Dying to Return

by StormDancer

Summary

When they try to hang him, he floats.

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They put him on the pyre at dawn.

He doesn’t burn.

Notes

Diverges from canon after season 3

See the end of the work for more notes.

The sorcerer is caught for nothing more than a simple conjuring trick, done in the marketplace to help an old woman lift a heavy load. He is an older man, with no distinguishing characteristics except his extraordinary normalcy. Even after presiding over his trial, Arthur couldn’t really describe him at all. He is plain but well-spoken, does not deny the charges and does not rage against the sentence. After Arthur announces it—death by beheading, the usual punishment for sorcerers—Leon nods to a troop
of guards to lead him back to his cell, and he goes quietly.

“That was odd.” Gwaine says what they’re all thinking, voices what Arthur can’t. He’s wondered, sometimes, if Merlin coached him in that role before he left, or if it just comes naturally to him. Arthur likes to think Merlin coached him, left something of him behind.

“It was,” Percival agrees, and walks forward towards the thrones. It feels empty in here, nowadays, without Gwen and Lancelot. Without Merlin, the oldest hurt.

Leon hovers by the door, looks at it anxiously. “Sire, it could be a trap.”

“For what?” Arthur drums his fingers against the arm of his throne. “He didn’t attack when he could. We know those cells can hold sorcerers, they always have before. What could he be trying to do?”

The knights are all silent. “No, really, what?” Arthur demands, harshly. He hates dealing with sorcerers. He sees Morgana in each one, Morgana before she was what she is now, and never knows what to do. He can’t even tell if they’re all evil anymore, or just dangerous. It’s been ten years since he became king, ten years of beheadings and deaths, and he still doesn’t know. “That was a question.”

No answers. Arthur sighs. They’re all military men, and though he values them for it, each for their strength and loyalty and intelligence, he sometimes wishes he had someone beside him who thought on different lines. He has Gaius, of course, but he comes down rarely; the trip is too hard on old bones. But Merlin left, and Gwen did, and now he sometimes feels off-balance, like he’s supposed to have someone at his side to counteract him. He wonders if this is how his father felt, if this is what made him who he was. “Well, he’ll be dead in the morning. Double the guard for tonight, just in case.”

Leon nods and leads the rest of the knights out. At the door, Gwaine, the last of them, pauses. “What was his name?”

“Hm?” Arthur looks up from his inspection of the day’s petitions.

“I can’t remember his name. Can you?”

“Of course.” Arthur remembers the name of everyone he ever put to death. “It was—” Huh. “It must have just slipped my mind, I’m sure I’ll get it in a second.”

“Yeah.” Gwaine’s gaze is clearly skeptical, but he leaves, his cloak less billowy than usual.

Something is definitely not right.

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The sorcerer (and Arthur still can’t remember his name, and it’s starting to irritate him) is led to the block at dawn. He goes as quietly as he did from the throne room, his hands chained behind him, guards on either side. There’s a crowd, as there always is, children lifted onto their fathers’ shoulders for a better view. Arthur stands alone on the balcony, and parrots his father’s words to the people, who roar back. Their approval, or their excitement, or their disapproval, its impossible to tell. Gwen had looked calm and regal. Merlin had simply set his face into stony determination which Arthur had always understood to be tacit disapproval.

He gives a sign; the headsman raises his axe. Arthur will give the sorcerer this, he doesn’t flinch. At least he is dying with honor. The axe falls.
It bounces off the sorcerer’s neck.

The crowd’s instinctive gasp is cut off into confusion. The headsman pauses, then raises his axe again. It still doesn’t work. He looks towards Arthur.

His father never had to deal with anything like this. “Get him another axe,” Arthur calls to Elyan, who’s captaining the guards today. Elyan nods, snaps orders to a page.

The new axe doesn’t work any better than the first. The crowd is getting restless, deprived of the spectacle it was promised. It’s at times like these that crowds can turn quickly into mobs, Arthur knows, though they have never done so for him. He orders the sorcerer brought back inside.

The man goes back to his cell, with the same long, loping stride he came with, his lips still curved in a something that could be a smile or simply determination.

“Why didn’t he take advantage of it?” Arthur demands, hours later. He paces the council room, back and forth in front of the table. It’s nagging at him. He doesn’t like it when he can’t see people’s motivations, he doesn’t trust it. Morgana taught him clearly that something as simple as love didn’t work. Gwen and Lancelot finished the job. “He turned the people against me. He could have taunted. Hell, he could have said something!”

“You could ask him.” Leon’s voice is quiet, but it sounds loudly. Arthur whirls to face him, and Leon takes a step back and holds up his hands. “It can’t hurt, can it?”

“He could cast a spell on me. That could be what he’s planning.” That made a certain amount of sense. Sorcerers seemed to get a fair amount of pleasure from casting spells on him.

“I’ll talk to him.” Of course Gwaine volunteers. The man bounces on the balls of his feet, “No point in enchanting me.”

“Couldn’t get through your thick head, anyway,” Elyan inserts, and Gwaine grins back at him.

It’s not what Arthur wants, which is the sorcerer just to act, to do something that makes sense, but it’s a plan at least. “Fine. Gwaine, go now. Report back to my chambers. And—” Gwaine raises his eyebrows from the door. Merlin would never have forgiven him if he allows Gwaine to be hurt. Arthur can’t stand up to Merlin’s disappointed looks even in his imagination. “Be careful. No unnecessary risks.”

“Since when do I take unnecessary risks?” Gwaine asks, and is gone with a swirl of his cloak that Arthur is fairly sure he practices in the mirror before any of the rest of them can start the list.

He reports back an hour later. The other knights have gone, so it is just Arthur at his desk. George is long gone—Arthur does not actually need anyone to help him into his nightclothes, thank you very
much. He is not helpless. Though he still sometimes feels like he is arguing with Merlin when he is insisting on that. Merlin, who never really left the rooms except when Gwen was there, who would sit in a corner and polish Arthur’s mail or sharpen his sword as Arthur worked, filling in the silence with chatter or gossip or just as an ear to bounce ideas off of. Merlin, who was always there for him. Until he wasn’t anymore.

Gwaine strides in and sits down across from Arthur without asking. “So what’d he say?”

“That—” Gwaine’s forehead creases. “Don’t stop me, I’ll forget again. I’ve been saying it to myself since I left. He said that he has no agenda, that he didn’t want to hurt anyone but he didn’t particularly feel like dying either. And that’s a direct quote. I think.”

“And that’s all?” Arthur demands. That—since when do sorcerers not want to hurt anyone? All sorcerers want to hurt people. Arthur’s never met one who hasn’t. Even Morgana, who he once thought more honorable and good than anyone, when she had glared him into defending the weak before he had found Merlin to do it for her.

“That’s what I remember. It’s the important things.” Gwaine leans forward, braces his elbows on the table. “I think he’s telling the truth, Arthur. He didn’t make any sort of aggressive move at all.”

“He could be stalling, or playing at being harmless so we let his guard down,” Arthur counters. He looks at the papers on his desk, unseeing. He wishes he had someone to talk all this over with. The knights try, Leon is, as always, his right hand, but they won’t really question him or his laws. Not even Gwaine, for all his petty rebellions. He needs the Morgana for Uther. He needs his Merlin.

“And he broke the law. Tomorrow, he’ll hang.”

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When they try to hang him, he floats.

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They put him on the pyre at dawn.

He doesn’t burn.

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Nightshade is forced down his throat. There is no pain.

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After the poison, Arthur is getting more than a little irritated. The sorcerer just isn’t doing anything. He isn’t attacking, he isn’t even talking, although he’s apparently perfectly willing to chat with anyone who wants. He’s not even trying to escape. He’s just—not dying. It’s frustrating. Not even Gaius can explain it; the best he can come up with is that maybe he means what he says.

Arthur storms into the dungeons in high dudgeon. The sorcerer is sitting in his cell, idly making shapes of fire appear over his palm. He closes his hand over a falcon and rises when Arthur slams open the door. “Your Highness!” he says, with a smile and a bow—the kind of bow one would learn at court. “How nice of you to drop by. I would offer you some refreshments, but, well,” he gestures, takes in the cell, which isn’t inhumane but certainly isn’t comfortable. “there doesn’t seem to be anything I can do.”

Arthur ignores him, stalks right up to the bars. “What’s your game?” he demands, in a low, soft hiss.
“My game? I like chess, personally, though I’m not averse to dice.” He’s relaxed, easy in a way he shouldn’t be when the king himself is there to threaten him.

“I mean,” Arthur hisses, “What is your plan?”

“Well, that’s not a very clever question, is it?” The sorcerer leans against the wall, smiles guilelessly at Arthur. “If I have a devious plan, I’d hardly tell it to you. And you haven’t believed me before when I say I haven’t one, so you probably won’t believe me now.”

“You have to be planning something. Why would you be here, otherwise?”

“Maybe I like the housing.”

Arthur snorts before remembers not to. That involuntary sympathy makes him harsher when he says, “I could starve you out. Stop bringing you food.”

“You could. Wouldn’t be very noble, very kingly, mistreating a prisoner, but you could.” For a second, Arthur could almost imagine Morgana saying that, accusing his—their—father. But the sorcerer’s not smiling anymore. Instead, his face is very, very serious, though still not angry. He looks almost like Merlin did, sometimes, when he felt that Arthur was about to do something wrong. “Of course, why would that work better than anything else you’ve tried to do?”

It hurts. It hurts because it’s right, because Arthur knows that he would never do that. It hurts because he looks like Merlin and he’s standing in a cell, which is in its way all too familiar. It hurts because no one since Merlin has made Arthur hurt like this, feel like he’s not living up to the king he could be.

“I’ll figure you out,” he says, threatens. “I will.”

“I’m sure you will,” the sorcerer says, and it sounds almost patronizing. “Could we skip drowning, though? I get colds.” Arthur scowls and storms out.

“Arthur.” Arthur stops, looks back. The sorcerer is standing in the center of his cell. He opens his palm and a dragon made of fire flies out. It swoops towards Arthur, around him, just close enough that Arthur can feel the heat, before it returns to the sorcerer and wraps itself around the his neck like a scarf. The fire flicks light up, makes the sorcerer’s hair look dark, his skin pale. In that moment, Arthur does hate him, because he has gotten over Merlin’s abandonment. Or at least, until now, he’s managed to convince himself it doesn’t hurt. That there aren’t too many holes in his heart. “I only want to live as myself. Is that too much to ask?”

Arthur closes the door rather than answer. The sorcerer could have burned him, killed him, with that dragon, as easy as you please.

He didn’t. And Arthur doesn’t know what that means.

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They pull him up from the depths of the lake after an hour. As he walks past Arthur, he sneezes. Pointedly.

Arthur almost laughs.

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Gwaine stumbles into the council room dripping with blood.
If it were anyone but Gwaine, this would be a cause for concern, but it being Gwaine, it’s a bit more of a usual occasion.

When Elyan comes in after him, similarly covered in blood, everyone is on their feet in an instant.

“It’s a—thing,” Gwaine gasps out, taking the seat that Percival shoves at him.

“Like a horse, but an eagle,” Elyan sags back against his chair.

Leon and Arthur’s eyes meet over the wounded men’s heads. Another griffin? Lancelot only barely killed the last one.

“Our weapons couldn’t touch it,” Gwaine says. He sounds stronger now—probably more exhaustion than wounds, Arthur assesses with a practiced eye. “We drove it away from the village, but there was nothing more we could do.” There’s the anger now, the anger that made Arthur believe he could be a knight. Anger that he couldn’t do more.

“Body of a horse?” he asks instead, “Are you sure? Not a lion?”

“Never seen a lion,” Gwaine shakes his head, “But I know a horse.” Elyan nods his agreement.

“Get Gaius,” Arthur snaps to a page, who darts out of the room. Then, to another, “Water for the knights.” He goes, too.

By the time Gaius arrives, Elyan and Gwaine are both more comfortable. Both are riddled in scratches, but nothing more serious, thank God. At their description, though, Gaius shakes his head. “You’re sure it wasn’t a griffin?” he asks.

“Positive,” Elyan grits out between clenched teeth, as the old man dabs at his wounds with a rag. “Horse body. Roan.”


“That’s it!” Gwaine exclaims, half-rising, then settles back with a groan.

“A hippogriff,” Gaius reads. “Half horse, half eagle. It’s the product of a griffin mating with a horse.” Arthur can see the same disgusted expression on his men’s faces as on his. “It’s very rare, not much is known about it. But it is said that like its parent, it cannot be killed but with magic.”

