Complementarity, Entanglement and the Uncertainty of Destiny —or— A Feminist Mage in King Arthur's Court

by Jenrose, procoffeinating

Summary

Merlin was once told that Arthur would rise again at the hour of Camelot's greatest need. But a thousand years pass, with no Arthur. When the last war comes, and the world dies, and Arthur still doesn't return, Merlin suddenly realises that the hour of Camelot's greatest need… was a thousand years ago. Sometimes he's a bit slow on the uptake. Fortunately, he's figured out how to go back. What would YOU do if you had 2000 years of experience in the body of a 17 year old, and absolutely nothing left to lose?

Note: E-rated sections clearly tagged, can be skipped.

Notes

IMPORTANT: Most of this is T-rated. Any smut will be clearly marked at the beginning of the relevant chapter for those who prefer to skip it. It is very possible to read this without the smut.
Merlin-the-TV-show belongs to the BBC.
Credits: The incredible Procoffeinating did the amazing full color artwork.

Some of the ideas in here are a bit of an homage to the excellent Stars Above, Stones Below/Para Bellum by Destina, though the two stories are fundamentally different, the idea of a no-violence geas was extremely appealing.

Betas: Wayward Helios was my primary beta for the whole thing. Other help provided by
SaltyAmelia (early chapters), Rawks (first half) and Narlth (britpicking)

All the spells either come from the wikia or (most) from this site: http://www.oldenglishtranslator.co.uk/ where I happily dropped words in and pulled words out with little attention to more than the most rudimentary of grammar. You don’t have to go figure out what things mean, it becomes pretty obvious in context.

I am using modern Greek for dragon-tongue because it allows easier translating in Google Translate, which is worth it. Anything he bellows at a dragon can be dropped into translate.google.com and you’ll get both pronunciation and translation if you care. If the translation matters, it will end up in chapter notes. (In the series they used sort of iffy Ancient Greek. I decided to err on the side of ease of translation.)

Speaking of grammar… Tenses? Let me tell you. So, time travel. It complicates things. Will complicate things? Has already complicated them? Can complicate them in an alternate timeline which no longer exists? Time travel is a terrible idea and linguistically awkward. I advise against it. The convention I use in this story, for the sake of clarity and demarcation, is that anything happening in Merlin’s here-and-now is in present tense. And anything happening in Merlin’s past is in past tense. Which is all well and good until you realise that his past is 150 years from now and his present is 820 years ago. Ish. So all the “canon era” is in present tense and all the modern/future is in past tense and it makes sense. I think… (please don’t hurt me.) If I missed any tense changes, please let me know at jenrose at jenrose dot com because dear lord I have never had this much trouble with tenses.

I know I’m not alone in this, but I actually am not all that fond of the show. I adore the characters, and the actors, and the castle, and the horses and the magic. Plots? Writing? Not so much. The show left me seethingly angry in so many ways, which is of course why I’m on my third run through and wrote 117k of fanfiction for it. Because of course I did. It’s a flawed, problematic darling. So here, let me fix that for you.

(The show is so completely anachronistic--most put Arthur long about 6th century, but the whole jousty knight thing, as opposed to non-jousting knights, didn’t even start until the 1100s or so, after the Norman invasion, and the architecture… and then there’s the near complete absence of the church, so I’m using a timeline of convenience. Assume Camelot exists circa 1200 AD, give or take, for this story’s purposes, a number I plucked out of thin air for convenience’s sake after doing just enough research to throw up my hands. Don’t try to reconcile it to actual history, it doesn't work and isn't possible. Also, as this is written as a fix-it, you will be happiest if you remember the events of 1x08 (Mordred is introduced as a child) and 2x08 (the one about Arthur's mother) in particular, familiarity with the entire series is important but those are the ones where the details matter, as references that are not particularly fleshed out abound.)

Read the end notes for content warnings, such as they are.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Story by Jenrose

See Procoffininating's amazing artwork here
Son of Time (most of the letters) by Pia Frauss
Arabia, Eglantine and Helen Queen K by Maelle Kaita: (Arabia has the flowers, Eglantine has the squirrels and butterflies and birds, and Helen Queen K has the peacock feather. And no, I don’t usually use this many different fonts in one title but it made sense visually and went ridiculously well with the story.)
Dingbats throughout the story are from Maelle Kaita and a variety of fonts from 1001freefonts.com unless otherwise credited. Dingbat design by Jenrose.

