as he dared, given that the consequences of an overdose could well be just as deadly as not administering the juice at all for all he knew.

Nothing happened, at first, and Arthur feared that he may have acted too late. A storm of emotion roiled mercilessly in his chest, though none was so overwhelming as the guilt he felt, knowing that he could have saved Merlin if only he had kept his head and considered the situation like a rational human being as he had long ago been trained to do. He had failed Merlin, in so many ways.

Arthur had never even told Merlin he’d loved him.

“Prat,” came a quiet voice, long fingers running fondly down his cheek. Arthur blinked through his tears and saw— He saw that Merlin was gazing up at him fond exasperation, eyes soft, smile sweet. He saw that Merlin was alive. “I know that you love me. You don’t have to say it.”

Arthur captured Merlin’s stroking hand, cradling it between his own hand and his cheek. “What if I want to say it?”

Merlin’s smile widened into a blinding grin. “I really think you should kiss me right now.”

Arthur quite agreed. So he did.

The battle, Aslan reported, was as good as won. Already the witch’s forces were being driven back. Surrender was imminent.
But there still remained the witch’s life to deal with.

They found the witch exactly where Arthur had left her, a pitiful wreck shattered amidst the rocks. Arthur could not even hazard a guess as to how many bones had been broken, but he was somehow certain that not even the fire-flower could have repaired the damage. Lifting Rhindon from the ground, remarkably undamaged by its fall, he held it aloft and fancied her execution a mercy.

Nimueh had experienced pain before.

As a child, before being taken under the wing of her predecessor, she had been left to the dubious affections of her father, who had been a violent drunk and far more inclined to beating her than nurturing her. She had learned to withstand pain—and, eventually, to dodge it—very early on. Uther had made her very grateful for her father’s lessons in perseverance when the purge began. While he had been content to slay any other sorcerers he could get his hands on as quickly as the pyres could be built, she had not been so lucky before one of her loyal friends (dead now, like the rest of them) had ushered her to safety.

So, yes, she was no stranger to pain.

But this pain... This pain was different...

Something had jarred loose in the fall, something vital, and she knew—she knew— Well, she knew a lot of things. Or she’d thought she did. But this time, this time she was sure. Her immortality, the price of which had been steeped in blood and sacrifice, had come undone. It was all coming undone.

Oh, she could feel her body struggling to put itself to rights, but it was a lost cause.

She had seen the look in the Pendragon boy’s eyes when she’d slain his whore. He had left her for now, but he would be back—back—

It was... a relief... almost...

To know it would soon be over, that is.

That must be her sanity returning. How strange that she should be more aware of herself now, in these final fleeting moments, than she had been since she’d first held a squalling baby in her arms and realised that in her arrogance she had stolen the life of the only real friend she’d ever had.

How had she come to this? Destiny, oh Destiny had a sense of humour, she did. The Old Gods had surely been laughing when she’d accepted her own prophesied fate with unquestioning joy as a young maid. “Nimueh,” the dragons and the druids and the oracles had said, “you will be a king-maker. You will bring about the reign of the greatest of all kings and usher in a new age of peace and prosperity to two worlds. Your name will forever be remembered.” True, all of it, she supposed.

The Old Gods never lied. Damn them, damn them all.

How high, the price for her foolish faith?

Her vision was going cross-eyed, fuzzy. She could hear the boy-king when he approached, could sense the shift in the air as he swept up the sword from beside her, but she could not tilt her head enough to watch him. There was silence for one long moment.
When he stepped into her field of vision, she had to stifle a sob, because even caked in blood and sweat and filth, he looked so much like her. She hated him for that, hated that she should die while he should live. But he was beautiful. Beautiful like—like—

The sword glinted golden in the late-afternoon light.

And as the sword came down, she saw her sweet Ygraine smiling down at her in welcome, and she embraced death, gladly. Finally, she was free of the accursed chains of Destiny. Finally, she was going home.

She hoped Ygraine’s son fared better than she in shaping his own future.
Merlin wasn’t the only one gawking like a country-born yokel from the far-end of nowhere when their victory party finally marched into the heart of Cair Paravel the day after the battle. Though he hid it well and would forever deny it, even Arthur found himself more than a little awestruck by the royal palace in all her glittering splendour.

According to Mr Beaver, the castle had been uninhabited since long before the witch had ever conquered Narnia, but there were neither signs of decay nor neglect. Walls that should have crumbled away decades ago continued to stand tall and strong. Glass windows that should have been shattered by storms or darkened by the filth of age instead gleamed bright and new in the early afternoon light. Furniture, portraits, and other decorative treasures that should have been plundered by scavengers (or at the very least plastered with dust or eaten away by pests) remained unmarred and thoughtfully arranged so as to best impress an audience (and impress they did). And as for the interior architecture—never mind that the ceiling murals should be cracked and faded or that the carefully carved mouldings should be in desperate need of replacement. The sheer detail involved was truly astonishing: not even the great Roman artists and architects of years gone by could have conceived of anything so grand. That all this had remained intact despite so many years of abandonment spoke of powerful magic.

Strangely, Arthur found he was okay with that.

Of course, there was not a great deal of time to puzzle over the marvels of what would be his new home. There was a coronation to contend with. The prophecy would not be complete until two “Sons of Adam” sat on the twin thrones. Good job that nearly losing Merlin had made Arthur realize what a fool he would be not to take this opportunity to give them both a chance to enjoy what they never could back home: an open and equitable relationship. Otherwise, the Narnians would have been out of luck.

Almost as soon as they had arrived, Arthur and Merlin were dragged away in opposite directions by some very persistent nymphs, who—for all their incessant giggling—were rather intimidating in their determination. When they pulled Arthur into a sunny room and immediately set about tearing off his clothes, he barely managed a word of protest (“Do you mind? You will remove your hands from my person at once!”) before being silenced by four sets of narrowed eyes that made him feel like a badly behaved child. After that he kept his mouth shut and allowed them to deposit him in a hot bath and scrub him down (though he put his proverbial foot down when one of them got handsy with the family jewels), mentally bracing himself with the amusing thought that Merlin must surely have been undergoing the same treatment. Anything that got Merlin’s dander up and made his face go all red and embarrassed couldn’t be all bad. Ah, if only he could see his face!

The royal blue and gold velvets they deposited him in were not of a fashion he was accustomed to, but Arthur had to admit that the cut accented his assets quite nicely. Merlin certainly seemed to agree when they found themselves unceremoniously thrown into a cosy parlour adjacent to the throne room to wait for their grand entrance, just a few short hours after they had been parted.

“You, ah,” Merlin started, licking his lips nervously, eyes dark and appreciative as he stared, “look... very... distinguished.”