“We killed the griffin without magic,” Arthur observes.

Gaius’s face shifts, for an instant, but then it stills. “Of course, your highness, but Lancelot was very, very lucky then. We cannot count on the same circumstances another time.”

“He was good at being lucky,” Arthur mutters. The knights pretend not to hear him. Then, louder, “So what can we do?”

“I do not know.” Gaius hesitates, then adds, “Perhaps there is someone we might ask.”

“What—Gaius, no,” Arthur protests as he realizes what the physician is talking about. He has avoided the sorcerer since his failed drowning, letting the man languish in his cell instead. Maybe he’ll get bored; it’s about the only weapon they have against him. And Arthur doesn’t like how easy it was to laugh at him, with him; how quickly he got to him. It’s uncanny, frightening in a way that has nothing to do with magic. Arthur doesn’t like to remember what it was like to be easy with
“It may be the only way, Sire,” Gaius says. And then he uses his eyebrows, and Arthur has no choice. Maybe he should put the sorcerer to death by Gaius’s eyebrows. There would be no way out of that.

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“Your Highness.” Once more, the sorcerer sweeps him that formal bow. “What brings you down here on this beautiful—” he squints out the slit of a window, wrinkles his nose as he guesses, “Evening?”

“Night, really.” Arthur breathes in and out. He needs the man now. He can humble himself for his peoples’ sake. If there is one thing he learned from Morgana, it is that, both from seeing her keep her dignity in disgrace, and in what she has forced him to do since then. “I’ve come to ask something.”

“Ask away.”

“What do you know about hippogriffs?”

“Hippogriffs?” the sorcerer cocks his head to the side as he thinks. It’s a motion Arthur can almost remember, that almost seems familiarly ridiculous, but as he starts to think about it, it slides away. “Aren’t they when for some reason a griffin mates with a horse? And—oh.” Arthur can see the realization slide over his eyes. “It can only be killed by magic.”

“There’s no other way?”

“Not that I know of.” The sorcerer shrugs. “I don’t know everything, obviously. Gaius would be a better person to ask.”

“I’ve already asked him. And how do you know about Gaius?” Is Gaius the focus of his plans? The man is old, shouldn’t he be left out of it by now? “If you harm one hair on his head, I swear, I will find a way to make you suffer. I will hunt to the ends of the earth to find—”

“Arthur.” The shock of his name makes him stop. The sorcerer’s eyes are large and meet his gaze unflinchingly. “I swear by anything we both find holy that I mean no harm to Gaius.”

His voice resonates, echoes in the small chamber, and Arthur can’t find it in him to disbelieve it. Though he has thought that before, to his grief. Merlin’s judgment was always better.

“Fine. So—” He swallows down the residual anger, the anger also at the fact that he does believe the sorcerer. “Will you help us?”

“Hm?”

“Will you help fight the hippogriff in exchange for your release?” It’ll be releasing a dangerous criminal, but the hippogriff is the greater threat, and it’s not like they were particularly hurting the sorcerer anyway. He is already gesturing to the guard, to get the keys to release him, when the sorcerer answers.

“No.”

“What? Do you not want your freedom? I warn you, this will only be offered once.” Who refuses their freedom?

“I will not go from here because of a ill-made deal through desperation,” the sorcerer explains. He
sounds almost sad. “I’d just get back in here anyway, after a bit more magic.”

“So you won’t help us. Wonderful. We’ll figure it out on our own.” He turns to leave. Before he
does, though, he feels heat behind him, and the dragon sweeps towards him again. It curls around his
sword, close enough to Arthur’s thigh that he should burn but without any heat, then dissipates, as if
it sunk through the sheath.

The sorcerer is looking after him with worried, sad eyes. It has been a long time since someone
looked at him like that as he left, more worry for the man than the king. Not since—not since months
before Gwen left. Since Merlin left. “Good luck, my lord.”

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Arthur raises his hand to strike down the hippogriff. His sword glows blue as it plunges into the beast
and pins it to the ground in its death throes.

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“Thank you.” It’s hard to say, but Arthur has grown since he was a teenager, and he can bring
himself to say it.

The sorcerer starts, and his eyes close and his lips quirk into something that is almost too resigned,
too painfully amused, to be a smile. “I’m glad to see you safe.”

Arthur looks at the bars. “Are you sure you don’t want your freedom?”

“That’s not why I did it.” He sounds like the best part of Lancelot, the part that would do anything
for anyone and never mention it. He sounds like the best part of Merlin, who never asked for thanks.
“I will stay here until it is no longer forbidden for me to go.”

He sits down in the back of the cell, crosses his legs. His fist closes, opens again. A fiery shape
appears—Uther’s head. “It’s interesting. Uther was willing to use magic in desperate times as well.”
His hand closes, opens. Now it’s Morgana’s head that floats there, as she was growing up, proud and
strong and tall and brilliant. “I think that’s what really did it. The hypocrisy. Not the hatred. She
could respect the hatred.”

Arthur is at the bars before he could think. “Don’t you dare—”

“Just an observation.” Once more the fingers—long fingers, like some he’s seen before somewhere
—open, close. It’s Arthur’s face this time. “You’ve never had to be your father’s son, Arthur.”

“I know.” Of all the things Merlin had given him, that might be the best—another way to look at
things, the knowledge that his father was not the be all and end all.

The sorcerer looks up, with a crooked smile on his face. The torchlight dances in blue eyes. “So you
say. Then why do you hate magic?” It’s the question they always ask.

“Because sorcerers try to kill me all to often.”

“So do swords,” the sorcerer observes. “Do you hate them too?”

“Swords can be used for good,” Arthur shoots back. His knuckles are white on the bars.

“And so can magic.” The sorcerer rises, more easily than he should for his age, and walks to the
bars. Arthur refuses to move back. The sorcerer gestures, and his eyes flash, not reddish or yellow,
like Arthur has seen before, but a pure clear gold. A flower drops into Arthur’s hand—he remembers
that flower. It was burned into his memory. A mortaeus flower. “Remember that.”

Arthur does back away then, fingering the flower. So few knew about that—Gwen, Gaius, Merlin,
him. Gaius wouldn’t have said anything. Arthur didn’t.

“Is this a threat?” he says, slowly. No one has heard from Merlin for years, as far as Arthur knows.
He got a few letters, the first year, but then those stopped. It’s not like Arthur could have answered
back, anyway. It’s not like he would have wanted to. Lancelot can take care of Gwen, clearly.
Merlin cannot take care of himself. It has always amazed Arthur that he made it to Camelot on his
own. He has to believe, though, that Merlin is bumbling through the forests somehow, finding
whatever it was that made him look at Arthur, all those years ago, and announce that as Arthur
seemed pretty well set up now, he could go. That he has found whatever it was he needed more than
Arthur.

The sorcerer blinks, once, then sinks back down to the floor, laughing hysterically. “Arthur,” he
gasps out between breaths, “Oh, Arthur, that is the farthest thing from a threat.”

That hysterical laughter follows Arthur out of the dungeons.

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There is no attempted execution the next day.

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Nor the next.

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Arthur goes back down to the dungeons the next day. He’s not sure why. If anyone asked, he would
have reasons—to inspect the condition of the prisoner, to ask him about some obscure point of
magic, to make sure the laughter didn’t mean he was going insane—but none of those are true. Well,
maybe the last, a little, because after Morgana he is apprehensive. He goes because…because he
does.

He opens the door quietly, politely this time. Gaius is standing at the bars, his head nearly meeting
the sorcerer’s. That’s quite a walk for Gaius, these days. Sometimes Arthur considers trying to send
Merlin a message, or maybe just sending a knight out with one, to tell him that he should come back
soon, to say his good-byes. Those thoughts usually come on the nights he spends alone, listening to
no one’s breathing beside him.

“—won’t hide anymore,” the sorcerer is muttering. He sounds younger than he looks.

Arthur can’t see Gaius’s face, but he knows that tilt of his head. He’s using the eyebrows. “Then
what is this? Isn’t—”

“Your Highness!” The sorcerer cuts him off, and Gaius turns and bows clumsily, as if surprised.
Arthur stays back, in the doorway. He trusts Gaius, completely, even with the sorcery in his past—
but this still makes him nervous.

“Gaius,” he says, with a slow nod, “What are you doing here?”

“Just checking on the prisoner’s health,” Gaius says. His eyes shift to the side, like they used to when
he was claiming Merlin was in the tavern. Arthur still wonders where Merlin actually went; he
stopped believing the tavern story when, once, there was not whiff of beer on him later that night. But Merlin had long since earned his freedom, and Arthur could not quite convince himself he had a right to him beyond the hours of his service.

Still, given that Arthur doesn’t have a good reason for being here either, he doesn’t press. “Will you be able to get upstairs on your own?” He asks instead.

“I’ll manage, thank you, Sire.” Gaius nods, moves slowly towards the door. The sorcerer watches him hobble out, leaning heavily on his stick.

“You take good care of him,” he says, when the door closes behind Gaius.

“He’s had years of loyal service to my family.”

“And that’s the only reason?” The sorcerer smiles, slightly, knowingly, almost teasingly, and leans against the sidewall of the cell.

Arthur shrugs. “He’s been my physician since I can remember.” He’s the only almost-family left, it feels like sometimes, with Uther dead and Morgana…gone. The Morgana he had known and loved. There’s barely anyone in Camelot who knew him before he was king—Leon, of course, but Gwen has left, and Merlin, even Lancelot, all his old friends. He needs Gaius to remain. “He’s…a close friend.”

“A friend?” The sorcerer raises his eyebrow. It looks almost like Gaius. “A king can have a freedman for a friend?”

“A king can have a servant for a friend,” Arthur replies, and leaves it at that. Wherever Merlin is, if this sorcerer someday sees him again, Arthur hopes he tells him that. He’s not sure he ever said it. He’s not sure he knew it until after Merlin left.

The sorcerer’s smile widens, until it’s a full-fledged grin, and his eyes are bright and there are dimples in his cheeks. Arthur is sure he’s seen it before, somewhere—“So what brings you down to my humble chambers, Sire?” the sorcerer asks with a cheerful bounce, and the thought is gone. “You’ve been lax in your burnings lately.”

“No use wasting wood,” Arthur counters. He crosses his arms across his chest. “I wanted to…” he trails off.

“You wanted to talk to me,” the sorcerer concludes. His lips press together like he’s trying to avoid smiling, badly, like Merlin trying not to laugh at his prince.

“No,” Arthur snaps. He has other people to talk to, better people, who don’t use magic and aren’t in cells. “I’m just making sure you’ve been well treated. Camelot owes you a great debt.”

“Camelot owes me nothing,” the sorcerer waves a hand, dismissing it, and sinks to the ground so he can sit. “But you could help me in one thing—and no, it’s not traitorous. Obviously. Just—tell me about the court? It’s boring down here, with nothing to do.”

“Conjure yourself some books,” Arthur grumbles. He’s been on his feet all day, training with the knights than a council than there was an issue in the kitchens he had to work out. He sits down as well, leaning against a wall. “What do you want to know?”

“Gossip,” the sorcerer says, promptly, and Arthur laughs.

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He ends up in the dungeons often during the next month. It’s easier, sometimes, to talk about things with someone other than his knights, who are bound to him and only disagree on tactics. They are good men, all of them, but not people Arthur can talk to, not like he talked to Gwen, to Merlin. And if Arthur always hears a voice that sounds like his father’s in his head as he goes down, warning him that he is spilling secrets to an enemy, he ignores it. He has stopped trying to figure out the sorcerer’s plans. He wasn’t getting anywhere with it. This is nothing Morgana doesn’t know already, in its essence.

“I never knew how much work running a castle was,” he complains one day, taking his seat on the crimson cushion he brought. The sorcerer looks up—he was using air today, swirling dust into figures in what Arthur guesses is his main amusement. It has ceased to disturb him.

“As opposed to the kingdom?”

“Oh, I knew that. But the castle itself—who gives a damn about the court ladies’ amusements? Balls are awful enough in themselves.” Arthur shudders. He remembers the years of being paraded like a prize horse. “But musicales? Listening to them play?”

“And you didn’t have to do this before?” the sorcerer asks, with a hint of skepticism. “You have been king for years.”