Complementarity:

The idea in quantum theory that items can be separately analyzed as having several contradictory, and apparently mutually exclusive, properties. For example, the wave-particle duality of light, where light can either behave as a particle or as wave, but not simultaneously as both.

Entanglement:

The phenomenon in quantum theory whereby particles that interact with each other become permanently dependent on each other’s quantum states and properties, to the extent that they lose their individuality and in many ways behave as a single entity. At some level, entangled particles appear to “know” each other’s states and properties.

I think we deserve

a soft epilogue, my love.

We are good people

and we’ve suffered enough.

– Seventy Years of Sleep # 4. nikka ursula (n.t)

Prologue: After the World Burns
He had no trouble whatsoever pinpointing his first critical mistake. He’d done that while Arthur still lived. It was obvious. It took him a thousand years more to correct it. A thousand years that he then had to unwind from the spindle of time, thus cementing the lore he’d find the second time around, saying that the mage Merlin lived backwards. He stayed silent as he unwound the years from the spindle, watching mistake after bleeding mistake slip off in knots, untangle, and fluff back into the stuff of chaos it had been wound from.

He’d had to learn how to spin in order to work this magic, stealing lessons from the past.

And so he’d done it, unwinding the years, the world oblivious to his presence. He resisted the urge to stop when finally, finally, his people un-died and lived and breathed and fought and slept and his hands, such as they were, slowed so as to not overshoot.

He would not save the druid, Mordred’s father. He knew that, knew the hard cost of mistakes and that hadn’t been his to fix. But Mordred… Morgana… Arthur… the moment was there, one moment when all would be open, all unsullied by future twisting wrongs. When he might let the spindle go and the years wind onto it once again, let the years fall from his bent and twisted hands, step yet again into the youth he once was.

It was so tempting to go back further, prevent the warping of Uther, but that had happened before his birth, and he dared not unmake Arthur. This, this point and this alone could untangle forever the horrific knot the dragon’s half truths and Gaius’s fear had wrought.

Chapter 1: Give Me One Moment In Time

Merlin opens his eyes, and looks at Morgana, standing in her quarters near the alcove that holds the young druid boy. She is young, clean, cared for—concerned but not yet broken—and his heart nearly stops at the beauty of her as she says, “What if magic isn’t something you choose? What if it chooses you?”

He remembers being staggered by it the first time. But this time, he simply smiles brightly, and says, “Well, I certainly didn’t choose it.” His voice sounds strange in his ears, so young. It has been a thousand years since he had a voice to use.

While her eyes widen and she steps back an involuntary half step, he looks down at the boy in her alcove, so frail, so sick. He puts out his hand, and speaks one of the many healing spells he’d spent centuries developing. She stares at his hand, then down at the boy as his cheeks pink up, and then looks back at Merlin.

“He’s name is Mordred,” he says. “And we’re going to change destiny today, if you will help me.”
“What… how… Merlin?” Her voice trembles. He’d forgotten how innocent she’d been. Is now again. *Oh goddess, it actually worked.*

Merlin lets the years bleed through a little, maturity touching his face, and her expression moves from shock to fear as she sees the age in his eyes.

“I lived this once before,” he says. “I lived it, and a thousand years beyond it. My lies and Uther’s poison and everyone’s fear warped Arthur, destroyed you, twisted Mordred, and broke what could have been a glorious destiny.” He pauses, then lets his words fall. “I’ve spent another thousand years righting it.”

The sheer weight of that many years is incomprehensible to him, though he’s lived it, and he isn’t surprised when she looks dazed.

“Why are you telling me this?” she whispers. “Why me?”

“You were my first mistake.” Merlin’s voice is full of regret. She looks confused, and he continues, intensity increasing. “You feel it. You fight it every night, the magic, in your dreams. You see horrible futures unwinding, but they are their own fault, your visions and the prophecies creating and reinforcing themselves until they hollow us all out in the end. Your magic is awakening and goddess help me, the first time around, I didn’t follow what I knew, knew in my bones to be the right path. You *must* know that Uther is wrong. Magic only corrupts if hate is allowed to win. Uther might be lost to us, but Arthur is not, and I will not see the pure heart that protects this boy, here, sullied. I will *not* see Arthur twisted, or that foul destiny come to pass. Not again.”