Arthur’s lips quirked predatorily. “You think so?”
It was at this point that Merlin realized his error and hastily tried to backtrack. “Well, yes, I suppose so,” he replied with a frown and a derisive sniff (Morgana was obviously a bad influence). “If ‘distinguished’ is synonymous for ‘prat,’ that is.”

Arthur grinned, glad to see Merlin was back to his mouthy self. He’d been unexpectedly quiet since his near-death the day before. Experiences like that could have strange effects on a man, Arthur knew, but he worried just the same. The poor boy hadn’t even reacted much beyond a tired smile and a few tentative kisses when Arthur had declared that they would stay, as if he couldn’t quite believe it was true. It seemed it was finally sinking in.

“Why, Merlin,” Arthur said, plopping down on the sofa beside him, deliberately pressing their thighs flush together and throwing his arm around hunched shoulders, “is that any way to talk to your soon-to-be husband?”

“Husband! What are you on about?” Merlin sputtered, eyes bulging. Too easy.

“Oh,” Arthur drawled, “didn’t you know? As far as all those people waiting for us to walk down the not-so-proverbial aisle are concerned, our prospective crowns are as good as wedding bands.” That wasn’t even a lie, really. They really hadn’t been terribly discreet. Assumptions had been made that Arthur... may or may not have been less than inclined to dissuade.

“What? I don’t... What?”

Arthur smirked mischievously, sliding one hand down Merlin’s own velvet-clad chest, admiring the way his lover’s breath hitched at the touch. “You make a beautiful bride,” he said slyly. “It’s too bad you can’t wear white. I would have liked to ravish your pretty virgin arse. I would have been so sweet to you.” Probing fingers slid up the hem of Merlin’s tunic to playfully toy with the fitted waistband of his trousers.

Merlin flushed, jaw going slack. “Arthur, you fucking tease... You know I’m not a virgin...”

Well. Turnabout was fair play, wasn’t it?

“Though,” Arthur conceded, “pale blue and silver suit you. They bring out the colour of your eyes. And I’m much too grateful to whomever taught you how to how to repress your gag reflex to care that you’re less than pure.”

“Arthur...”

Arthur leaned in so that their lips were a hairsbreadth apart. “Gods above, Merlin... I want you so bad. Right here, right now.”


Their lips met—

And the horns outside the parlour door blared triumphantly.

They pulled back, disgruntled, annoyed, and with a terrible sense of déjà vu. Granted, this time it was their own fault (or, more accurately, Arthur’s fault) for starting something they couldn’t finish, but it still grated.

“Drat! Foiled again,” Arthur grumbled, combing a hand through his hair. Merlin echoed the sentiment. “That’s our cue.”
Rising to their feet, they stepped toward the door and paused to take a breath. Merlin fidgeted with hem of his tunic, expression strained and uncertain. Arthur reached out and grasped his hand.

Merlin looked at him, blue eyes wide, and Arthur offered what he hoped was an encouraging smile. “Are you doing this for me?”

“No. I’m doing this for us.”

Aslan’s deep tones resonated throughout the throne room, calling them forth. The parlour door swung open.

Hand-in-hand they ventured out to embrace the dawn of a new life.

Merlin’s palm was clammy with sweat and his grasp was tight enough to hurt, but Arthur neither flinched nor let go as they stood, the tall stone thrones at their backs, before Aslan and the masses that would soon be their subjects, and repeated the vows that would bind them forever into the service of Narnia. Thankfully, Narnian traditions turned out to be considerably less dramatic than Camelot traditions, and it was not long before Aslan was calling forth the crowns.

Mr and Mrs Beaver emerged from the wings, each balancing a shining crown—one gold, one silver—one on a plush, red pillow. A pleasant-faced, curly-haired faun followed them (“Mr Tumnus,” Merlin whispered under his breath, and Arthur valiantly refrained from throwing a fist when Merlin offered the newcomer that smile).

“To the glistening eastern sea,” Aslan said, “to the great western woods, I give to you King Arthur the Magnificent.” Mr Tumnus lifted the golden crown from Mr Beaver’s pillow, bowed lowly first to the Lion, then to Arthur, and then placed it on Arthur’s head. The weight was foreign, but not unwelcome. Magnificent? He liked the sound of that. Arthur shot Merlin a smug look, eyes laughing at Merlin’s heavenward sigh of despair.

“To the radiant southern sun, and to the clear northern skies, I give to you King Merlin the Wise.” Arthur sucked in a breath and muffled half-hysterical laughter as Mr Tumnus repeated the process and placed the silver crown on Merlin’s head. Merlin refused to look at him, cheeks glowing pink.

“May they both rule as they love: with fair hands and strong hearts,” Aslan finished, and indicated that the two young kings should take their thrones.

In unison, they sat. The crowd erupted into cheers. Their prophecy had been fulfilled.

“Long live King Arthur! Long live King Merlin!”

“So,” Arthur commented as the feasting and festivities began, “I hear I’m magnificent.”


“You think I have a magnificent arse? Huh. Maybe you are a wise man, after all.”

“... Shut up.”

Arthur absolutely was not jealous. He hadn’t been jealous of Prince Brat and he wasn’t jealous now. He was merely being protective. There was a difference.

What did they really know about this Mr Tumnus fellow?
Sure, the faun had warned Merlin about the witch and been turned to stone for protecting him, but... Well, Arthur didn’t like the way he looked at Merlin, laughed with Merlin: all over-exuberant friendliness and tactile affection.

He was reminded unnervingly of Lancelot, who had also ingratiated himself much too deeply into Merlin’s good graces for Arthur’s peace of mind. Great and powerful sorcerer or not, Merlin was still very tender-hearted and unaccustomed to reading other people’s intentions.

If Mr Tumnus didn’t remove his hand from Merlin’s shoulder and keep his grubby hands to himself...

As if sensing the train of his thoughts, the faun darted a speculative glance across the room to where Arthur was settled at the banquet table, stabbing pensively at a plate of fish—with despair, he had come to the disheartening conclusion that ruling over a kingdom of talking beasts meant that there would only be one kind of meat in his future, and it wasn’t going to be nice, red, and bloody. Mr Tumnus cocked his head, turned his attention back to the man beside him, and slid his arm over Merlin’s shoulders to whisper something into the boy’s ear that made Merlin throw his head back and laugh uproariously. The sound drifted through the din of the crowded room and rang in Arthur’s ears.

Arthur swiped up his wine goblet, drained it, and waved over one of the dryads going around with wine-pitchers. He confiscated the whole pitcher.

Merlin wouldn’t really... With a faun... Would he?

“I need to get drunk.”

“If drinking yourself silly is the goal, I think you’ve been doing a right commendable job of it thus far.”