“Not really. My father dealt with it, somehow, and then Gwen—” He cuts himself off. He has, purposefully or not, avoided talking about her with the sorcerer. He can’t tell if it’s because he doesn’t want to make her vulnerable, or himself. “But then Gwen left,” he finishes, and stares at the cushion’s fringe.

“I heard,” the sorcerer says. The laughter has gone from his voice; he sounds sad, weary. “I am sorry.”

“So is everyone.” It’s out before Arthur thinks better of it, out before Arthur realizes the anger in it. “Everyone’s sorry. Sorry your wife cuckolded you. Sorry the woman you love didn’t love you back. Sorry—”

“She loved you.” His rant cut off just as he was building up steam, Arthur jerks his head up to look at the sorcerer. He is leaning forward, his eyes intense under dark brows, the intensity Merlin had when he needed Arthur to believe him. “Whatever else happened—I can’t know that, can’t know what happened between you, between her and Lancelot—she did love you.”

No one has said that to him before. “How do you know?” he asks, because how can he trust what this man who has never met her, never known her, has to say?

“Would you believe me if I said magic?”

“No.”

“Then magic.”

Arthur huffs out a breath, unwillingly amused. He hasn’t laughed so much in years as he does with the sorcerer. Not even with Gwen, whom he loved, had loved, who had meant everything to him, but who had never quite known how to joke with him. Maybe that’s why she left. Merlin had made him laugh, like no one had before or since.

“Then why’d she leave?” he voices. Not that he’s going to trust anything the sorcerer says, but another opinion is always good.
The sorcerer shrugs. “I can’t know—”

“So you said—”

“I can’t know,” the sorcerer begins again, impressively. “But—if I had to guess—” he fiddles with the straw of his cell for a moment, then looks up to meet Arthur’s eyes. “If you had to choose, Camelot’s happiness or Guinevere, which would you choose?”

Arthur opens his mouth, pauses, then answers. “I threatened to run away with her once, to leave my position as the heir so we could marry.” He can hardly remember the boy he was then, madly in love and blown away by it. He can barely remember that sort of love.

The sorcerer smiles indulgently. “And would you have gone through with it?”

Arthur lets out a breath. “No.”

“Would Lancelot?”

“Yes,” Arthur answers immediately. Lancelot would have walked through fire and water for Gwen, would have—would—do anything to keep her safe and happy and warm. He would have, did, give up everything for her.

Arthur would have too, he guesses, if it had just been him. But he couldn’t just be him, not while he wore the crown, not while his people depended on him, not while he sees his people suffering or happy through his actions.

He tries to remember the last time he had dinner with Guinevere rather than his council. He can’t.

“So it’s all my fault.” Arthur stares dully at the floor. That’s a new way of looking at things.

“It’s not your fault.” There is a sudden fierceness in the sorcerer’s tone, one that hadn’t even been there when he defended himself. “You are who you are. Gwen knew that when she married you. She is the one who broke her vows, not you.” The fierceness subsides, and there is something oddly like nostalgia in his voice, like wistfulness. “Just remember that it can be her fault and still be understandable.”

“I suppose.” Arthur sighs, leans back and stares up at the sliver of light that comes through the tiny cell window. “But how am I supposed to know all that? That’s what she was for. That’s what Merlin was for. He was good with feelings.” Too good, that girl, Arthur remembers ruefully. Couldn’t even go hunting without crying for the poor baby deer.

“Merlin?” The sorcerer asks. His head is tilted to the side, big ears almost perked with interest. “Who’s he?”

“My servant,” Arthur answers shortly. “He left.” It’s not like with Gwen. Clearly. Because he was not in love with Merlin. And because Merlin had told him he was going, had told him why, more or less, had said good-bye with a smile and a wave and left a hole bigger than Arthur had ever expected. Gwen is easy to understand, in some ways, a marriage that broke, a woman he loved. Arthur has never been able to explain Merlin so simply. More than a servant. More than a friend, in some ways, in how it sometimes felt like he was the only one who knew Arthur, down to his essence.

“And?” The sorcerer presses. He rarely does.

“And I have to go,” Arthur says, and walks out.
The sorcerer counters Arthur’s stories of court, of his quests, of Gwaine’s latest antics, with stories of his adventures. They are many and varied, take him into all the kingdoms of Albion. He has worked as a farmer in Mercia, as a shepherd in Escetia, as a fisherman in the lakes in Camelot’s north, and can tell stories of the places with expansive gestures and surprising humor.

He uses magic in the stories, of course. Its never important, just a casual mention that he slips in so easily that before long, Arthur has stopped noticing, stopped flinching. But he never hides it, either. He never hides anything, it seems, just narrates tales in a continuous stream of words that he can’t stop to think about.

Which is why it surprises Arthur when he cuts himself off halfway through one of his more exciting stories, including a garter snake, a caravan, three apples, and a group of bandits.

“And?” Arthur prompts, “And then the bandits attacked, and…”

The sorcerer presses his lips together, relaxes them. He stills, sobers. “What do you think?” His fist closes, opens, and there’s a ball of fire on it, blue with heat.

“Oh.” Arthur forgets, sometimes, that just because the sorcerer isn’t attacking him doesn’t mean he can’t. Doesn’t mean he isn’t still dangerous. More dangerous than Morgana, in some ways, he worries, because he is absolutely sane, and Morgana isn’t anymore. Or so he hopes.

“I defended myself.” Long fingers wrap around the fire, squeeze, and it winks out. “Just like you would have.” Shadows flicker over the sorcerer’s face, turning it into sharp planes, staining his lips red.

“I would have used a sword.”

“It’s still a weapon. Still a tool.” The sorcerer sounds tired, less like he’s unconvinced and more like he’s said it so often he doesn’t think his words will do anything.

“Not one they can counter.”

“A sword will kill me as dead as it would you.”

“Apparently not,” Arthur scowls. He hasn’t actually tried to execute the sorcerer in weeks, but he regards it as a bit of a loss of pride that he hasn’t been able to.

The sorcerer, though, is serious as he responds. “There’s a limit to everyone’s power, Arthur, even mine. Once that’s gone, I’m as mortal as any man.”

“But you have that power,” Arthur insists, though something curls inside him at the sorcerer’s words, like ice. “It’s—it’s unfair.”

“And what do you call your armies? Your knights? Your skill at arms?” The sorcerer traces a design in the air, leaves a trail of sparks behind so that it twists into some complex rune. There’s something in his tone that sounds like Merlin, quietly, seriously impudent. “We each have our power, Arthur. Is yours more ‘fair’ than mine?”

Arthur finds he cannot answer that.
Morgana attacks the next week. Or, in honesty, she attacks with the help of Alined and his armies, but Arthur knows his men can fight off the armies. They have the best army in Albion. But Morgana—and the magic she wields—worries him. They’ve been curiously free from most magical attacks, the hippogriff not withstanding, for the last seven years or so, but he still cannot predict her strength, or how to fight her.

“You defeated her before,” the sorcerer points out when Arthur tries to discuss battle strategies with him. It doesn’t work well; the man simply does not understand, or doesn’t want to. “What did you do that time?”

“It’s not the same at all,” Arthur snaps, “She had an undead army. And,” he admits, “I don’t know. The men started dying. I think her magic broke, or malfunctioned. We can’t count on that happening again.” He hardly remembers that battle in some ways, only the swirl of betrayal, the breaking of the image of the girl who had sparred with him as children.

“No, you can’t,” the sorcerer agrees, sounding entirely too cheerful for someone who is in a castle facing imminent invasion. “But what else can you do? Otherwise, you’d have to use magic.” He blows a glittering cloud off his hand, lets it settle over Arthur. He rolls his eyes and shakes it off. God, he can be such a girl—damn. No, he can’t be thinking that, in that fond tone. That tone is Merlin’s. Always. Completely.

“That is the problem,” he snaps. “If you can’t help me—”

“I’m sorry.” The sorcerer truly does sound sorry, and it softens Arthur, a little. He wasn’t mad at the other man, anyway—just at himself. The sorcerer is a sorcerer. He can’t be grouped with Merlin, even if sometimes, if Arthur closed his eyes, he could almost imagine himself ten years ago, talking to Merlin in his chambers, back before Gwen and Uther’s decline and everything else. “But I can’t tell you how to prevent anything until I know what she can do.”

Arthur closes his eyes, breathes in and out. He came down here knowing that, though hoping otherwise. He hears Merlin in his head, talking to him of tolerance, of patience, of wanting a better world. “You could fight for us,” he suggests, and studies the door jamb.

A long, slow breath comes from the cell. “Would I come back here afterwards, for doing magic?”

“I’d let you go.” It hurts, to say that. Not in the admitting the exception, the hypocrisy, because it isn’t hypocrisy. Not because he’d let a dangerous criminal go, because he can’t quite convince himself that the sorcerer is dangerous. But because the sorcerer will go, and Arthur won’t have this retreat anymore, this retreat to someone who talks to him not as a king, but as a man.

“But magic will still be punishable by death.”

Arthur breathes out. “Yes.” He can’t change that. He doesn’t even know if he should, given Morgana’s invasion. If magic is let into the kingdom, what protection does he have against more Morgana’s? All the sorcerers already hate him.

Something rustles in the cell. “I won’t hide my magic, not anymore.” Arthur looks up. The sorcerer is standing in the light at the mouth of the cell. The torch lights up his face, skews his proportions, so he looks taller and leaner, paler. He could almost be Merlin, in one of his sojourns in these cells, and Arthur coming to let him out with a roll of his eyes and quiet gratitude. Arthur doesn’t know why he’s been thinking about Merlin so much, lately. He’s just missing him more, he guesses. He’d forgotten what it was like to laugh, and to argue. “I can’t. I’ll save my own life, but no more.”

It’s nothing Arthur doesn’t expect. “Fine. If you won’t fight, we’ll have to muddle through on our
Morgana will attack at dawn. She has moved quickly through the countryside, quickly enough that Arthur suspects magic at work. He doesn’t know, of course. Her army is smaller than his, and his has walls and towers and the full protection of Camelot. But she knows the country, knows Camelot, for all his changes; and she has magic.

Arthur paces his room. He’s alone, of course; George went to bed hours ago. He always gets all this energy before a battle, the nerves that aren’t nervous, just keyed up. Merlin used to stay up with him, babble at him until he calmed down, play games or just sit in pensive quiet, whatever Arthur needed without Arthur asking. Gwen used to help him work off his energy in other ways. But now—he’s knights are off doing what they need, for their own battle. He needs—he can’t be alone.

He pivots, stalks down the stone stairs. Everyone else is asleep. Camelot is asleep, waiting for the storm to break. He crosses the courtyard, stares up at the towering walls. His walls. His place. His love. Gwen must have understood that, once. That he loved her, but he loves Camelot with everything he is, everything he has. Merlin knew that, had told him that. Told him he would become this.

He is in the dungeons before he can remember getting there. The sorcerer is sitting on the pallet, legs folded, staring at the fire dragon curled in his lap. When Arthur bursts in, the door slamming open, he bolts to his feet. The dragon screeches. Arthur stares.

“Afraid?” he barks. He starts to pace the small area of the room that isn’t the cell.

“No,” the sorcerer shoots back, folding his legs back under him. Then he subsides. “Just—can’t you feel it? The waiting?”

“Always,” Arthur says. The anger has drained out of him, until all he has left is energy. “I can’t sleep. It’s coming. She can’t take Camelot, she can’t. I’ve seen what she’ll do with it. I won’t let that happen.” He growls it through gritted teeth, a vow and a threat. “I’ll die first.”

“You won’t,” the sorcerer says, with that same odd surety he has sometimes, like absolute faith. Merlin had that too, the same total devotion. Total loyalty. “She is not your destiny.”

“Great. Destiny. Will that win a battle?”

“No,” the sorcerer chuckles, leans forward and covers his face with his hands, and keeps on chuckling. “Gods, no, it won’t.”

“Exactly. You know what will? You.”

The sorcerer lifts his head. His eyes are a deep, rich blue in the light from his dragon. “Arthur, I told you—”

“You’re a bloody sorcerer!” Arthur yells. It echoes off the stone walls. “Violence is what you do. Just cast your spells and keep Camelot safe.”

The sorcerer rises, slowly, dragging darkness behind him like a cloak. Arthur hasn’t remembered that he’s dangerous for a long time. “Sire,” he says, dripping dignity. The dragon dissolves in a flash of sparks. “If that is all you think of me, then why should I not fight for Morgana?”
Arthur steps back, wishing he brought his sword. It’s not much defense, but it is some. “Why don’t you? Not helping us is the same thing.”