Morgana sags back against the wall, breathing heavily, and then sinks to the floor next to Mordred, who watches them both, his expression both knowing and awed.

“What now?” she asks. “What will you do with this knowledge? Can you really live it all over again?”

“Now?” Merlin says, “It will all be different. I won’t live the lie again.”

“But Uther?” He had nearly forgotten how everyone, even Morgana, had seen the king as a force of nature, unchangeable. His later memories were of the husk of a man who followed the betrayal. Morgana continues, shaking her head. “He will never bend.”

Merlin’s smile is cold, implacable. “Uther may not bend. And I will not curse him. I will not kill him. But he will break. He must be stopped now, before his evil warps Camelot beyond redemption. Mordred’s father must be the last to die under Uther’s axe.”

“As bad as Uther can be, Arthur is still his son, and loyal,” Morgana says. He knows she’s seen this dozens of times. “Arthur might kill you if you depose his father.”

At this Merlin lets the years drop away, and his laugh is boyish. “Arthur can try. I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t work.” He soberes. “But if I’m right about this moment, it’s the moment that will open him to accepting magic as the tool that it is. The first time we lived this, he defied his father. To get him to that point, we will have to pretend for the next few days, to help lead our prince to an open mind, but then the time for deception will be over, for good.”

Morgana looks at Merlin, and gathers herself. “I don’t know if I can, but I will try.”

He smiles, struck again by her innocence and her fledgling strength. “I have seen you be so strong. Tomorrow, Arthur will pound on that door, and you will shame him away from searching here with
a mix of truth and mockery. You can do this. I saw it happen the first time. Never have I seen anyone so blind to the truth of a confession as Arthur. And tonight, Uther will push him. You will find words to explain to the prince why the king fears the druids. In a day or so we will sneak him out. Arthur will catch you both. Let all you feel now drive you, without worrying about my magic or yours, only your concern for this little boy.”

Merlin’s hand flicks and his eyes flash, and Morgana feels wrapped in warmth. “I’m making it easier,” he says, “for you to simply follow what has been done. You are under my protection. They cannot harm you.”

Her hand comes up to his cheek, and he gives a half smile. “We were never like that,” he says.

“My mistake,” Morgana murmurs, but doesn’t drop her hand. “You are… always seemed so young.”

“I was,” the ancient time traveller says. “I never will be again. The worst mistake I ever made was being young and easily pushed. Don’t let my appearance fool you.”

It is surreal for Merlin, walking through the rest of his day, letting time wind back on the spool—almost as it had been before. He uses the same charm on himself that he used on Morgana, to make it easier to follow the steps. It would take an act of will to step outside of what-was-and-is, but as long as he doesn’t push, he can watch himself almost as if he were a passenger in the body. Which he isn’t. He’d wondered if he’d have to share with his younger self, but the boy he was is simply wound into who he is. He’d never quite gotten the hang of growing up anyway, and from what he can tell, most people don’t, they just age and get better at hiding.

He is an expert at hiding and disassociation. So he watches himself go through the motions with Arthur and manages to keep the part of him that is falling to pieces seeing Arthur so young and earnest—so vibrant and alive—quietly stuck inside his own head as he muddles his way through a typical evening on autopilot. Arthur is preoccupied, which helps.

With Gaius that night, he finds himself studying the man from an entirely new perspective. So much of his life in the Camelot court had been wrapped up in learning from and pleasing his mentor, so much of the time after was spent in dissecting every moment of their years together. He’d had decades of hating the man for the advice that sunk his destiny and Arthur’s, hating him for his cowardice and for his continued support of Uther, and he’d had centuries more of missing the man in his very marrow. Back in the thick of it, he sees the conflict, the responsibility pulling at Gaius from every direction, and is surprised that his dominant emotion is simply compassion. Gaius, who is pulled harder than anyone between love of King and everything that stood opposed to the man on the throne.

The next morning, he rushes through Arthur’s breakfast, and Arthur seems relieved at his speed and more than willing to dismiss him to “help Gaius” as he resumes his search for the boy.

Merlin makes a beeline to Morgana’s rooms, to find Mordred looking nearly completely well, buzzing with energy and clearly ready to be out of the space. Morgana looks a bit beset with the boy’s nervous bouncing.
Merlin looks at the boy and sends, *Enough, Mordred. Settle. Into the alcove with you, Arthur will be here soon.*

The effect is instantaneous and dramatic. The boy stops mid-bounce, and then walks over to the screen, and sits down in the corner.