Arthur lowered his goblet, blinking. “Ah, Merlin.” How had Merlin reached him so quickly? He glanced toward the balcony on which he could have sworn Merlin had been entertaining his dear Mr Tumnus just moments before and then back down at his drink. Huh. The Narnian wine must have been a good deal more potent than he’d thought. Nonchalant (he was not sulking, not at all), Arthur asked, “Bored of your friend the goat already?”

Merlin smiled back, shaking his head in fond exasperation. “How many times do I need to tell you that you don’t need to worry about me leaving you? Mr Tumnus and I are just friends.”

“Like you and Lancelot are friends?” Arthur sniffed snidely. He poured another goblet of wine—but Merlin, not at all wisely, yanked both the goblet and the pitcher out of reach before he could react. He glowered.

Merlin glowered right back. “That came out of left field. For goodness sake, nothing happened between Lancelot and I, and nothing ever will!”

“Does Lancelot know that?”

“The same goes,” Merlin continued, ignoring him, “for Prince Hector and Mr Tumnus and everyone else! Your jealous insecurities are becoming less endearing and more annoying. I know you’ve been burned before, but I’m not like those others. Stop doubting me.”

“It’s not you I doubt,” Arthur mumbled and refused to meet Merlin’s accusing gaze. “It’s everyone else.”
“Arthur,” Merlin said, grabbing Arthur’s face and forcing him to look up at him, “I love you. I pseudo-married you today. And you know what? You owe me a pseudo-honeymoon. I think the festivities can continue well enough without us. How about we go back to my room, and I’ll show you how happy you make me, and why no one will ever measure up to you? It about time we finished what you began earlier, yeah?”

Arthur’s mouth went dry.

All he could manage was an eager nod.

They received quite a few knowing looks as they left, but no one said anything, and no one stopped them.

All through the castle hallways, there were stolen kisses, greedy touches, and hungry looks; so great was their enthusiasm, that Merlin lost all sense of direction (not that his had ever been particularly keen to begin with), and Arthur’s senses were muddled enough that they had to backtrack twice. They were both giddy with lust and affection when they finally stumbled through Merlin’s bedroom door, all irritation from their earlier argument forgotten.

This time no one was pinned to any doors or walls; instead, they ended up tripping over Merlin’s staff, which had carelessly been left lying on the floor near the doorway (how very like Merlin to toss his things about so carelessly), and falling to their knees on the plush rug in the middle of the room. The incident didn’t even slow them down. They both might be sporting bruised knees come the morrow, but for now the only aches they had any concern for were related to the blood pooling in their groins.

“Arthur,” Merlin gasped into his mouth, hands scrabbling over the velvet spanning Arthur’s chest, needful, “I’ve wanted you so badly. It’s been so long.”

“Too long,” Arthur agreed, nipping playfully at his lover’s bottom lip, already plump and swollen. With both hands, he cradled Merlin’s neck, holding his head steady and refusing to let him go. There would be no interruptions this time, no surprises. All the creatures of Narnia could come bursting through the door after them, and he would only grant them a show not to be forgotten. All that mattered was the man in his arms: Merlin’s pulse, quick and strong against his palms; Merlin’s fingers, now fumbling to release the clasp of Arthur’s cloak; Merlin’s lips, so sweetly parted in happy welcome. This was his. No one would take this from him.

“Yes, yours,” Merlin moaned, and Arthur dizzily realized he must have spoken aloud without realizing it. “Take me. Now, Arthur. Right here on the rug. I want to feel you in me.”

Arthur’s throat worked convulsively as he peppered kisses down Merlin’s jaw and pulled Merlin’s body more firmly toward him, until their bodies were perfectly in line. Merlin’s cock was hard against his. Even through the fabric, he could tell Merlin was slick and leaking—ready, so ready. In his mind’s eye, Arthur could see Merlin wriggling out of his clothes and lying back on the carpet, legs open, inviting. If he asked, Merlin would probably even prepare himself, long fingers reaching down past his cock and balls to slowly tease himself open while Arthur talked him through it. They would both be more than ready when Arthur finally lost control and replaced those fingers with his own cock, making sure to rub down against Merlin’s matching erection with every slow thrust. It had been a while, so he’d have to be cautious. His self-control would be tested, but Merlin would be mewling so prettily, hands hot and sweaty on his shoulders, that it would be worth it to take his time, to make it last—
But that wasn’t how it was going to go. Not this time.

Arthur wanted something else: something he had been thinking about for a while, but had never gathered the courage to ask for. He’d been nervous—both about the act itself and about Merlin’s possible reaction. What if he didn’t like it? What if he wasn’t any good at it? What if Merlin thought less of him for it? On the other hand, what if Merlin became dissatisfied with the status quo? What if he wanted what Arthur hadn’t offered? He’d seemed well-pleased thus far, but what if he was simply hesitant to mention it? Merlin was too kind and too good sometimes. It wouldn’t have been out of character for him to keep silent about something he wanted if he thought speaking up would make Arthur unhappy. Gradually, Arthur had been sorting through his conflicting desires and had come to the conclusion that he was being a right idiot about it. He’d actually meant to say something sooner, but, well...

The timing had never been right.

If the timing wasn’t right now, then it would never be right.

“Actually, I want to do something a little different tonight,” Arthur said, haltingly. Sensing Arthur’s unease, Merlin wrapped his arms around his neck and lowered them both to lay side-by-side and eye-to-eye on the rug, the plush tufts tickling Arthur’s cheek. Blue eyes flecked with gold considered him solemnly.

“You can ask me for anything, you know that right?” Merlin asked.

“I—yes.”

“And you know that I won’t agree to something I’m not comfortable with out of some twisted sense of obligation? That everything I do, I do because I love and trust you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then have a little faith in me and ask. If there is something you want, then I want to know about it, and we can decide things from there. You can expect the same courtesy of me, right?” Merlin laughed, dimples showing. “I didn’t hesitate to ask if I could tie you to your favourite chair and ride you, now did I? Even though I thought it was embarrassing?”

“No.” That had been a good time. Bondage wasn’t something he’d ever thought about before, and he hadn’t expected to like it, but he had. It wasn’t something he wanted to do regularly; however, it was an interesting change of pace, and he’d be willing to do it again if Merlin asked. Not being able to touch his lover may have been utter torture, but seeing Merlin taking Arthur’s cock into his body with such shameless abandon had been positively exhilarating.

“So?” Merlin prompted. “Tell me.”

“I want you to fuck me this time,” Arthur said in a rush, hurrying on when he saw Merlin’s eyes go wide. “It’s sort of our wedding night, you know? And I want this night to be special for the both of us, so I’m offering you what virginity I have. Please, Merlin, I really want this. Won’t you fuck me?”

“No,” Merlin said, shaking his head, expression flickering strangely.