“No, Arthur.” The sorcerer paces forward, until he stands at the bars and glares out. “It’s not. That’s what Uther never understood. Sorcery isn’t violence. Men are violence.”

“And you’re a man!”

“But not a violent one.”

“You’ve killed before.”

“Do you think that makes me happy?” The sorcerer reaches up to grab the bars, braces himself against them. “Do you think I’m proud of that? I’ve done what I had to do. And that’s what I’ll do now.”

“Great. Just great.” Arthur whirls around, paces the other way. “Merlin, he did what he had to do. Just a peasant boy. But he saved my life more time than I can count. He went into battle with me, with only the barest of training. Hell, he invaded Camelot with me!” Arthur reaches the other end, feels the cold stone against his forehead. “I wish he was here now.”

“Why?” the sorcerer sounds curious, now, less angry.

“Because he was the bravest man I knew,” Arthur tells the wall. “I could be brave for him.” He lets the cool of the stone sink into him. “If I live, I’ll see you after the battle.”

“Arthur—” Arthur turns back. The sorcerer’s eyes are golden in the night. He swallows, bites something down. “Good luck.”

* *

It goes as Arthur expects, which means Camelot is losing. The enemy can’t breach the walls, but they’re coming far closer than anyone is comfortable with, and they’re losing men far too fast. Morgana is clearly visible, riding back and forth among the troops, throwing bolts of something at the walls that makes them creak and writhe, though as of yet, miraculously, they’re holding. When dusk comes, Camelot still stands.

“We aren’t provisioned for a long siege,” Leon says, striking the report of grain supplies. The metal rings against the wood. “And who knows what Morgana would do to the countryside in the meantime.”

“Then we take the battle to her,” Gwaine suggests. His usually shiny hair is matted with sweat and blood, but his grin is still bright and fearless. “Drive them away.”

“Did you see what happens when those—things hit the walls?” Elyan counters, “I don’t want to face those on the field.”

“She’s key,” Percival breaks in, slow and thoughtful, “If we can disable her…”

“How, if we don’t have magic?” Gwaine points out. “Arthur, have you talked to—”

“He’s not going to help.”

“Damn.” All five of them study the papers on the table, the sketches of the battlefield, records of supplies, scout’s reports. The situation isn’t hopeless, not as bad as they have been—but it’s bad.
“What if,” Leon begins, but the doors burst open before he can finish his thought. They hit the walls with a bang, and fall silent.

Morgana stands in the center of the open doors. Arthur hasn’t seen her this closely in years; a part of him registers that she has come a long way since the lady worshiped by all the knights of Camelot. She is beautiful still, always, but her dress hangs off her body like she has lost weight, and her eyes are huge and crazed in a pale face. “Oh, boys,” she drawls. She paces forward, and a score of men pace behind her. The knights press together in the center of the room, back to back. How did she get in? “Were you talking about me?”

“Why are you here, Morgana?” Arthur says evenly. If one of them gets out, sounds the alarm…

“Why brother dearest,” she throws up her hands, so a blast of fire shoots towards the ceiling. “I’m only here to take what is rightfully mine.”

“Arthur is the rightful king of Camelot.” Arthur has never loved Leon so much as then, as he faces down Morgana with cool eyes and steady resolve.

“Of course you’d say so,” she snaps. “But my men here think otherwise, don’t you boys?” The men don’t answer, but they spread out around the room. “And I’m afraid that once Arthur is dead, it won’t matter much anyway.”

The room bursts into action. The knights close around Arthur, Morgana’s men charge forward, and she laughs, high and loud.

It’s a hopeless fight, and they all know it. Five men, though they are the best of Camelot, against a score or more plus a sorceress of unknowable power; there is nothing for it. They can only hope to survive, to get Arthur out, to do damage before they die. Gwaine laughs as he slashes, a blur of red cloak and silver mail and dark hair; on Arthur’s other side Leon is steady and methodical, textbook perfect as he slices down men. Percival shoves Arthur aside so that another fire blast hits the hanging behind him and sets it alight; Elyan cries out and then mutters “thanks.” The fire spreads to the music of swords and Morgana’s laughter, pens them in even more, so that they can hardly breathe, and Arthur spares a moment as he slashes desperately at an oncoming sword, hacking out a breath, to wish Merlin a long, happy life, away from the death he would have earned here, to wish Gwen happy, to hope Lancelot takes care of her. The fire licks at the round table, Morgana shrieks her victory—

And then the fire stops, shifts, and then it is a dragon’s cry that rings out, and the fire is a dragon that swoops around Camelot’s knights, driving back their enemies, and glides to the door, where it twines around the sorcerer before disappearing.

How did he get out? Arthur barely wonders it before he dismisses that in favor of the more pressing question. Why did he get out?

“Morgana,” the sorcerer says, quietly, calmly.

Morgana shakes her head and yells out a word, fire flashes towards the sorcerer. He waves a hand and it vanishes.

Morgana takes a step back. “Who are you?” she demands, and she almost sounds frightened.

“You will not kill these men,” the sorcerer replies. He paces forward.

“Why not? I am High Priestess of the Old Religion,” she declares, and tosses back her hair, and for an instant Arthur sees the girl who had bullied her way into sword practice in the midst of his fear for
the sorcerer. “You have magic, you owe your fealty to me.” She tries to throw a gust of wind this
time; once more the sorcerer dismisses it.

“I owe fealty to no one but Arthur,” the sorcerer says, tall and sure, and something sets fire in Arthur,
pride or simple astonishment. “I am Emrys, and I say you will not touch him.”

“Emrys?” Morgana’s eyes widen, and she reels back. “Emrys? You? But—No!” She yells, and the
men attack again.

The sorcerer speaks a long, rolling word, and lightning crashes outside, the windows crashing into
pieces. The lightning streaks in, cuts down half the men before it flashes out. Another flash, the
others are down, and the knights turn towards Morgana. She screams her fury and throws her hands
towards the sorcerer, and a whirlwind starts, pulls the papers into it; then the chairs start to groan and
break as the whirlwind grows. Percival reaches out to grab a pillar with one hand and Gwaine’s
collar with the other as the wind pulls them in; Leon snatches at Arthur and Elyan and yanks them
back before they stumble into the dervish that has already picked up dead men’s swords.

The sorcerer’s eyes widen, and he reaches out his hands in a mirror image of Morgana. His eyes
flash golden; the whirlwind stops moving. For a long, long moment, the whirlwind is still, and they
face each other across the room. Then, inch by inch, the whirlwind moves towards Morgana. Sweat
is dancing across her forehead, his muscles are clenched, but it moves, until it is next to her, until it
picks her up and spits her out so that she hits a wall with a sickening crunch.

The sorcerer rolls back his shoulders, looks at the still raging whirlwind. He speaks another word, his
eyes flash, and the wind is gone, and he says.

Arthur gets to his feet. Morgana is down, dead or unconscious but certainly defeated. “Take her and
the men to the dungeons,” he orders Leon, then to Elyan, “Find out how she got in,” and to Percival,
“Find the rest of the men.” The men scatter, move around the sorcerer in a wide berth.

Arthur approaches him cautiously, one hand on his sword. “I thought you weren’t going to fight.”

The sorcerer looks up from where he was considering Leon picking up Morgana. His eyes fade from
golden into blue, and his grin is wide and open. “I also said you weren’t going to die.”

“Well—” Arthur decides it’s not worth it to argue about if he would have lived. Only Merlin would
have argued with him after a battle. “Why did you fight?”

The sorcerer breathes in and out. He is just Merlin’s height, Arthur notices inconsequentially, a few
inches taller than Arthur himself. “I said I’d fight to save myself,” he says, slowly. “But—”

Gwaine is moving even before the sword is finished piercing into the sorcerer’s side, and the man
who struck the blow falls dead for real even as Arthur grabs at the sorcerer as he falls. “Get Gaius,”
Arthur snaps out, and there are pounding feet. The sorcerer’s eyes are gold, and there isn’t enough
blood coming out, he must be somehow healing it, but he’s getting pale fast. Arthur grabs for
something to make a bandage out of, comes up with nothing but his bloody surcoat, which is better
than nothing. He rips off a piece, folds it, presses it against the wound. “You can’t die,” Arthur
mutterers, nonsense words. He hasn’t felt this helpless since his father died, since he watched Merlin
collapse after drinking poison meant for him. He can’t watch another person die for him. He can’t
have more holes in his heart. “I’m supposed to kill you, eventually. I already tried a sword. That
can’t work.”

“Not—about—the weapon—” the sorcerer—Emrys, he called himself—gasp out. His hair looks
nearly black against the pallor of his skin. “Should—have—figured—that—out—already—you—
Arthur nearly drops him. That’s Merlin’s word, his and Merlin’s word, just like he is Merlin’s height, and his hair is black and his eyes are blue and he knew those hands and that smile and that faith.

Then Gaius is there, at the sorcerer’s—at Merlin’s—side, and he is easing him away from Arthur as Arthur stands frozen, and Merlin smiles. “Told you you’d miss me,” he mutters as his eyes flutter closed into unconsciousness.

* 

Arthur spends the next week supervising recovery from the attack. It takes a lot of time and effort, and he even helps rebuild a home or two, and it is important and necessary work. And it means he has very little time to think about Merlin, recovering in Gaius’s chambers. Merlin, who he hadn’t recognized. Merlin, who was a sorcerer. Merlin, who came back to him.

“He’s recovering well.” Arthur looks up from his desk to see Gwaine in the doorway, watching him. His dark eyes are almost sober, for once.

“Hm?”

“Merlin.” Gwaine moves into the room with his usual insolent swagger. There is something more in his gaze, though, something Arthur remembers from the first few times they met, when Gwaine followed him for Merlin’s sake, and thought Arthur no better than his father or any other noble. Merlin always could inspire loyalty. He had won Arthur’s, once. “He’s going to make a full recovery. Just thought you might like to know.”

“Oh. Thank you.” Arthur lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, feels tension slide off his shoulders. Not that he knows what he feels about this news. In some ways, it would be easier if he—no. He can’t wish Merlin dead, even if he is a sorcerer. But was Gwaine spending much time with Merlin? He had been around the rebuilding, helping and charming the girls in equal measure, but he must have stolen time to check. Clearly there was no bitterness there. “Anything else?”

“No. Just thought you might be interested in the fate of the man who nearly died for you. Again.” Gwaine lets out a humorless chuckle and turns to go. His cloak swirls judgmentally around him, and really, how does he manage that? He can’t judge Arthur. He didn’t talk to Merlin-as-the sorcerer like Arthur did. He didn’t know Merlin like Arthur did.

He did know Merlin, though, had been his friend, had missed him when he left, had taken his place as the insolent one in Arthur’s court, so Arthur stops him before he can leave. “Gwaine.”

“Yes?” It’s surly, disrespectful, but he stops.

“Did you know?” Arthur’s not sure what answer he wants. If Gwaine knew, then he can be insulted, but it’s an explanation for why Gwaine isn’t angry. If Gwaine didn’t know—how did Gwaine swallow the abandonment? And how many secrets had Merlin carried alone, without Arthur’s help to hold him up?

“That he had magic, or that he was the sorcerer?”

“Either. Both.” All those secrets. All those things Arthur hadn’t known. All those parts of a man Arthur had thought he knew inside and out.

“No.” Gwaine twitches his head thoughtfully. “I suspected about the magic, though. Was clear he had a secret, right? Always disappearing at the right moments.”
“And you’re not angry?” Angry, hurt, betrayed, overjoyed, all of the emotions swirling together in Arthur so it feels like he’s about to explode.

“Nope.” Gwaine pauses, thinks. “Well, a bit that he didn’t tell me he was the sorcerer in case he needed help. But not really.”

Arthur shakes his head. He can’t understand that. Can’t understand how everyone isn’t reeling.

Gwaine’s cloak moves thoughtfully around his ankles. “Want my advice, Sire?”

“No.” He doesn’t need Gwaine’s advice. Gwaine may be the only person in the castle who understands emotions less than him.

“Go see him.” Gwaine hesitates, then puts a hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “I was his friend, yeah, but you two were something else. And he’d like to see you. Always asks about you.”

“Probably wants to make sure I won’t have him killed,” Arthur mutters, and shakes off Gwaine’s hand.

Gwaine takes a step back. “Tried that, didn’t you? How’d it work for you?”