*Get your boots.*

Mordred scampers across the floor and grabs the boots, then scoots back into the closet.

“How did you…” Morgana starts. “He wouldn’t stop moving!”

*Like this,* Merlin sends to her, and her eyes widen.

“To him, I am Emrys,” Merlin continues. “I’ll explain that later. But it means he'll do as I say, so that helps.” He looks down at the boy. “You do as she says, too.”

Mordred nods.

“Arthur will be here soon,” Merlin says. “You must stay very still. Morgana, you know how to handle Arthur.”

“How did I?” she asks. “I haven’t the foggiest what to do if he comes barging in…”

“Just be your sassy self,” Merlin says. “You teased him, until he left in a huff. Let it happen.”

“Could we not tell him now?”

“Catching the two of you trying to escape was one of the worst things he ever had to do, up to this point, and it pushed him over the edge to the point of being willing to defy his father,” Merlin says. “We must have him at that point before I reveal myself.”

A pounding began at the door, and Merlin ducked behind the screen, pulling it shut.

*You risk much for me,* Mordred sends to him.

Merlin gives the boy a small smile. *I risk nothing. And you are worth the effort to save you. We will not abandon you to your fate this time.*

*You did not know who you were when we met,* the boy sends. *You are different now. You bubble with power.*

*I unmade the death of the world to save you,* Merlin sends. *All of you. I am much older now.*

*I hurt you. I wouldn’t ever want to hurt you, but I hurt you all the same. How could I hurt you?*

Merlin looked at the boy for a long moment, only half hearing Arthur and Morgana in the background, going through the motions. *We made a mistake, and you loved someone who was so full of pride that she could not bend. You were the brightest and best of us, and you deserved better. I don’t think that we’ll repeat our error.*

*You forgive me?* Mordred’s mental voice is so, so young.

*You’ve done nothing wrong,* Merlin sends. *Never forget that. What I’ve seen in another lifetime is simply that. Another lifetime. We will build a new world here, a new life for all of us. I’m sorry I couldn’t save your father.*
That wasn’t my father, Mordred sends. I was apprenticed to him. My father… I never knew him, nor my mother.

You’ll have a choice, Merlin sends. You can return to the druids, though they may end up settling near here anyway, or you may stay with us once things calm down. Morgana adores you already. I am fond of you myself. Even Arthur loved you like a son once, and could easily do so again.

Mordred stares at him for a long moment, his eyes bright despite the deep shadows of the curtained alcove. I killed him? I… I know he is Uther’s son, and Uther is a bad man, but you love Arthur, and he is the Once and Future King. And you would forgive me that?

Merlin throws up protective barriers in his mind. I had forgotten how strong you are. Who you were when you did that… you were a product of many bad decisions on my part and Arthur’s part and even Morgana’s part, not to mention that the druids left you too much to your own devices. That is not who you will be. You cannot be that way now that I have changed time. We will not abandon you. You will not be hunted past the next few days. And the situation that caused you to turn from us… I think we will not betray you that way again. I cannot say it will be perfect, but if I succeed in what I am trying to do, you will grow up close to here, surrounded by people who care about you.

The door slams behind Arthur as he stalks out, annoyed. Morgana pulls back the screen to find Mordred clinging to Merlin. She tips her head to one side, curious.

“I just told him that he will have a home here, if he likes,” Merlin says.

“Do you really think you can promise that? Do you think change can come so quickly?” Morgana asks.

“It must,” Merlin says.

He makes his way down to the cavern beneath the castle soon after. He doesn’t bother with a torch, just wills it and there is enough light to see by. At the threshold, he deepens his voice and calls out, “Δράκε, έχου µε πολλά να συζητήσουµε. Καταλαβαίνω τώρα τι είµαι. Είσαι δεµένος µε µένα και την οικογένειά µου, και καλώ τώρα τον δεσµό αυτό της συγγένειάς µας. Έλα να µου µιλήσεις”

Kilgharrah lands in front of him without bluster, eyes wide with shock.

Merlin smiles and folds his arms across his chest.

“I still feel him,” Kilgharrah says. “How are you able...” The dragon falters.

Merlin has a bemused smile playing across his face. “Have I actually managed to surprise you, old friend?”

The dragon rolls his giant head to one side, as if listening, eyes half shut. “You ripped time apart. I cannot feel the future.”