Arthur’s heart plummeted, cheeks going red. He felt a little sick. He told himself it was from relief, in which case relief felt an awful lot like disappointment. “Oh.” Arthur tried to roll away, but Merlin’s hands squeezed at his shoulders and held firm.
“You misunderstand me,” Merlin scolded gently. “I’m not going to fuck you. Not for your first time. I’m going to make love to you.”

“I... You... What?”

Merlin’s smile could have shamed the sun. “You’re pretty dumb sometimes. Good thing you’re pretty.”

“Who are you calling dumb, idiot! Also: I am not pretty,” Arthur blustered, but he was smiling too—and this time relief really was washing through him. “And what’s this business about ‘making love’ to me? I’m not some girl, you know. You don’t need to—”

“Shut up,” Merlin said, affectionate, and helped Arthur to his feet. “We’re taking this to the bedroom. I’m not going to despoil you on a rug. You deserve a proper bed.”

“Again, I’m not a girl,” Arthur sniped, though he let Merlin lead him by the hand into the adjacent bedroom without resistance. He would never admit it, but he was sort of glad Merlin was making such a fuss about this. “You’re ridiculous,” and Arthur loved him for it.

Merlin saw right through him, of course, giving Arthur a cheeky bow before moving to light a few candles. Suddenly nervous, Arthur perched on the side of Merlin’s bed, enjoying the soft down that sank beneath him. “I think your bed is softer than mine,” he noted with a frown, though he could have been mistaken. He hadn’t been allowed much time to explore his own quarters earlier.

“You can just share mine, if you like,” Merlin offered generously, face glowing soft and golden in the flickering light. “It might be a tight fit, but if you can try not to snore—”

“I do not snore!”

“Oh, yes, you do! You snore like— like a bear!”

“Do not!”

“Do too!”

“Well, in that case, why don’t I just leave now?” Arthur threatened, mock-lurching toward the door. “I wouldn’t want to disturb your beauty rest. Heaven knows you’ll need it!”

As expected, Merlin cut him off at the door, silencing Arthur’s half-hearted protests with a thorough snogging. Arthur could feel Merlin’s lips smiling against his mouth and couldn’t help an answering smile of his own.

Good grief. Arthur was a girl after all. Merlin was obviously a bad influence.

Once they were both properly breathless, Merlin pulled Arthur back toward the bed. Settling back down, Arthur decided that he was more than ready to move things along and made to remove his tunic.

Merlin’s hands on his stopped him.

“No,” Merlin said, “let me,” and he grasped the hem of Arthur’s tunic and slowly lifted it over Arthur’s head. Then he sank to his knees and, eyes firmly locked with Arthur’s, began to untangle the laces of Arthur’s boots.

Merlin’s face was level with Arthur’s groin. He couldn’t have failed to notice the obscene stretch
of velvet over Arthur’s crotch or the way the gold fabric had darkened several shades, wet with pre-come. But he made no show of noticing. His gaze never shifted from Arthur’s face, expression primal and yearning; not even when he urged Arthur to brace himself on his hands and pulled his trousers down, Arthur’s cock slipping free, twitching in unmistakable demand.

All his life, Arthur had been dressed and undressed by servants. Before Merlin, it hadn’t meant anything. Now it made him feel cherished.

When Arthur was fully nude, Merlin urged him up onto the pillows, where he lied waiting and exposed. Through lidded eyes, Arthur watched as Merlin made short work of his own clothes, admiring the long, lean lines of him—and the prominent bobbing of the hardness that would soon be inside of him. Not for the first time, Arthur was grateful that Merlin’s length and girth, although respectable, were not particularly intimidating. He could do this.

Crawling up Arthur’s body, Merlin settled between Arthur’s legs so that his mouth was a handbreadth from Arthur’s cock, opened his mouth to suck him down—and paused just before making contact.

“What are you waiting for?” Arthur exclaimed, frustrated, and thrust his hips up helplessly, only to be pushed back down.

“Wait a second,” Merlin said, and scrabbled over the side of the bed to search through the nightstand drawers.

Oh, Arthur realized with a groan, lubrication.

A few painful minutes later, Merlin turned sheepishly back to him, hands empty. “Um,” he started, and mumbled something that could have been an entirely different language for all that Arthur understood it.

“Repeat that,” Arthur demanded, “in English this time.”

Merlin liked his lips. “I, um, can’t find anything to, er, ease the way.”

Arthur took a few calming breaths and counted to ten. Then, “Merlin,” he said, more angry with himself for not having foreseen this than with Merlin, who looked miserable and still as painfully hard as he, “don’t panic. We’ll just have to content ourselves with a little frottage and see about acquiring some oil tomorrow.” He was disappointed, but right now anything would be better than having to content himself with his own gods-forsaken hand again.

“Um, well, yes, that’s an option,” Merlin said, chewing his lip, “but I had a thought.”

“A thought? Will wonders never cease?”

“I could, uh—” Merlin paused, dubious. “If you didn’t mind, that is...”

“Oh, just spit it out, would you? The night’s not getting any younger!”

“I could try oiling you up with— with magic.”

Oh. That was unexpected. And strangely hot.

Arthur hadn’t thought he could get any harder, but he did.

He really didn’t care to analyze what that might mean.
“If you think it’ll work,” Arthur shrugged, parting his legs wider, “be my guest.”

Merlin’s mouth shaped into an “oh.” Then, shaking himself, he returned to his prior position between Arthur’s legs, this time swallowing Arthur down to the root without so much as a by-your-leave. Arthur gasped, hands flying to tangle in Merlin’s mussed hair. Merlin choked a little, pulled off enough to catch his breath, and took Arthur back in, this time more easily. Ye gods.

Arthur was too distracted with the wet, hot suction working on his cock and the hand squeezing gently at his balls to notice when a single digit pressed against the tight ring of his arse. He did notice, however, when something cold and slick suddenly filled him. Instinctively jerking up, he broke free of Merlin’s steadying grasp and came so suddenly that Merlin started coughing and choking, pulling back with an unpleasant grimace.

“Give a man some warning, would you!” they shouted simultaneously, panting and huffing—Arthur still coming down from his unexpected orgasm, cringing at the foreign, wet sensation when he moved, and Merlin still trying to catch his breath. Their glaring eyes met, held.

Arthur’s lips twitched first, but Merlin was the one who burst into a fit of laughter.

“Sorry,” he gasped, “sorry!”

Shaking his head, Arthur softened and pulled Merlin back up to plunder his mouth, tasting himself in the kiss. “Idiot,” Arthur snickered. Merlin trembled with humour over him and reached down to press one hand back between Arthur’s legs.

The first finger felt odd.