As Arthur doesn’t have a retort to that, and shouldn’t really be bandying words with one of his knights, he sits back down at his desk. “I’ll see if I can find time to see him.”

“Whatever you say, Sire.” Gwaine leaves. His cloak blows dramatically in the wind.

It takes Arthur a second to realize there isn’t any wind in the castle.

*  

Merlin is asleep in the room off of Gaius’s chambers when Arthur comes in. It’s almost like no time has passed, like Arthur has just come in to wake his lazy servant (who was never really lazy, Arthur always knew) with a bucket of water and laughter when Merlin would come upright, sputtering profanity.

But there are differences, too. The Merlin who came back is not the Merlin who left. His shoulders are broader than they were before. His hair is still a mess, but its longer, more unkempt. He has been in a dungeon for the past two months, Arthur supposes, though not charitably. And he’s paler than he was. Arthur moves forward, towards the bed. His cheekbones have always been ridiculous, but now they jut out from his face like a weapon, like Merlin hasn’t eaten enough in weeks. Merlin’s always been skinny, but this is—the prisoners are fed, Arthur knows that. This is the sort of weight loss that comes with years of not eating enough.

“Where have you been?” Arthur asks quietly, sitting down on the chair next to the bed. He doesn’t want to wake Merlin. He’s not sure why. He is the king, he’s busy, he has things to do—but he sits, watches Merlin sleep.

Merlin tosses in his bed, rolls over onto his side so he faces Arthur. His eyes are still closed, lashes dark against the pallor of his cheeks. His chapped lips are parted, just the tiniest bit. The motion makes the blankets fall down; with an exasperated snort Arthur leans over to pull them back up to his chin.

“Arthur,” Merlin says, lips moving softly. Arthur freezes, one hand on either side of Merlin. His eyes are still closed; Arthur has a sudden thought of what might make him breathe his name that sends warmth rushing through him. Then again, louder, worried and frantic. “Arthur!” His eyes spring
open, Arthur leaps backwards, way from him, away from the proof that he bothered to care about him. Merlin’s eyes rove the room, then light on him, and the relief in them is tangible. “Not yet,” he breathes out, and relaxes back down into the blankets. “Not yet, not yet, not yet,” like a mantra.

“Still talking about me in your sleep?” Arthur drawls. He knows nightmares when he sees them. He remembers Morgana, bolting upright in her bed, remembers talking her back into the present. He’s wondered, sometimes, if he might have changed something if he had done that more. If he had seen more in the days she was sharper with lack of sleep and he had laughed her off with bravado and fear of showing care.

Of course, Merlin might already be evil—no. Arthur can’t even really think that. Merlin is a sorcerer. Merlin isn’t evil. Arthur knows that like he knows his name, like he knows the sky is blue. Like he knows the color of Merlin’s eyes.

“Nightmares,” Merlin retorts. He eases himself up onto one elbow, so he can look Arthur in the face. His lips twist into an ironic, teasing smile. That smile, not quite the same but close enough to the one with which he used to greet him, sends another wave of heat through him. “Nice of you to grace my bedside with your presence, Sire.”

“I’ve been busy.” It sounds much less justified out loud, with Merlin smiling at him like that, like he knows exactly what that means.

But Merlin still sobers, and his eyes are worried when he asks, “Was there much damage?”

“Not as much as there could have been. In a way, Morgana’s assassination attack worked for us. It kept the fight contained.” Arthur leans back against the wall. It’s almost like old times, talking over their days in the quiet of a room.

“Didn’t work for me,” Merlin mutters.


“It was a gut wound, and the only reason I’m not dead right now is because I had to let go of the wards around the kingdom to hold myself together,” Merlin shoots back. Arthur’s eyebrows rise to hide the fear. Merlin seemed more or less fine now. He lets his eyes drift down, over Merlin’s chest and stomach, to survey what damage there might have been. He can’t see any, but he keeps looking. “You might want to send out more patrols, by the way.”

“Wards?” Arthur asks. It’s the easiest thing for him to deal with.

“What, did you think I was going to leave you unprotected?” Merlin scoffs. “I knew you were an idiot, but really?”

“I didn’t even know you were bothering to think about us back here.” Arthur thinks, decides to amend it. “I mean, I didn’t know you were protecting us.”

“Of course I was.” Merlin wiggles, scoots backwards, so he is sitting up in bed, the blankets around his hips. His whole torso is swathed in bandages, but they’re all white, so the bleeding must have stopped. “Why do you think you’re still alive?”

“The fact that I’m the best knight in the land?” Arthur suggests. Then he glares, because he still does know Merlin. “And if you say I’m not, I will have you executed.”

“That hasn’t worked so well for you.” It’s only then that Arthur really remembers why he came here. It wasn’t to talk about old times. It wasn’t to fall too easily back into a pattern of relying on Merlin.
Merlin, who went away. Merlin, who out of all those who left had come back.

Merlin must read something of that on his face, because his falls. “So we’re doing this now?”

“No.” Arthur rises. He can’t deal with it right now, with Merlin weak and pale in bed, with him still trying to wrap his mind around Merlin. “Sleep, now.”

“But—”

“Get better, Merlin.” It’s not a suggestion. Arthur leaves with Merlin staring after him, and can almost feel the gaze the rest of the day.

*

When Arthur next finds the time to visit Merlin—not that he’s been avoiding Merlin, at all, no matter what Gwaine’s cloak seems to imply—he’s sitting up in bed. He’s still thin, too thin, but his color is better. The fire dragon is doing loop-de-loops in front of the bed. When Merlin sees Arthur, the dragon screeches, high-pitched but fairly accurate, from Arthur’s admittedly limited experience with dragons, and swoops around Arthur’s head before it curls around Merlin’s neck. Like a neckerchief, Arthur realizes. He wonders why he didn’t realize that before.

“Why didn’t I recognize you?” Arthur asks as he takes a seat. It’s not the most important question, not even nearly, but it’s something. A small truth.

“An illusion. Well, it was more of a glamour.” Merlin runs a finger along the dragon’s crest. The flames encircle his finger, twine around it, but it doesn’t seem to hurt. “Sort of a mental nudge. I learned it from a half-Sidhe herbswoman in Mercia. It was an omni-directional influence that redirected all thoughts pertaining to—” Merlin is almost smiling, and his face is alight, his hands waving around just like he used to when describing something Gaius had taught him. Arthur had forgotten how enthusiastic he got about things, how excited he got about the smallest things. He’s almost attractive like that.

Arthur still feels the need to cut him off. “In English, please.”

Merlin pauses, his hands still waving in the air. Then they drop, and he rolls his eyes. “Whenever your brain—what there is of it—recognized anything about me, the spell sort of pushed your thoughts in a different direction. So if you thought you, say, knew my laugh, then the instant you thought that you’d sort of overlook that you’d ever thought it, see?”

This is why Arthur doesn’t like magic. It’s like the science Gaius used to try to force him to learn. It goes in twisty direction, is essentially not straightforward the way a good sword is. Arthur can think like that, no way of doing diplomacy otherwise, but he doesn’t like to. “No.”

Merlin lets out an irritated huff. “It was an illusion.”

“Okay.” Arthur can understand that, he supposes. “And you decided to disguise yourself and come back as a criminal instead of returning honestly, as yourself, because…”

Merlin sighs. “Because I’m a coward.”

“Try again.” Merlin is a lot of things, a liar being one of them, but Arthur will never believe he’s a coward. Even if he has magic, he’s still done stupidly brave things over and over again, usually to save Arthur’s life. Maybe more, now that Arthur considers all the convenient circumstances that saved his life when Merlin was around.
“Because I’m not going to hide anymore.” The dragon rustles at Merlin’s throat. Merlin runs a hand over its head, and it dissolves. Merlin’s neck looks oddly bare without anything on it. There’s a little dip in his skin, just below his collarbone, just the right size for Arthur’s thumb. “I won’t. I knew that when I came back. I had to be here, obviously, in case anything happened, but—”

“You aren’t going to hide by pretending to be someone else?” Arthur demands. “And what did you call yourself, anyway?”

“Will.” Merlin’s simple answer takes the breath out of Arthur. Because he remembers what he said, remembers standing in front of a pyre and watching Merlin hold back tears and not knowing what to say, how to make him better. He remembers wondering if—hoping that—Merlin would look like that if he died. “The spell probably stopped you from remembering it.”

“So you decide to disguise yourself as Will the Sorcerer because you won’t hide who you are? You decided to lie some more, because there hasn’t been enough of that around here already?” More lies. Morgana, Uther, Gwen. Now Merlin. Everyone he loves, it seems, those are the ones who lie the most. Not that he loves Merlin.

The breath rattles in and out of Merlin’s chest. Then he raises his hand and blows out a breath of sparks, which change color and dance in the air in front of him until they disappear. Arthur watches, unimpressed. “Very pretty. Answer my question,” he demands.

Merlin makes a sound that is almost laughter. “I just did.”

Arthur glares, then leaves without another word. Bloody sorcerers.

* 

It nags at him, though. Merlin always had a way of talking that was a bit like sorcerers, now that he thinks about it, sideways and enigmatic and as if the simple things he said had depths of meaning behind them. It had amused and annoyed Arthur in equal measures—and, though he would never have admitted it, intrigued and helped him, because Merlin could be astonishingly wise sometimes, once Arthur had deciphered what he said. This feels like one of those times. But Arthur—he’s got nothing.

“Oh, I give up,” he announces as he drops onto the edge of Merlin’s bed. Now that Merlin’s recovering, the chair has disappeared, so the bed is the only place to sit.

Merlin slowly closes the book he’s leafing through. He must be about ready to get up, by now; he’s moving easily, and only occasionally winces when he twists. He does wince, however, when Arthur snaps the book out of Merlin’s hands and glances at the cover. He doesn’t even recognize the writing, let alone the words. “What is this?”

“A spellbook,” Merlin replies. Of course. Arthur opens it, flips through a few pages of unreadable script, then drops it on the floor. Maybe you need magic to read it.

“So what did you mean?” Arthur asks. His cheerfulness is surprising even himself, given that he’s been in a bad enough mood for the past few days that even Leon snapped at him. But Morgana is imprisoned, and despite the fact that apparently Merlin just stepped out of the prison without a problem Gaius assured Arthur that Merlin had prepared for this, and she wouldn’t be getting out. The kingdom is at peace. And Merlin is back. Everything is more right with the world than it has been, even with the lies and slow-burning hurt. “With the ‘I just did’ thing.”

Merlin closes his eyes, in the expression that Arthur had always used to interpret as a plea for
patience. Then he opens them again and his eyes flash gold, so bright that it almost takes Arthur’s breath away, and it begins to snow. Arthur waits with commendable patience as the snow builds up on his shoulders, but by the time an inch has fallen he reaches over to cuff Merlin lightly on the shoulder. “Merlin. Answer the question.”

Merlin’s eyes flash again, and the snow stops. “I just did magic.”

“Yes, thank you, I noticed. The indoor snow rather gave it away.” Arthur reaches over to brush the snow off of Merlin’s head, because it can’t be healthy to get a chill so soon after being stabbed through. Merlin’s hair is soft against his fingers. The cold made Merlin’s cheeks flush even more; a few flakes of snow caught in his eyelashes. Arthur moves back, away from the odd twist in his stomach, and only then does Merlin reply.

“I did magic. And did you care?”

“Not really.” Arthur shrugs. “I mean, it was just a trick, right? It’s no more than you’ve been doing for months—” then he hears himself. “Oh. Well. I’m used to it, I guess.”

“Exactly.” Merlin pushes his hair back with one hand. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. I figured you needed to see magic that wasn’t trying to kill you.” He tries a smile; it’s a weak, pitiful thing, but hopeful. It’s the same sort of smile he would use when informing Arthur that no, the stables weren’t cleaned out, because you kept me up all night winning all your pocket change at dice. Those were good nights, just him and Merlin in the warmth and darkness of his room, their heads bent together over the table, close enough that Arthur remembers the feeling of knowing he was near more than the sight itself.

That memory hurts, because that had been true, hadn’t it? “And you couldn’t have done that as yourself?” Arthur snaps.

“No!” Merlin snaps back. The smile dies a quick death.