“I was not so careless,” Merlin says. “And the only reason you were able to feel the future so
strongly was that I spent so much time looking at you, in that future.”

“What can you possibly want from me? You are brimming with power. I do not know how you are not consumed,” Kilgharrah says.

“Does your fire burn you?” Merlin asks.

This earns a nod of understanding. “I am fire. You are magic.”

Merlin continues, “I want peace. I want to release you without you devastating the people here. I need you to make a sword for me, and I know the possible consequences better than you ever will. You are not to attack people without my express consent.”

“Is there anything else?” Kilgharrah says dryly. “Wars to win, monsters to slay?”

“Oh yes,” Merlin says. “But I think you’ll like it.”

After he explains, the dragon asks, “And what of the druid boy? You know he’s dangerous.”

“In the future you saw, he was dangerous only because we made him dangerous. And you only knew it because I knew it and you pulled it from me as I watched. That future will not happen. I have the druid boy well in hand. And you will never, ever refer to Morgana as “the witch” again.”

The dragon nods his assent. “I am bound to your will.”

“Only for a short time,” Merlin says. “I do not want you as a slave, though I would count you as a friend. I will, ultimately, require you to leave people in peace, and I may ask favors from time to time, but you are kin, not a servant. I would prefer your sense of obligation to be “family”, not “lord.”

“You have changed much,” Kilgharrah says.

“I’m older than you,” Merlin says. “I should hope so.”

Gwen, oh it is good to see Gwen still hopeful, proud of her position with Morgana, taking care of her father, before it all twisted for her. He remembers her growing harder, colder, calcified by the demands of the throne. She’d not been able to look at him, when he came back without Arthur, and his own guilt had pulled them apart for good, but here, she is still almost in love with Merlin and he’d forgotten that somehow. She flirts with him a little, and he has to fight not to lose the thread he’s pursuing. Part of him wants to just throw his arms around and hold her and tell her that she’s safe now, that the bad things won’t happen, but she doesn’t even know what he’s saving her from, and if he has his way, she never will.

She gives him her father’s best sword, curious, but not pushing, and he remembers that sense of knowing where the walls are, what you ask, and what you don’t. That willing blindness that let him hide in plain sight for so very long.

He takes it down to the dragon, and outlines his plan for it, then steps back into the pattern he’d walked so very long ago.
Dragontongue: Roughly, "Dragon, we have much to discuss. I understand what I am now. You are bound to me and mine, and I call on the bond of the dragon kin. Come speak with me."

Pronounced, approximately, "Dráke, échoume pollá na syzítísoume. Katalavaíno tóra ti eímai. Eísaí deménos me ména kai tin oikogéneiá mou, kai kaló tóra ton desmó aftó tis syngéneiáis mas. Êla na mou milíseis" (Just in case someone decides to podfic this.)
Morgana plays her part beautifully, as Merlin has always known she would. It all unfolds fluidly, right up until that moment Arthur sits talking to Morgana while the boy is in the dungeon. She is watching his mind open when Merlin opens the door. She says, “I trust him,” before Arthur can open his mouth to send Merlin to the stables.

Arthur hesitates, just as he had the first time, and then speaks the truth. “We are going to break the boy out of the dungeons.”

“Have you decided,” Merlin says, quietly, “that your father is wrong?”

“It cannot be justice to murder a child,” Arthur answers. “I cannot betray my father, but I cannot allow this to happen.”

“Even if the child has magic?” Merlin asks.

“He has harmed no one with it,” Arthur says. “My father says magic must be evil, but that feels like a lie.”

“It is,” Merlin says, and lets his voice deepen, lets the years creep in, still young, but with a voice of authority.

“Merlin…” Arthur starts.

Merlin kneels in front of him, head bowed. “It took me a thousand years to figure out how to right the wrong I did you, not telling you before you were dying.” He looks up, tears in his eyes. “It was worth every moment I spent coming back here, to this moment, to right that wrong.”

Arthur pushes the chair over, scrambling to his feet. “What… What are you… Stop that.”

“It is a tool,” Merlin says, looking up at him. “Like a sword, like an axe, like a knife, like fire… it can be used for great ills, and small, but it can also be used for greater good and small conveniences.” His eyes fixed on Arthur, Merlin stands, saying, “You need never fear me or my magic.”