Arthur had expected it to be odd, of course, but, well—it was even odder than he had anticipated. It didn’t hurt, not really, but he was all too cognizant of the fact that something was going in to a place where things had only ever come out. Merlin was watching him studiously as he fingered him, his finger moving fairly smoothly thanks to the thick fluid Arthur’s insides had been coated with. Had Arthur shown any discomfort, Merlin would have surely stopped.

Arthur only frowned and demanded another finger.

This would get better. He knew that well enough from being on the other end.

The second finger burned a bit going in, but it was a minor ache that quickly faded. In fact, he forgot all about it when Merlin finally—

“Ah!” Arthur cried, hands fisting in the blankets and head falling back into the pillows, unable to control himself. Vaguely, Arthur noticed that his arousal had fully returned, but he was more concerned with the sparks zinging through his nerves. So, that’s what his male lovers had always made such a fuss about. No wonder they hadn’t minded being buggered. That was... That was...

“Good,” Merlin said, audibly gloating, “you’re sensitive.”

“How about that again,” Arthur commanded, imperious.

Merlin obeyed without argument.

Soon Arthur was begging for a third finger. Then for Merlin’s cock.

The insolent bastard ignored this orders, stretching Arthur with such care that Arthur was near tears with want by the time Merlin finally deemed him good and ready for the next stage. “I’m not
“going to hurt you,” Merlin admonished in response to repeated threats and pitiful pleas. “You’ve always carefully prepared me. Why should I show you any less courtesy?”

Merlin could be quite the sadist when he wanted. And, oh, he wanted.

“So, how do you want to do this?” Merlin asked, when he finally pulled his devil-fingers free. Arthur blinked at him, uncomprehending.

“I mean, do you want to be on your belly or on your back when I take you?”

Oh. “B-belly will be easier,” Arthur replied, rolling over without prompting to present his arse. Merlin slipped a plump pillow under Arthur’s hips, hands trembling a little. It seemed he was losing some of his cool at last. “In me. Now.”

Merlin’s hands grasped Arthur’s hips a little too tightly, angling him, and finally he felt that delightful pressure he’d been shamelessly sobbing for the last quarter of an hour. Merlin’s cock was bigger than his fingers, and it hurt rather a lot, initially.

But Merlin was in no hurry, and soon Arthur was grunting and pushing back on his lover, impaling himself without restraint.

“Is—is it good?” Merlin panted behind.

“Yes,” Arthur groaned, and “more,” and “harder.”

He loved this, loved having Merlin like this, and he didn’t know why he’d waited so long to try this, because it was better than he’d imagined, better than anyone had ever said. Each thrust sent Arthur’s cock rubbing against the silk coverings of the pillows, the sensation cool and soft in contrast to the concentrated thrust-jab-thrust of Merlin’s hips. Sometimes Merlin struck that spot inside him, sometimes he didn’t, and Arthur thought Merlin was perhaps being a mite too cautious with him, but it was good. Every thrust was so good. And yet.

It wasn’t quite right. Good, but not perfect. It could be better, if...

“Merlin, please— I want— I need—”

“What do you,” Merlin panted, strained and desperate, “need, Arthur? Tell me. You have to tell me,” and Arthur could only imagine how his pupils must be wide and blown, how his skin must be glowing with exertion, how even his unruly hair must be damp with sweat.

“I want to see you,” Arthur gasped, shuddered, pushed back hard and fast. “I want to see your face.”

“I want that, too,” Merlin breathed against his neck, going still. Arthur nearly cried with want when Merlin pulled free, but he was flipped onto his back in an instant, Merlin sinking back inside him with an expression of utter awe and adoration.

And this.

This was better.

He’d always loved the way Merlin looked at him when they fucked, like Arthur was the most amazing thing in the world, and how had Merlin managed to get so lucky? Now was no different. Seeing such open devotion in his friend’s face, Arthur couldn’t help but think that he was the lucky
Reaching up, Arthur cupped one of Merlin’s cheeks, delighting in the way Merlin leaned into the touch. “You’re lovely,” he whispered, and Merlin leaned down and kissed him in response—another reason this position was better. He quite liked the way Merlin’s tongue slid into his mouth, eager and pleading. Merlin made such delicious whimpering noises when Arthur stroked along the underside of his tongue.

The sensation was even enough to make Merlin thrust madly into Arthur’s arse for a few glorious moments before he came back to himself and curbed his desire once more—how frustrating! He wanted to feel Merlin moving so hard in him that he felt it in his very bones, so deep that he would feel him for days to come. He wanted the pleasure-pain to wash over him and sweep the world away. Damn it, he wanted Merlin to lose control the way Arthur was losing control!

Arthur parted their lips with a low groan, messy with spit and loving it. “I’m not made of glass,” he growled. “You won’t break me.”

“No,” Merlin refused, chin taking on a familiar stubborn tilt. “You may think it’s okay now, but believe me when I say it’ll hurt like the dickens later if I’m rough when you’re not used to it.”

Merlin continued to roll his hips, too deliberate, too mindful, too tender. Honestly. Even Arthur at his very worst wasn’t this cruel.

Arthur glared. Obviously he was going to have to take matters into his own hands.

Hands stroking down Merlin’s sides with deceptive sweetness, Arthur brought his hands to rest on Merlin’s hips, gripped tight enough to make a point, and rolled them both over with such swiftness that Merlin was flat on his back with Arthur smugly straddling him before the poor fool even knew what was happening.

“Spoiled brat,” Merlin said, when realization dawned. “You just have to have everything your way, don’t you?”

Brows raised in challenge, Arthur braced himself on his knees, lifted himself so that Merlin’s cock nearly slipped out, and slammed himself down again—hard.

Merlin made a pathetic sound.

Much better.

It took a few tries to get the angle right, but before long Arthur had set a rhythm that was stimulating his prostate on every downward stroke, riding Merlin with merciless vigour. Merlin made a few choked sounds that might have been protests, but the fingernails digging desperately into Arthur’s thighs betrayed the other man’s need.

Neither of them lasted long after that.

Merlin came first, spilling his thick essence inside of Arthur with a gibbering shout, very real tears pooling at the corners of his eyes, which Arthur was happy to lick away as he stroked himself to completion and spilled convulsively between their bellies in long spurts.

“Wow,” Merlin grunted when Arthur had finally seen fit to crawl off of him to collapse at his side, messy and sated. That pretty much summed up everything.

Minutes passed. Just as their breaths had begun to even out, Arthur said, “Merlin, you must promise me something.”
“Yes, Arthur. Anything.”

“Never keep secrets from me again.”

Merlin was quiet for a few moments, causing Arthur to suspect he might have had the audacity to fall asleep, but eventually replied, “Alright. I promise.”

And Arthur believed him.

Arthur stirred from his drowsing leisurely, peering at the man at his side through lazy lashes, not quite comprehending what he was seeing.