“I wouldn’t have—I wouldn’t have tried to execute you if I had known who you were,” Arthur retorts. It’s true. He thinks. No, it is. He wouldn’t have executed Merlin. He’s not sure what he would have done, how he would have reacted, but he’s not sure there was anything Merlin could have done that would have made Arthur execute him. Maybe kill the king. Maybe, Arthur would have been willing to listen to his reasons; he probably would have had good ones. He hadn’t managed to execute Gwen or Lancelot, had he?

“I know.” Merlin sounds weary, the sort of weariness that goes soul-deep, that pierces Arthur below the anger and makes him want to drive it away. “I know, Arthur.” He reaches out, so that his hand rests over Arthur’s. Arthur looks down at their touching hands. His skin is warm and rough, calloused in the way that only hard work can do. He didn’t do everything with magic. “That’s why I couldn’t. I didn’t want to be an exception.” He might sound tired, but his eyes are incredibly earnest. “I didn’t tell you any lies, Arthur. Not in that cell. If magic remains outlawed, I will stay in that cell the rest of my life.”

“Merlin…” Arthur doesn’t know what to say. He can’t just go around allowing magic. It’s not how things are done. No one would agree. How would the courts deal with it? Regulate it?

Merlin pulls his hand back, way from Arthur. He hadn’t noticed how warm Merlin’s hands had been until they were gone. “You’ll do the right thing, Arthur. But until then, I’m still just a sorcerer you have imprisoned.”

Arthur can tell when he’s dismissed. He goes.
Merlin is clearly not a threat. He’s not competent enough to be one, in the first place, and in the second—well, he just isn’t. Anyone with half a brain could see that. But he is powerful, apparently, according to Gaius and what Arthur has seen. And he knows a lot. Maybe…

“So what do you think about magic?” He’s gathered the knights—his knights, the five of them—into his chambers for a smaller meeting. These aren’t the men he would have to convince, but he won’t do it without them.

The men look around at each other. It is, to Arthur’s surprise, Percival who answers first. “Magic is just another strength,” he says. “I do not believe there must be evil in it.” They seem to understand his real question. Good men, all of them.

“But look at all the magical threats we’ve faced,” Elyan counters.

“Look at all the non-magical ones,” Gwaine puts in. He leans back, kicks his feet up onto the table. “I say anything that helps us in a fight is good.”

Those two are the easy ones. Neither grew up in Camelot; neither have ever had the beliefs the rest of them have lived with, have been told were true since they were children.

Elyan glances at Gwaine, at Arthur. His eyes skirt over to the corner where Merlin used to stand. “I’m not saying it’s all bad. But it’s not all good, either, and that worries me.”

That’s fair. That’s true. Arthur nods at Elyan, and turns to Leon.

Leon is studying the hilt of his sword. “I saw what the discovery of her magic did to Morgana,” he says, slowly, thoughtfully. “I saw her suffer, though I did not know why.” He looks up, then, and his eyes are as fierce as they were when he first swore his sword to Arthur, in the ruined castle all those years ago. “That must not happen again.”

Gwaine claps. Percival grunts his approval. Even Elyan shrugs.

“Good.” Arthur leans forward, thinks of Morgana shooting lightning and laughing as it struck men down. Thinks of Merlin in that cell, playing with his fire creatures for the rest of his life. Thinks of Merlin with his golden eyes, brighter than the sun. “Then you’re all with me.”

“Always,” Elyan swears, and the others echo it. Then they get down to planning.

After, when the knights scatter to their various duties, Gwaine lingers. “Not that you’re not doing a good thing,” he says. The swirl of his cloak is oddly hesitant as he hovers in the doorway. “But how much of this is about Merlin?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not really, no.” Gwaine puts a hand on the doorknob. “But you might want to figure that out.” He leaves with a self-satisfied swish of his cloak.

It’s not all about Merlin. He had made some good points, in that cell, about tools and threats and power. Arthur cannot say he rules over a just kingdom where men are persecuted.

Most of it is about Merlin. Merlin is not meant for the cells. Merlin is meant to be with Arthur.
Arthur doesn’t sleep much for the next week. He spends most of his time talking with councilors, ministers, representatives of everything and everyone. He talks to Geoffrey to look at old precedents, to Gaius about the magic itself, even to Merlin about safeguards. He sleeps in clumps of a few hours each, spends that time tossing and turning and dreaming of Merlin bleeding to death in front of him. He negotiates for hours and hours until he more than half considers just going down to the dungeons to let Morgana take his head off.

At the end of the week, magic is no longer punishable by death, and Arthur drops into his bed, fairly certain he’s going to sleep for a year.

“Rise and shine!” Arthur groans, and buries his head under the pillows. Then the pillows are yanked back. Without opening his eyes, he grabs for them. His fingers close around something that feels like fabric, and he pulls.

The pillow makes an odd squeaky noise. He opens his eyes to find Merlin—whose shirt was apparently the ‘pillow’—lying almost on top of him. His eyes are dancing, and his lips are pressed together as he tries not to laugh and very very red.

“Merlin!” Arthur lets him go, scrambles back to the other side of his bed. He’s not even sure why he’s so embarrassed, but he thinks he might have dreamed about Merlin again last night. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I’m not a prisoner anymore, so I thought I’d drop by for old times sake.” As Arthur watches, Merlin moves away from the bed, opening curtains and uncovering his breakfast. “George was actually rather defensive. I had to promise I wasn’t going to take my old job back or hurt you before he would let me set foot anywhere near your chambers.”

“Hurt me?” It takes him a moment to remember why anyone would think Merlin capable of hurting anything. “Does he know?”

“Arthur, the servants always know.” Merlin favors him with a vaguely pitying look before he finishes setting out the food. “Now, come and eat.”

Arthur does as he is ordered. He’s not sure how he could do otherwise. Merlin is back in his rooms, like he never left. A hole in him is healing, even if Gwen’s absence is still there beside him. “Will you eat with me?” he asks. It doesn’t escape his notice that there is clearly enough food for two.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Merlin drops into the chair across from Arthur and serves himself a hearty helping of eggs. A look of pure pleasure goes over his face as he bites in, and he makes a noise that makes Arthur blush. “Gods. I had forgotten how well you ate.”

“You clearly need to eat more,” Arthur retorts, so Merlin will stop making sounds like that.

“Excuse me for travelling to find the magic that will better protect Camelot,” Merlin grins and bites into an apple. “I’m sorry I didn’t stay and wallow in the lap of luxury like—”

“Is that why you went?”

Merlin’s grin falters. “What?”

“Is that why you left? To learn more magic?” Arthur’s good mood hasn’t evaporated, but it’s certainly weakened.

He sets down the apple. “There wasn’t going to be a better time, Arthur.” His voice is sad, regretful. “Gaius had taught me all he could. I needed to be better prepared. And you—Morgana was defeated,
the kingdom was stable. You had the knights. You had Gwen. I wasn’t needed.”

“Good to know,” Arthur mutters, looking down at his food. He doesn’t want to say that he was needed. That Arthur had needed him. That Arthur still needed him. “Glad you decided that. Glad I didn’t get a say. Glad everything didn’t go to hell when you were gone.”

“Arthur.” Arthur looks back at Merlin. Merlin’s face is very, very serious. It doesn’t look right on him. Arthur wants Merlin to be smiling, laughing, looking like the idiot he is, not this sober-eyed man, old before his time. He wants to chase away that age, has a sudden urge to do a handstand just to make Merlin laugh. “It didn’t go to hell. You held the realm together.”

“Gwen—”

“Gwen was not your fault.” Merlin swallows. “She was my friend too. I should have known. I should have said. I didn’t. There’s nothing to be done. I’m sorry.”

Arthur pauses. Thinks. Doesn’t think. The hole Gwen left, he knows, will never be filled. And maybe that’s just the way things have to be. “Can you find them?”

Merlin’s eyes widen. “Yes. But Arthur, that’s a bad—”

“Don’t. Don’t look. I just wanted to know. In case I ever had to.” And that’s that, he supposes. Gwen is gone. But still… “If you could check—sometime—don’t tell me—but if she’s happy—”

“She is.”

“Hm?”

Merlin actually blushes, cheeks stained with red that goes all the way down his neck and under his shirt. Arthur wonders just how far down it goes. Not that he really cares. “I may have checked up on her, sometimes. And you. Everyone.”

“Oh course you did.” Arthur rolls his eyes, and eats some more breakfast. He has a kingdom with suddenly permitted magic to deal with.

* 

For the next few weeks, Arthur deals with the repercussions of letting magic into Camelot. Merlin, as far as Arthur can tell, does nothing. He has meals with Arthur in his rooms, goes to the tavern with Gwaine, spends long hours holed up in Gaius’s chambers. He spends time in the stables and at court, takes walks into town and shuts himself into the library.

It’s going to make Arthur’s heart fail. Not that he isn’t happy Merlin’s back. He is. That’s the problem. He might have once been used to Merlin everywhere, always next to him when he needed the support, but now every time he sees Merlin his heart jumps, gives an extra thump in surprise and joy that Merlin is back. It’s a bloody nuisance.

And so is he. Arthur had forgotten just how irritating Merlin could be, popping up whenever Arthur just wanted to have a good sulk and coaxing him out of it by being so bloody cheerful Arthur just had to throw something at him, breaking his mood. He’d forgotten just how easy it was for Merlin to make him laugh.

And to make him groan, because he also had always had a way of bringing up whatever Arthur least wanted to talk about at the moment. He certainly hasn’t lost that gift, slipping into the council chamber as the knights file out. Gwaine grins at him and punches his shoulder, Leon bends down for
a muttered word—and when did they get so chummy, Arthur wonders, and worries—Elyan and Percival give him easy smiles. He seems to have slid easily into the knights’ good graces. He probably just bought them ale, Arthur thinks grumpily, and remains seated at the table.

“Yes?” he snaps, and ignores the double beat of his heart as Merlin sits in the seat next to his. The seat that used to be Lancelot’s, Arthur finds himself remembering, almost without bitterness.

Merlin, though, looks unusually thoughtful as he leans forward and braces his elbow on the table. Arthur finds his gaze following the movement of his fingers as he cups his chin, then flicking to his lips. They move as Merlin speaks, making round ‘o’s and then opening. “Arthur, what are you going to do about Morgana?”

Arthur shakes his head, brings his gaze back up to Merlin’s eyes. Stupid. What was he doing, dropping into daydreams staring at Merlin’s lips? “Hm?”

“You can’t keep her locked up forever.”

Arthur straightens. If whatever magic Merlin wrought to keep her there was failing—Merlin waves his free hand. “Well, you can, I suppose, unless she gets considerably stronger. I spent a lot of time pouring magic into the wards on those cells. Unless she gets, like, a dragon to break her out—well, no, a dragon wouldn’t do it, I made sure of that, but maybe a Sidhe—”

“Merlin.” Despite the topic, Arthur holds back a smile. He hasn’t changed. Arthur needs to remember that sometimes, when he can remember Merlin’s eyes glowing golden and holding back a whirlwind. When sometimes that image haunts his dreams, and not with fear. “Get to the point.”

“What? Right.” Merlin swallows, and his eyes go serious again, deep and dark, infinitely blue, like some of the lakes at the north of Camelot, deep mountain pools. “You could keep her locked up forever, but Arthur—do you want to?”

Arthur sighs. He has thought about this, actually. He’s discussed it with Leon, with the other knights. “I don’t see what else I can do. I can’t let her go, and you showed that we can’t kill a sorcerer of that much power.”

“Actually—” Merlin’s chest rises and falls beneath his shirt, and he nips at his lower lip. A totally inappropriate wave of heat goes through Arthur at that simple motion. He ignores he. He was always good at ignoring it. Especially when Gwen was around. “You can. I could—well, you could. No matter what she did. You could execute her.”

Another sigh. That only makes it worse. “Do you think I should?”

Merlin’s eyes widen, as if he hadn’t expected to be asked. He never used to ask, Arthur supposes, though he always listened. That sort of pride seems so petty now. He likes having someone to ask.

“I think,” Merlin says slowly, “That you can’t keep her. You either need to let her go or kill her.” He pauses, but it’s the sort of pause that leads to something else.

“And?” Arthur prompts. That is a masterful restating of the problem.