Arthur lets out an involuntary snort. “As if I’d fear you.” But there is fear in his eyes.

“If I meant you harm,” Merlin says, stepping back, “You’d be dead. Even now, so early in our
time, you already know that I have saved your life, and there have been more times than you know. By the time I couldn’t stop it, I’d saved your life scores of times.” He paces back to the wall opposite them.

“You can’t have magic.” Arthur’s moment of bravado is gone. “You’re Merlin. You’re…” and here he gesticulates wordlessly, “you.”

Merlin leans against the wall and gives Arthur a wry half-grin, one eyebrow raised, arms folded across his chest. He wiggles his fingers a tiny bit until a shimmering, familiar sphere hovers there at his elbow. He makes a tiny gesture with his chin, sending the blue light to hover in front of Arthur, at chest level.

Arthur stares at it for a long moment, processing, and starts to open his mouth several times, but nothing comes out. Finally he manages to speak.”Why? Why me? You claim that you can make time go backwards and yet you cleaned my chamber pot this morning. Badly, I might add. Why would you demean yourself if you have that much power? I’m not even crown prince yet.”

“Because you are willing to defy the most important person in your life and break his most important law to save a child. Because I watched you rule against impossible odds, and make the kingdom better,” Merlin says. “Because for all your bluster, you are, at your heart, good. You are my King and the last king I will ever serve.”

“My father…” Arthur says, a helpless look crossing his face. “I cannot stop him from these atrocities.”

“No, but I can. You won’t like it, but I promise I will not injure him, and I will not use anything against him but the truth. He harms Camelot daily.” Merlin’s face is resolute, and Arthur is not sure he’s ever seen anything so certain.

“You think the truth will make him see reason?” Morgana asks, almost laughing, but there is no humour in her voice, only exasperated disbelief.

“The first time through,” Merlin says, “His hatred of magic hurt and twisted you until you betrayed him. And it broke him. The net effect of his years of abuse, both personal and political, ultimately killed him. Then it tore Camelot with war, killed you, and mortally wounded Arthur.”

They both take a step back, eyes wide.

Merlin looks down at his hands, and gives a self-deprecating laugh. “I was told, after, that Arthur would rise when Camelot’s need was greatest. I waited for nearly a thousand years and watched the world end before I realised that the need was greatest now.” He tries to suppress a small sob of hysteria at the thought of it, and thinks he’s done it until he sees the looks on their faces. “I really am that thick,” Merlin says, dashing at his cheeks with the backs of his hands.

“The boy…” Morgana starts.

“Will be returned to his people, if he wants,” Merlin says. “By Arthur. That, at least, we did not fail the first time around. Though we may use less drama to accomplish that. Uther, on the other
hand, will require quite a bit of drama.”

At this, he stands and straightens his body to its full height, allowing a few of his years to pad his shoulders and mature his face. Not beyond recognition, but enough. With a tiny flick of his wrist his clothing alters, twists, and brightens. Not the old man disguise he once favoured, his face is bare, his hair still black, as the Pendragon crest glimmers large and golden on his chest, rich robes flowing down from his hands.

“You look like a sorcerer,” Arthur’s voice is matter of fact, to his own surprise.

“Warlock… ish,” Merlin responds, opening his hand to receive the staff that appears there, pulled from a future that will never happen. A rowan staff with a gold dragon curling at the top of it, around a blood red stone. He gives Arthur a smile. “Your warlock.”

Arthur looks completely daunted at the very notion.

Merlin turns his attention to Morgana, and asks, “Are you ready to speak your truth?”

“I… only dream,” she says, shaking her head, her voice full of denial.

Arthur looks at her, some of Merlin’s words finally connecting. “Morgana?”

“Right now she dreams truth, or possible truth.” Arthur has never heard Merlin’s voice so deep, so sure. Merlin continues, “Soon her magic will awaken. I failed her, once, and she despaired, twisted, then betrayed us all, as we had betrayed her. She was… will be one of the most powerful sorceresses in the land. You need her on your side, Arthur. She has a destiny of her own. I would not see her so damaged again.”

Seeing doubt remaining on both their faces, Merlin places the staff on the table and says “Ásege.” A cloud forms there, and both Arthur and Morgana see her, a white dragon circling her head as, arms raised, as she appears to call something to the sky, power flashing around her. The apparition is silent, but the result is clear as the dragon turns and follows her gesture.