Unaware of his gradually waking audience, Merlin was alternately dipping a quill in an inkwell on the nightstand and scribbling in a book Arthur recognized as the one Father Christmas had gifted Merlin with; in itself, this was not so strange. Writing in a diary when he should have been lost in a post-coital haze seemed like something Merlin would do merely to drive Arthur crazy. What was unusual about it was that the ink was somehow being absorbed by the page. Each stroke faded as Merlin moved to make another, the page reverting immediately to its original, clean state.

“Why won’t the ink stick as it should?” Arthur asked groggily, voice thick with sleep.

Merlin glanced at him in surprise, grinned, then registered what Arthur had said. “What do you mean?”

“The ink. It keeps disappearing.”

Puzzled, Merlin studied the book in his lap and passed it slowly to Arthur, cheeks pinking suspiciously. Arthur accepted the offering with a sigh, sitting up to take a better look. Nothing.

“Am I supposed to be seeing something?”

Merlin pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Father Christmas did say the book would keep my secrets. Maybe...” He leaned against Arthur’s shoulder, their naked skin pressing together, and pointed sternly at the book. “You will reveal yourself to Arthur, book,” he commanded, turning at the last to offer a shy smile, “for I keep no secrets from him.”

Arthur’s throat knotted, and he had to look away from Merlin or risk doing something entirely unmanly (like throw himself on him with a cry of “Ravish me now!”—not at all a sensible idea, since his arse was raw and sore, and he was beginning to think Merlin might have had the right of it when he’d refused to be rough with him earlier). Returning his attention to the book, Arthur found that words were appearing on the page. Two words at the head of the page caught his particular attention, nearly making him swallow his own tongue in shock.
There, in bold letters, was a declaration that required no explanation: LUBRICATION CHARM.

“Gods have mercy!” Arthur exclaimed. “What in the world are you working on, you lunatic?”

Merlin launched into a rambling explanation on the mechanics of his magic, the benefits and disadvantages of instinctual magic versus practical magic, and concluded with a leering declaration that proper lubrication was very important, so it was his solemn duty to the betterment of mankind to devise a practical spell of fine quality. “The consistency was off with the one I tried earlier,” Merlin finished airily. “It was much too thick. I think a proper word-spell could fix that—and maybe even enhance the experience.”

Arthur stared dumbly.

Merlin slipped an arm over his shoulders, and conspiratorially whispered, “Of course, this endeavour will require lots of experimentation.”

Dryly, Arthur cocked a brow, voice amused, “Will it?”

“Yes,” Merlin nodded, slipping a hand under the blankets to massage at a part of Arthur’s anatomy that was suddenly very awake indeed. “I know it’s a lot to ask that you help me advance my studies this way, but I really feel it would be best to test by trial and error.”

“It’s, um, a tall order,” Arthur said, clearing his throat, “but, I suppose, if it’s for the sake of mankind’s advancement, then I have no choice.”

“Your sacrifices will not be in vain,” Merlin said, cheeky. He pulled Arthur on top of him, wrapped his legs brazenly around Arthur’s waist, and set about inspiring in Arthur a whole new love for science.

The book tumbled to the floor with a thunk, momentarily forgotten.

Aslan paced along the shore, the ocean’s waves lapping gently at his paws, and cast his gaze to the castle above. He had done what he could.

Now all he could do was wait and hope the lessons he had hoped to impart would stick, that when the time came for them to leave Narnia behind, the Sons of Adam would be ready to face what awaited them. Destiny was not set in stone. There was always a choice.

With one last slow smile, Aslan returned to the sea from whence he’d come.
The early days of their reign were dedicated to the cause of peace and the building of a new kingdom, prosperous and beautiful. There were bridges to be built, roads to be mended, memorials to be dedicated, and alliances with neighbouring kingdoms to be forged. “So much to do, so little time,” the two kings were often heard to complain, but they were smiling when they said it, and their people shared in their ambition and simplistic joy.

For reasons of politics, Arthur the Magnificent and Merlin the Wise were never formally wed. From far and wide, prospective brides came calling—the Duchess of Ettinsmoor, the King of Archenland’s two sisters, the daughter of the Governor of the Lone Islands, a long string of Princesses from Calormen—to further the interests of their lands and their families, but the girls were always returned to their families unwed (and rapturously in love). These courtesies were looked on with some amusement by the Narnians, particularly once it became apparent that the primary reason the courtships continued so long was because King Merlin seemed to delight in baiting his co-monarch to all-new heights of possessiveness, which usually led to King Arthur attempting to beat him at his own game and—Well, rumour had it than when the girl-of-the-month would return home, the young men would lock themselves in their chambers for days, hardly emerging long enough even to eat.

Ah, young love.

Now, it so happened that some fifteen years into their reign, the two kings received word that the great White Stag had been spotted wandering the Western Woods. It was well-accepted as fact that anyone who managed to capture the White Stag would be granted one wish, though no one could
ever recall anyone having succeeded in doing so.

Arthur—never having lost his passion for the hunt, though his time in the other world seemed little more than a distant dream by then—could not resist such a challenge.

“Come on, Merlin!” Arthur hissed, shoving his way through the brambles of an overgrown copse. The stag had gone this way not long ago. The crushed foliage at his feet, the broken branches along the barely-traversed path, the fresh prints in the mud: all signs indicated that they were close. So close. “It went this way. Hurry, or we shall lose it!”

Merlin fell through one of the bushes behind him, no doubt having tripped over something ridiculous (like, say, his own feet), panting and scowling and flailing his arms for balance. Once he was solid on his feet again, he stood there sulking and brushing brambles from his soiled tunic. He didn’t notice the twig tangled in his curls.

Arthur suppressed a grin, choosing instead to cling to his previous ire (and, really, it was unfair that after all these years Merlin could still tame him with a single look). “Bumbling oaf,” he sniffed with exaggerated hauteur, “if you ruin my chance to have my wish, I shall never forgive you.” Taking Merlin by the wrist, he pulled him through the last of the brush toward the clearing ahead.

“Umph!” Merlin complained noisily as he was propelled forward. “I do believe that you said I was your only wish and desire, so what is the point of this again?”

“I would never say anything so trite or soft!”

“You said it just last night!”

“I recall no such thing. You must be mistaken.”

“Have I told you lately that you are a prat? Because you are. Why do I put up with you again?”

“Because you are a girl, and you cannot get enough of my manly—Oh.” Arthur stopped, stumbling a bit as they finally exited the brush to find a black curiosity sprouting from the ground. “Well, here is a marvel. I seem to see a tree of iron.”

“I say,” said Merlin, brushing by with a look of awe, “it is a pillar of iron with a lantern atop. Why would anyone wish to place such a thing in the middle of the wood?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” said Arthur, circling it. “By the Lion’s Mane, a strange device. Never before have I seen...such a thing. Or I hadn’t thought so... Somehow, as I look on it, this lamp strikes me as oddly familiar, as if I have seen it in a dream, or in a dream of a dream. Perhaps we have come here before? Long ago?”