“And—has she heard about the magic?” Merlin asks. “That isn’t all of it, not even a bit, but—it could help. And,” he closes his eyes, opens them again, and Arthur can see for a moment the lost boy who came to Camelot, the one who looked at him when Will died, even when Balinor bled out in front of him. The one who used to look at Morgana with gawping, admiring gazes, so worshipful that Arthur had purposefully turned away rather than consider why Merlin never looked at him like that. “I don’t want to kill her.”
“Neither do I.” Arthur breathes it out, more a whisper than a statement. Morgana has terrorized Camelot, broke his father’s heart, may be halfway to insane. But she is also the girl he grew up with, wild and passionate and fiercely righteous, the girl who helped teach him what it meant to care for his people, the girl who had snuck him cake when he was sent to his room without food and had stayed up late eating it on his bed.

“Then…” Merlin trails off.

“I’ll tell her.”


“I’ll talk to her. Tell her about magic. We’ll see what happens then.”

“Arthur—” Merlin says again, barely a step behind him as they leave the council chamber. “She’s dangerous.”

“That’s what you’re here for,” Arthur replies amiably, and takes a sharp left. Merlin doesn’t miss a beat in following him.

“But—”

“Look.” Arthur stops, whirls, so that Merlin almost bumps into him. He grabs at Merlin’s forearms, to steady him and to drive his point home. “Do you want to execute her? This is the only way out I can see.”

Merlin tenses, but then Arthur can feel the fight go out of him. “Maybe we can find a different way.”

“I don’t see how.” He’s holding Merlin awfully close to him, he notices suddenly, so he can feel the heat of his body and count the freckles on his cheeks. More than there were before. If he leaned in an inch, their foreheads would touch. Or their lips.

He lets go, moves back. “Let’s go.”

Merlin follows him down the stairs.

* *

Morgana is standing when they enter the room, her head tipped proudly back, her face set in coolly regal lines. There are no fire creatures around her; the cell seems colder. “Arthur,” she says simply. Then, “Merlin. I see you’ve returned.” She doesn’t sound insane, doesn’t sound like the woman who laughed as Arthur nearly burned. She sounds like the girl who had stood in this dungeon and spat at Uther for his prejudice.

“As have you,” Merlin says, and steps back into the shadows by the door. He’s on the other side of the bars now, Arthur muses, and wonders if Morgana knows.

“Not quite as welcome as you.”

Merlin’s grin flashes, as cold as hers. “You’d be surprised.”

“Very little would surprise me about Camelot.” She turns that icy gaze to Arthur. “So, brother dear, what brings you to my cell?” the words are eerily similar to Merlin’s, months ago. Arthur hopes—but he doesn’t let himself hope much.

“I thought I’d bring you news,” he says, and moves closer to the bars. A show of trust, he hopes, not
one of threat. “I’m not sure how much you hear down here.”

“Not much.” She smiles, shows her teeth. “For some reason, it would seem your guards are afraid of me.”

“They always were,” Arthur counters. He’s close enough that she could touch him, should she choose. He’s been in more dangerous spots, but he feels the tension in the air, like another battle.

“You always were too soft on them,” Morgana agrees, and glides forward. Arthur remembers a girl who would scream at him for overworking the men, and wonders when the hatred took root. Had he always lost her? “Perhaps that’s why Camelot is so easy to take.”

Arthur bristles. “You—” Merlin’s hand on his shoulder, like a bath of ice water, balancing him out. “You,” he says again, but in control this time. “didn’t manage it this time.”

“No thanks to you.” Again, that sharp-toothed smile without mirth. “Where is Emrys? Have you had him killed yet?”

Arthur takes a deep breath. “No. I haven’t. He’s safe.”

“Ah, so much nobler than father dearest. Or not, I suppose. He did allow Gaius to live, after all.” Her voice is infinitely bitter. “The Pendragons reward those who betray their own kind.”

“Morgana—”

“No, Arthur.” Her dark eyes are hot now, swimming with emotions he cannot read. “Listen to me now. This I tell you, so that you may glory in the joy of it. Emrys is not yours, will never be yours. He is the Old Magic’s, and so he is mine. You hear me?” Her voice is high and sure and fierce. “Mine.”

“He is his own,” Arthur answers evenly through the fire roaring in his veins, screaming at him to stop her from daring to claim Merlin, though he can hear Merlin shifting in the background. Is he Emrys? Or was that simply a name?

Morgana ignores him. Her eyes are wide and unseeing, staring into the distance above the bars. “And this too I swear, Arthur Pendragon, now King in Camelot. When I escape these bars, I shall take my revenge. On Camelot, and on you.” As she says the last word, her eyes focus and her hand darts out, spider swift, towards his throat. Arthur jolts backwards, and would have evaded it, but her eyes flash golden and he feels something pulling him back, just a gentle tug but enough that he is slowed, and she has a knife darting at him from the other hand and—

“No.” Merlin says it simply, as sure as Morgana’s oaths. He steps forward, raises his hand, and it is glowing as gold as his eyes. The pull is gone, Arthur darts away. “Morgana, don’t bother. Your blade will not work in here. You know that as well as I.”

Her mouth actually drops, the first sign of surprise Arthur has seen on her yet. She looks younger, somehow, like the girl who had first come parentless to Camelot. But not saner. “You? But—you? A mere servant? A peasant? And you said—you didn’t—” Then she tips her head back and laughs, that high, cold, manic laugh. “Oh, Arthur, look who you have had beside you all this time? A traitor to the throne!”

“Merlin is not a traitor,” Arthur says. He moves back, so he can stand beside Merlin. “Magic is no longer a crime in Camelot, Morgana.”

She barely sober. “For him? For the boy who serves your food and makes your bed? Is he your
great magician, Arthur? Will you stand against me with him?”

“I had hoped you would have no more quarrel with me,” Arthur replies.

She goes from laughing to terrifyingly sober in an instant, and presses herself against the bars. “I will have quarrel with you until I have what is mine,” she hisses, and her tongue flicks like a snake’s. “Until I have Camelot.”

Arthur studies her, sadly. She is the only family he has left. Blood and breeding both. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he says, and turns to go, Merlin once more a step behind him.

She laughs as he reaches the door. “And how is my dear Guinevere these days?” she drawls. “Thriving, I’m sure. Happier than she ever was here.” It hits Arthur like an icy blade through the gut, because it is probably true, but as he steps towards the door he hears Merlin turn and he speaks in a voice that echoes off the cave walls.

“You will stay here until you rot, Morgana Pendragon,” he says, and Morgana actually stumbles back, onto the ground. Arthur flinches, pulling back like a one might recoil from a lightning bolt. Merlin moves forward like a wave, like a gust of air. But when he speaks again, his voice is cool and cruelly kind. He leans down, so he is level with her. “Or until you learn to love again.”

“I love,” she spits at him. “I have just lost all who I loved.”

“Have you?” He tilts his head. “It is a poor soul who has so much hate that she cannot see love where it still grows.”

She hisses and spits in his face. Arthur moves forward this time, to answer the insult, but Merlin simply wipes it off and stands. Something changes in him as he does, as he shifts and his hair changes and suddenly the sorcerer is standing in front of Arthur again. Morgana’s sharp intake of breath is audible throughout the room.

“And Morgana,” Merlin says, the sorcerer says, as he stands tall and proud, like the light is drawn to him. He is almost beautiful in that moment, for all men are not supposed to be beautiful, beautiful and wild and regal. “This I swear. Emrys is, and always was and will be, for Camelot. And for Arthur.”

Then the light around him is gone, and he is Merlin again, and Morgana is wheezing out laughter as he strides out, pulling Arthur beside him. “You!” she cackles, “You!”

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They don’t speak again until they are back in Arthur’s rooms. Arthur sits at his desk, but Merlin collapses onto Arthur’s bed as if all the strength of his legs gave out.

“I’m sorry,” Merlin says at last, “I lost my temper.”

Arthur swallows. He’s never been afraid of Merlin, but if he ever was, he thinks now would be the time. Not for the power he showed—but for the fear Morgana did. He has never seen anyone frightened of Merlin before, not the sort of fright that a condemned criminal shows in front of a tribunal. “That was losing your temper?”

Merlin shrugs. “She shouldn’t have brought Gwen into it.”

“No,” Arthur agrees. He probes at the emotional wound that Morgana gave him, and finds it shallower than he thought. It’s as much humiliation now, he thinks, as grief and anger. “But that’s Morgana.” It always was, really. She had always known where to shove the knife.
“That’s Morgana,” Merlin agrees. He throws himself sideways onto the pillows. For a moment, Arthur just studies him there, comfortable on Arthur’s bed. As if he were meant to be there. Then Merlin raises his head again. “We can’t let her go.”

“No,” Arthur agrees, and barely recognizes the ‘we’. “But—I don’t want to kill her, Merlin.”

“You might have to.” Merlin says it evenly, resolutely, and Arthur has to stare, because he knows those decisions, has had to make too many, but he never thought Merlin did. But there is a darkness in Merlin’s face that says he knows the choices that damn your soul.

“Not now,” Arthur decides. He has made too many of those choices. He has made too many choices, and now he is alone. Except for Merlin. “Maybe—maybe she’ll come around.” It sounds weak, that hope. But Merlin simply raises an eyebrow and doesn’t call him on it. Instead, he lies back into the pillows.

Arthur turns resolutely to the papers on his desk and does not think about Merlin on his bed. But that only starts him thinking about Merlin in other places, and then, “Who’s Emrys?” he asks conversationally.

“Me,” comes from the bed. “It’s another name. What the druids call me.”

“And then why was Morgana scared of it?” he presses. Something is burning in the memory of Merlin’s words, of Merlin swearing himself to Arthur forever.

Merlin rolls over so he can face Arthur. “Destiny.” He keeps his face absolutely serious until Arthur starts to laugh, then he cracks a grin. “No, really. There’re prophecies.”

“About you?” Arthur picks up a scrap of paper, wads it into a ball, and throws it at Merlin’s head. It hits, dead on, of course. “Come off it.”

“Come off it yourself, you prat. Why do you think I ever stuck around when you ordered me to muck out stalls?” Merlin throws the ball back. It hits the desk.

“Because you swore yourself to me,” Arthur taunts. “You said it. No take backs.”

Merlin sobered. His voice has that rumble of thunder in it when he talks. It shakes through Arthur. “I meant it, you know. I am yours. Forever.”

Arthur swallows down the knot that rose into his throat. “I know.” He rises, walks over so he can put a hand on Merlin’s head. It’s the oddest oath of loyalty he’s ever taken, but he has a feeling it’s the truest. “I’ve always known.” His hand shifts, slightly, so it is against the side of Merlin’s face instead of the top, his thumb brushing against Merlin’s cheek.

“Good.”

Then Merlin rolls up to punch Arthur in the stomach, and they’re laughing and wrestling like they’re boys again, and the fate of a kingdom doesn’t rest on Arthur’s shoulders.

* * *

“Arthur.” It’s Gwaine again, hovering after a meeting of the knights. Arthur looks, unconsciously, to his cloak. It’s not really moving, so he’s not worried. Not that he would be worried otherwise. But sometimes he has nightmares where Gwaine’s cloak joins with Gaius’s eyebrows and chases him around the castle.
“Yes?”

“D’you think Merlin isn’t quite happy here?”

That makes Arthur sit up straight. Merlin has to be happy here. “What?” he demands.

“He just—he can’t seem to settle.” Gwaine shrugs. His cloak bounces, a little accusingly. “I’ve lived that. Just wondering if you’d seen it.”

“No, I hadn’t,” Arthur says through gritted teeth. He can’t distrust Gwaine, not on this—he is Merlin’s friend, and Arthur knows they spend a lot of time together, and he trusts Gwaine more than anyone except himself to look out for Merlin—but he hates the implication that he should have. “Thank you for pointing it out for me.”

“Not a problem,” Gwaine says with his bright grin. “I think I’ll go find him and we’ll hit the tavern. That’ll cheer him up. Don’t worry,” Gwaine says at Arthur’s glare, “I’ll return him in pristine condition.”

He leaves, his cloak swaying jauntily behind him.

Arthur stares at the wood grain in front of him, but he doesn’t see it. Is Merlin discontented? He’s always smiling when Arthur sees him, always willing to lend a hand or talk something over with Arthur. He’s even started coming to council meetings again, though he hovers in the corner. As if he’s not sure he belongs there, Arthur realizes vaguely. As if he’s about to bolt.

He’s not Arthur’s manservant anymore. He apparently had to swear to George that he wasn’t going after his old job to be allowed anywhere near Arthur. And there was a new physician, with his own apprentice, for all Arthur still sought out Gaius whenever he could. Merlin had returned, but his spaces had all been filled.