“Yes, perhaps,” Merlin agreed, and stroked his beard as was his habit when deep in thought. “I have the most peculiar suspicion that if we pass this post and lantern either we shall find strange adventures or else some great change of our fortunes.”

“Yes,” Arthur nodded, pensively. “The same foreboding sits with me.”

“I don’t like this. I propose we return to our mounts and pursue the White Stag no farther,” Merlin said, but from the tone of his voice he already knew turning back was not an option.

“No,” Arthur refused. “Go back if you must, but I am no coward. Have I not driven back the Northern Giants? Have I not conquered over distant lands and wild people? Have I not cowed the
werewolves, hags, and devil spirits into obeisance? Have I not defeated the White Witch? To be so daunted now smacks of the worst sort of cowardice. If an adventure lurks around the corner, then I will meet it, come what may.”

“You know that I will follow where you lead,” said Merlin, troubled but determined. “I will not be left behind.” His concern twisted into a wry grin. “You’d get yourself killed within five minutes without me, and you know it!”

“Such blasphemy!” Arthur huffed, but smiled anyway, feeling the anxiety he hadn’t realized had been knotting up his insides coming undone. “Let’s go, then, and not waste another minute.”

And so Arthur offered his arm in exaggerated gallantry, and Merlin accepted it primly, with a humorous roll of his eyes, and they followed the White Stag’s tracks into the unknown.

So ended the Golden Age of Narnia.

One moment Arthur and Merlin were pushing their way through branches, the next they realized they were pushing through a row of fur coats. Then, before they had time to truly process the implications of the change, they were falling out of the wardrobe and bruising their knees on the hard stone floor.

“Oh,” Arthur said, sitting back on his knees, wide-eyed with shock. He raised his hand to his face, feeling the smoothness of the skin, the lack of laugh-lines and crows-feet. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Merlin was doing the same, searching for the beard that wasn’t there. They were young again.

They were just as they had been when they’d stepped into the wardrobe.

Even their clothes had reverted. The old style felt utterly foreign.

He was a stranger in his own body.

“You realize,” Arthur said slowly, catching Merlin’s eyes, “that no time at all has passed since we...” He glanced back at the wardrobe. It stood tall and immovable—impressive, but with no sense of magic to it any longer. Somehow he knew that if he walked back into it, he would find nothing but mothballs and the coats. He swallowed thickly, throat going tight and achy. “...since we stepped into that wardrobe.”

“I—I—” Merlin stuttered. There was something broken and forlorn in his voice. “Yes. It’s— Yes. We are... Everything is... just as it was before.”

“Merlin...”

Merlin shook his head, shrugging away Arthur’s outstretched hand, and pushed himself to his feet. He stood there, arms folded as if to protect himself from the world, and Arthur was struck by the knowledge that all those years of easy bickering, friendship, and love had come to an end. In the back of his mind, he’d always known it would come to this. Narnia had dulled his memories of their origins, of Camelot, but—

His dreams lately had been plagued by dread. Now he knew why. Deep down, he’d never forgotten that one day he’d have to look Merlin in the face and again pretend they were nothing more than master and servant.

By the Lion’s Mane, how had he—they—managed before?
It all seemed so cold.

“Oh, Merlin.”

“Don’t,” Merlin admonished quietly, dodging Arthur’s second attempt to pull him close just as efficiently as the first, “make promises you can’t keep.”

Arthur was prepared to argue, but he’d forgotten one little thing: the reason he and Merlin had entered into the wardrobe in the first place.

Princess Jolecia.

She had impeccable timing, as always.

“My Lord Arthur!” she simpered from the doorway, painted lips pursed into an over-enthusiastic smile, despite the confusion lurking behind her (terrifyingly) batting eyelashes. “Here you are! I’ve been looking all over for you! You disappeared so suddenly. I worried. I was surprised when I was informed you’d headed to this wing.” She darted her eyes between Arthur and Merlin, clearly expecting some sort of explanation.

Arthur opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

Merlin jumped in, bowing low and grovelling in a way that made Arthur’s hackles rise. It wasn’t right. “M’lady, please forgive me. It was my fault that Arthur left so suddenly. It’s just that I got lost and stumbled across this fantastic wardrobe while trying to complete my chores, and I really wanted to show it to him. Please don’t blame him, m’lady. I was out of line. My master is very kind to humour me.” As Merlin spoke, head bowed and properly subservient, the faint traces of tension in the princess’s brow began to ease, her lips curling in a haughty manner.

“Yes,” Arthur chuckled hoarsely, nearly choking on the lie. “He was under the mistaken impression that I might care about something as mundane as a clothes closet. Granted this is impressive workmanship, but it’s hardly worth pitching a fuss over. Still, I find it is sometimes easier to indulge Merlin’s eccentric notions. It makes him more... pliable.”

“Oh, you silly boy,” she said condescendingly. “Your master really is much too lenient with you.” She turned to Arthur, floating over to him with a careful swish of her skirts to cling to Arthur’s arm, resting her head familiarly against Arthur’s shoulder. Merlin’s head remained bowed, but Arthur knew him well. He had already been hurting, but then this spoiled, selfish bitch had come along to callously rub salt into an open wound. “Perhaps you should beat him,” the princess suggested. “A good beating has always worked well on the servants of Benwick.”

If Arthur were in the habit of hitting women, he might have just then.

“He doesn’t mean any harm,” he said. “He’s just a little naive. Why don’t you go on ahead to the garden and I’ll meet you by the fountain after I... have a talk with my servant.”

Anyone else would have noticed the tightness of his tone. Princess Jolecia did not. Vapid creature that she was, she merely trilled and simpered at him until he gave her a carefully restrained push toward the door. He couldn’t strike a woman. It would be wrong.

Suddenly, he really missed Morgana.

Morgana was not known for putting up with the antics of brainless twits like this princess. And, unlike Arthur, she had no respect for gender-roles. It might have been nice to see the insipid creature knocked flat.
Arthur looked to Merlin.

The poor boy stood stiffly, hurting and in need of something only Arthur could give—and his shoulders were shaking slightly now with the force of his sorrow. One tear trickled down a shaven cheek and Arthur was done for.

He couldn’t do this.

He couldn’t pretend nothing had changed.

He had changed.

Keeping Merlin his dirty little secret wasn’t an option. Not anymore.

“Wait!” Arthur said, more loudly than he had intended, just as the princess was leaving. She turned to him, head tilted in curious expectation. Merlin was looking at him to, confused and perhaps a bit alarmed. He straightened under the scrutiny, nodded briefly at the princess, marched over to Merlin, and pulled the baffled young man off balance and into his arms for a thorough kiss. Then, when he was sure Merlin was too dizzy with breathless shock to make any protest, Arthur parted reluctantly from his lover’s mouth, titled his head to face the bug-eyed and stammering princess, and said, “Actually, we lied. It was my idea to come up here. I haven’t had a chance to properly enjoy my lover since arriving in Benwick and had hoped that an unused wing would guarantee some privacy. My mistake.” He smiled pleasantly.

The princess blinked. Turned. Walked away in a daze.

Arthur turned his full attention back to the man in his arms, who was looking at him with such awe that he was humbled.

“You really are magnificent, aren’t you?” said Merlin.

Arthur grinned, heart catching in his throat. “I’ve been telling you that for years. Are you just now catching on?”

“No, I’ve always known how wonderful you are. I just wasn’t sure you knew—not really.”

Arthur kissed Merlin again (or maybe it was the other way around) drunk on life and love and the possibilities. Before the day was out, all of Benwick would know Merlin was his. Before the week was out, Camelot and his father would know the same. A few might guess that the opposite was also true, though most would not.

There would be hell to pay for his transgressions.

He didn’t care.

Aslan had once encouraged him to remain in Narnia in order to make Merlin happy, and also to enjoy a love that would not be condoned in this world. He had wanted the easy acceptance the Narnians offered and the chance to love without shame for himself just as much, if not more so, than he’d wanted it for Merlin. He’d been afraid and uncertain and unready to face the ridicule he knew would await him back home should anyone know of the relationship he held so dear. Narnia had seemed the perfect solution: a chance to be himself, if only for a while.

Now, faced with the prospect of shoving his desires back into the shadows, he found that all his previous insecurities didn’t matter anymore. This wasn’t something he needed to fear or be ashamed of. He’d sooner cut off his own sword arm than lose the only true friend he’d ever had.
And lose him he would if Arthur went back to shoving Merlin into a proverbial box as he had been. What was a little ridicule or even his father’s blinding rage compared to a lifetime of emptiness?

This was love. Love was worth fighting for.

The book appeared on his worktable one morning as if by magic.

Gaius was mixing an ointment for the aging Sir Gilbert’s joint pains at the time and nearly broke his pestle and mortar in alarm, but recovered quickly. He’d been living with Merlin too long for anything to truly shock him—not even books that mysteriously manifested themselves out of thin air.

Setting his work aside, he reached for the book, flipped to the first page, and sputtered: “Herein lies the wondrous works of King Merlin the Wise, Master of the Olde Magicks.” The words, emblazoned in gold, seemed to catch fire before his eyes before burning themselves away.

Blinking in confusion, suddenly wondering why he was pouring over something so mundane as a blank book when he had work to be doing, Gaius set the book aside and returned to his work with a dazed mumble. Perhaps he would give the book to Merlin when the lad returned to Camelot. It would be perfect for taking notes. The gods only knew how anyone could read the cramped scrawl the boy penned haphazardly over the scraps of parchment he’d managed to procure thus far.

End Notes

[1] The royal family of Benwick are based on real characters from the Arthurian legend. In the original myth, King Ban’s legitimate son with Elaine, is Lancelot. Hector de Maris (a.k.a. Prince Brat) is actually the product of an affair between King Ban and Lady de Maris. Since in the TV series we are given no indication that our Lancelot is in anyway related to royalty, I felt rewriting the myth a bit and replacing Lancelot with Hector would be acceptable. Bors, his wife Evaine, and their sons Bors the Younger and Lionel are also drawn from the myth. Princess Jolecia, however, is an entirely original character created merely to serve the purpose of throwing herself at Arthur and contributing to Arthur's humourous dilemma.

[2] I had to give Prince Brat "ginger curls" merely because I am terribly amused by all the bad jokes about Colin being a ginger-racist. Let's play a logic game: If Colin is a ginger racist and if Colin is Merlin, then it follows that Merlin is a ginger racist and Arthur has absolutely nothing to worry about! So maybe, in my own twisted way, I was trying to offer Arthur subtle comfort.

[3] Arthur's lame attempt at writing a sexy letter makes me laugh. I'm sorry: he really wouldn't have much use for subtlety. I wonder what it says about Merlin that he was turned on by that rather than tempted to burst into laughter. Good thing Arthur's pretty.

[4] Some of the animals that appear in this story are apparently no longer living in the wilds of England; however, it is likely that many of these animals would have been around back when England was still Albion. According to Beavers in England, "Archaeological evidence, historic literature, place names and folk belief suggests that the European beaver
was once a widespread English species ... [that] may have survived in England until 1789." Similarly, according to Smithsonian Zoo, the brown bear "went extinct in Great Britain in the tenth century." So I consider myself safe in asserting that it is likely that Arthur and Merlin are familiar with some animals that may not presently be native to England.

[5] As the only religion directly referenced in the series is the Old Religion, I am assuming that although Christianity may have spread to Albion, it is likely still primarily a cult practice that Arthur and Merlin would know very little about. "Adam" and "Eve" would mean nothing to them. Furthermore, "Christmas," as we (and the Narnians) know it, would not have been celebrated until after the period I tend to place Arthur's reign during (around the 5th to 6th century).

[6] When it comes to general historical discrepancies, the anachronistic nature of the series itself has encouraged me to place Camelot in another world, somewhat parallel to our own, but with extreme elements of fantasy and an altered concept of time. For those of you familiar with The Magician's Nephew, imagine that the world from which Arthur and Merlin come exists in a separate "pool" from our own, though with many similarities.

[7] For those of you still confused about how Nimueh came to be the White Witch, I imagine that in the final showdown between she and Merlin, Merlin's magic did not destroy her but rather spirited her away to another, dying, world such as the one described in The Magician's Nephew. Along the same vein of that story, she was released from an enchanted sleep by two unwary youths and eventually found her way into Narnia through the world between worlds just as Aslan was creating Narnia. She's been waiting for her vengeance ever since. I tend to imagine that it is her connection to Arthur and Merlin that allows magic to deliver our boys into Narnia and her neighbours by making their speech more sophisticated—but I also wanted them to still be their mocking, affectionately bickering selves. I'm afraid the dialogue turned out somewhat disjointed. I apologize.

[8] Toward the end, before Arthur and Merlin return to their world, I attempted to show that they had grown up and been influenced by the ways and customs of Narnia and her neighbours by making their speech more sophisticated—but I also wanted them to still be their mocking, affectionately bickering selves. I'm afraid the dialogue turned out somewhat disjointed. I apologize.

[9] In the last scene, I decided that I really wanted Merlin to have his book. I also wanted a unique way to indicate that Arthur and Merlin's story is not finished, although I have no concrete plans for a follow-up at this time.

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