It strikes Arthur, suddenly, that he knows all this. That he figured this out on his own. That he understands Merlin. That he never understood Gwen. That he needs to make Merlin a place—or make him realize his place, because he’s always had a place here, even before he came the first time, though neither he nor Arthur realized it, that space beside Arthur, to whisper advice into his ear—before he leaves again. Before he too breaks Arthur’s heart.

Because it would. That comes to Arthur like a mace to the head. He fell into love with Gwen easily, gradually but with the understanding of every step. He had felt it grow in him until it ruled his heart. But this—what he feels for Merlin—it’s the same, but it isn’t. It’s been growing but he didn’t see it until now, until he realized Merlin was unhappy and might leave again, until he thinks of life without Merlin and can’t imagine it. And now it just dropped onto him, with the full weight of everything that had grown before, equal but different from what he had felt for Gwen. He drank poison for Merlin. He spilled his heart to Merlin before he knew it was him. He let magic into Camelot for Merlin.

He can’t let Merlin go.

So he does what he does best. He starts to plan.

*  

Merlin is clearly confused when he walks into the throne room. Arthur watches him move forward from his seat on the throne, watches Merlin throw confused glances at Gaius—who made it down from his chambers for the occasion—and at the knights, who all hold in grins, except for Gwaine, who winks broadly and lets his cloak billow proudly around him.
Merlin doesn’t look small, as most people do in front of the throne. He kneels, but his head is back so he can meet Arthur’s gaze, with confusion and challenge and a hint of exasperation, and a bit of something Arthur wants to think is fondness. Emrys, Arthur, who does know how to do research when he wants, thinks. A lord in his own right. “My lord,” he says from his knees.

“Merlin,” Arthur says in acknowledgement. He rises to better address the crowd. “With the recent laws that have been passed, bringing magic back to the land, we have seen a new influx of magic users. Many of these are good, prosperous citizens we are happy to welcome to this land.” Merlin’s eyes are still confused, but there is pride there as well, and Arthur resists the urge to preen. “Others are not so friendly. All are subject to new rules, rules that this court has not dealt with for many years. To this end, to advise the king in matters magical, both in giving laws and in defense, a new position on the council has been formed.” There are murmurs amid the crowd, now, and a dawning light in Merlin’s face. “Merlin, do you swear do use your magic solely for the service of Camelot, to honor the downtrodden and helpless?” He had specifically crafted the oath to sound like the knights’, because Merlin is a knight in his own way, has fought for him with the same nobility and honor.

Merlin’s grin is blinding. “I do swear, Sire.”

Arthur nods, and wonders if Merlin knows he’s glowing. “Rise, Merlin, Court Sorcerer of Camelot.” Merlin rises and bows, the sort of bow he never gives Arthur.

“I will serve with pride,” he says. Arthur jerks his head to the dais. Merlin obediently walks forward.

“You will advise me at court and in council,” he announces. Then, quieter, “Happy?”

“With pride and honor,” Merlin murmurs into Arthur’s ear, so Arthur can feel his breath on his cheek. Then, with a smile in his voice, so Arthur knows if he turns his head there will be a dimple, “And to keep your head from getting too big.”

“Of course,” Arthur mutters back, then nods at the herald, who leads in the next petitioner. Merlin stands tall and steady at his back.

*

The sorcerers attack two weeks later. To free Morgana, Merlin claims, though Arthur isn’t sure how he knows. All he knows is that his men can only do so much against these mercenaries and their ice-eyed leaders. They can only watch as the sorcerers take up positions around the castle and start—something, something that even Arthur can feel, like prickles down his spine, like something growing at the edge of his field of vision.

It irritates him, but he can see it is doing more to Merlin. Merlin, who watches the sorcerers from the tallest tower with grim eyes, who answers all of Arthur’s questions but grows dark circles under his eyes as he spends nights pouring over books to break whatever spell the sorcerers are building. People look at him sideways, as if he might break, as if he might join the sorcerers; Merlin ignores them, though Arthur glares them away whenever he sees them. Can’t they see Merlin burning himself away?

“Merlin.” The light glowing above his head catches on his dark hair, almost lost in a book as big as his head.

“What?” He doesn’t look up.

“Merlin,” Arthur says again.

Merlin tears himself away from the book with something almost like a snarl. His face is pale in the
“What, Arthur?”

Arthur sighs. He wants to push Merlin into bed and never let him out. He wants to brush away the shadows beneath his eyes. He wants to chase away the tension in his shoulders. Instead, he asks, “Have you—”

“No,” Merlin snaps. “No, I haven’t found anything, trust me, you’ll be the first to know.” He scrubs his face with his hands. Arthur waits. “Sorry. It’s getting to me.”

“I know.” Arthur leans against the arm of Merlin’s chair and peers over his shoulder at the book. He still can’t read one word in three, and the diagrams are incomprehensible. But he can feel Merlin’s warmth, can take the excuse to brush against him, to feel his unthinking support and give him some in return.

“It’s just—it doesn’t make sense,” Merlin goes on. “They’re gathering energy at each nexus, but they aren’t connecting, and the power isn’t going out but it isn’t building up, either, and where can it be going?” He rubs at his forehead. “I can’t feel it, Arthur, and I should be able to.”

Arthur lets a hand run comfortingly down Merlin’s back. Comfortingly. He won’t distract Merlin with something like his feelings now, when he’s trying to save them all. He won’t distract himself, when he has to rule. There will be time enough. Merlin won’t leave him again. “You’ll find it.”

Merlin smiles, something almost resembling his grin. “Was that a compliment?”

Arthur rolls his eyes and moves his hand to cuff Merlin on the back of the head. “You might be an idiot—”

“Hey!”

“But you are also the Court Sorcerer of Camelot, which means you are duty bound to outdo the magic of every one of those sorcerers out there. I know it’s hard, but we all have our duty.”

“And yours is to be King of the Prats,” Merlin shoots back, and Arthur laughs despite everything. God, but its good for Merlin to be back.

When he sobers, Merlin is looking up at him with deep, dark eyes. His face is serious again. “We could let Morgana go.”

“No.”

“I know.” Merlin runs another hand through his hair and sinks back into his chair, so his head brushes against Arthur’s forearm. “But if I can’t—”

“You can.” Faith for faith, loyalty for loyalty. Two boys who once took poison for each other. Arthur wonders if he loved Merlin even then, but Gwen has obscured all before her. All he knows is that he loves him now, and he wishes he didn’t have to be king. “You will.”


“Well, you won’t if you don’t eat anything,” Arthur goes on, to move away from the emotion thrumming in Merlin’s voice. Not now. There’s time. “I’ll make sure a servant brings you up dinner.”

“I’ll get it my—”
“A servant,” Arthur ignores him, forces a smile onto his face. “Maybe I’ll send George. I do know how much you two love gossiping.”

Merlin spins and glares, but the corners of his eyes are crinkling with laughter. “You are an evil, evil man, Arthur Pendragon.”

“And you left me with him for years,” Arthur retorts, and finds it’s not even supposed to wound. “This is revenge.”

“Evil!” Merlin calls as Arthur leaves. Arthur laughs until he climbs high enough to see the sorcerers at their posts. Merlin is the only thing that stands between them and Camelot. And Arthur—Arthur can only wait and depend on Merlin.

It’s not as hard as it should be.

*

A week later, the ground begins to tremble. Arthur rushes to the tower with Merlin on his heels, his knights in a flock behind them. Merlin carries a mirror, and he bickers with Gaius over it, things that Arthur doesn’t bother to listen to because he won’t understand it.

A chasm is opening. All around Camelot, the earth is groaning, roaring, as it is pulled away. Arthur can’t tell what it’s meant to do, other than build them a new moat, but he has a feeling it’s not good.

“Merlin—”

“They’re summoning a demon,” Merlin snaps, both at him and the mirror. “If it gets here, Gaius—yes, I know. I know what it’ll do. I have to.” He drops the mirror onto the crenellation, and looks out. Then he turns to Arthur. “The demon is like nothing you’ve ever fought. Nothing I’ve ever fought. It’s—remember the dragon?” Arthur nods. He remembers, remembers what it did to Camelot. “Take that and multiply it a thousand times.”

Arthur blanches, but it’s Leon who asks the question. “How do we stop it?”

“I stop it from coming,” Merlin says sharply. “I close the rift.”

It sounds simple enough.

“So why didn’t Gaius want you to?” Gwaine asks, moving forward to put a hand on Merlin’s arm. He stares at the crack widening in the ground. His cloak is lank at his back.

Merlin sighs. “Because it very well could kill me. That much power—this far along—” he shakes his head, as ‘kill me’ echoes in Arthur’s brain, as everything in him frantically clamors for him to hide Merlin away somewhere safe. “I can’t tell how much of me it’ll take, but there’s a better than likely chance it’ll be everything.”

“No,” Gwaine snaps instantly, “Don’t do it. There has to be another way. Arthur, tell him.”

Everyone turns to Arthur, but Merlin’s the only one he sees. Merlin, who came back to him despite the threat of death. Merlin who swore himself to Camelot before he did to Arthur.

“It’s the only way,” Merlin says, softly, just for Arthur. “Or it’s the only way which will work quickly enough, so it’s the same thing.”
Arthur looks out at Camelot, at the city, at the people quivering in fear. At the courtyard where Merlin didn’t burn. He thinks of Gwen, who finally has a man who puts her before all else, before his people and his land. He wishes he could be Lancelot. He wishes he could not be a king. He wishes Merlin didn’t know his choice before he made it, hadn’t made it for himself.

“Do it,” he says, and feels his heart rip open even as the earth does.

“What—” Gwaine begins, but Merlin shakes him off, pushes him gently back.

“Let’s hope this works,” he says with a grin, with his old flashing grin, and Arthur can’t help himself. He can’t quite convince himself Merlin will die, Merlin who didn’t die no matter how hard he tried, but—if he does—

Aerthur moves forward, captures Merlin’s lips with his, tries to pour all of his desire and love and faith and need and come-back-to-me-I-order-you-I-will-kill-you-if-you-don’t-into it, and Merlin lets out a moan and kisses back just as forcefully, as desperately, like he is memorizing Arthur’s face and lips.

The ground moves, pushes Arthur back. “I—” he starts.

Merlin only smiles. “I know,” he says, even as his eyes turn to golden. “Why do you think I came back?”

And then the words rolling off his tongue are a different language all together, and they thunder out over the land, and Arthur can see the sorcerers stop, look up, and he imagines the fear on their faces as Merlin roars out his words, his magic, and it must be powerful because Arthur can see it, can see the golden flood race over Camelot and into the chasm, filling it up, pulling it together, and Merlin is shaking and glowing and slowly, slowly, the earth begins to groan again, and the land pulls itself back together with a scream like a dislocated shoulder being fixed.

Merlin collapses. Arthur catches him before he can hit the ground, praying, hoping, even as Leon barks out orders to check on the other sorcerers, just wanting Merlin to breath, to be alive, to have been wrong about this once so he can make fun of him about it for the rest of their lives.

“Come on,” he mutters, as he grabs at the mirror to hold it to Merlin’s lips, “Going to let a little thing like this kill you after all my work? Make me ashamed to have called you my sorcerer, you’ll prove Morgana right, you can’t be dead, you can’t—”

And then the mirror fogs, and Merlin’s eyes flicker open, gold still flashing in them. “Can’t kill me that easily,” he murmurs, and then his eyes are closed, and Arthur is carrying him to Gaius’s chambers, trying not to weep or laugh in relief.

*  

Arthur is sitting at Merlin’s bedside when he opens his eyes again. He’s never telling Merlin how long he sat there—which was every moment since he fell unconscious.

“You,” he says severely, and doesn’t comment on how his hand is clutching Merlin’s like if he lets go Merlin will slip away, “Have a bad habit of nearly dying.”

Merlin lets out a near-silent laugh. “You,” he retorts, and squeezes Arthur’s hand, “Have a bad habit of nearly getting me killed.”

Arthur grins, uses his free hand to push Merlin hair out of his eyes. He says, still mock-stern, “As long as I am the only one trying to kill you, I think we’ll be okay.”
“Don’t worry.” Merlin takes Arthur’s hand, raises it to his lips, in something that could be fealty or something more. From the look in Merlin’s eyes, Arthur’s guessing the latter, and something heats in him, in his heart and elsewhere. “You’re my favorite executioner.”

And then Arthur has to lean over him and swallow his laughter with a kiss, and make sure Merlin’s still there, still alive, still his.

End Notes

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