“I saw this with my own eyes,” he says, pulling his hand up and allowing the image to dissipate. “At the time, the only person in all of Albion with more magic was… me.”

“My hair was terrible,” Morgana murmurs, and Arthur looks at her as if she has suddenly grown horns.

“You see yourself ordering a dragon about, and all you can think is that your hair was bad?”

“Hardly all,” she snaps. “I don’t have words for the rest of it.”

“You didn’t take Gwen with you when you left us,” Merlin says. “Your only concern by that point was revenge. I hope that you will have less need of it this time.” And with that he gives her a wry smile. “If only for the sake of your hair.”

He sober. “There will be more truths revealed today, Morgana. Be prepared.” His gaze shifts to Arthur. “You as well. There may come a moment when I need to restrain you from taking your own revenge for wrongs already past. I will not hurt you, but I also won’t allow you to kill him.”

“He’s my father,” Arthur says, horrified. “I could never…”

Merlin’s hand comes down flat on the table and Arthur sees himself in the Council room with a sword point pressed to his father’s chest, silently yelling.
“I didn’t…” Arthur says, horrified, as the image disintegrates. “I couldn’t…”

“I stopped you,” Merlin is quieter, filled with complex sorrow. “I stopped you with a lie because I could not bear to see you break under the weight of patricide.”

He reaches out to them and then says, “Try to move.”

They both find themselves locked into place, for a moment only. A look of anger flashes across Arthur’s face, while curiosity rises on Morgana’s.

Merlin drops his hands, releasing them and says, “I do not boast when I say that I can stop you with a thought. Uther cannot harm me. He will not harm you. And I will not allow you to break yourselves with your anger when it simply won’t be needed.”
They find him in the council chamber. Uther startles to see Merlin stride in with Arthur and Morgana a step behind him.

“What is the meaning of this?” he bellows, reacting at first to a servant leading his son. Then he takes in the glowing staff and the robes and jumps readily to his inevitable conclusion. The king starts to rise, calling out, “Guards! Sorce…”

But Merlin raises the staff before the word is finished. Uther finds himself sitting, immobile, unable to move or speak, his eyes wide with alarm.

“Enough,” Merlin says.

The guards come into the room, pikes lowered, and his other hand makes a tiny twist. The guards find themselves pressed gently against the wall, able to watch but not move. Merlin spares them a glance, saying, “I’m sorry, but I need you to witness this. I’m not going to hurt you, and you will be released shortly.”

Returning his attention to Uther, he says, “I regret that I must hold you thus, but I know it's the only way you’ll ever listen. I'll allow you to speak, but you need to realise that I could restrain every guard and knight in the castle without effort, and so calling for more of them is a waste of breath. What I do here, I do to save your life, save Camelot and help your son become the great king he is destined to be. To save your daughter from a fate that will destroy the both of you.”

There is just enough room in his holding spell for Uther’s eyes to dart, looking beyond the mage, and Merlin feels Morgana, behind him, startle and start to step forward.

Merlin adjusts the hold a tiny bit, gently stopping Morgana, and says, “Nod if you understand that shouting is pointless.”

Uther hesitates, then nods.

“I will allow you to speak,” Merlin says. “Speak truth, only, and I will do the same. Lie, and I will speak the truth for you.”

“Arthur will never trust the word of a sorcerer,” Uther says with absolute certainty. “Gaius…”

“Gaius was a sorcerer, as you well know, and by your own lies would be corrupt beyond measure if magic did truly inherently corrupt all who used it,” Merlin says, shutting Uther’s mouth for him. “And yet you trust him and love him dearly, because you know better. Shall I summon him?”

Uther shakes his head, eyes wide and anxious, but Merlin’s eyes flash and the air blurs as Gaius appears, momentarily stunned.

He takes in the scene, eyes widening at Merlin’s wider shoulders, the faint lines at the corners of
his eyes, the maturity in his face, then comes to a realisation and sighs. “Sire,” he says to Uther, with a small bow.

“Your apprentice…” Uther says.

“Sire, if I judge correctly, he is no longer my apprentice, if he ever truly was.” Gaius almost laughs. “His power is beyond anything I have ever seen. We are fortunate that he chooses to serve Camelot rather than destroy it.”

“Yet he holds me here,” Uther says. “He restrains Camelot’s king.”

“The only reason he would, sire, is if he thought that allowing you movement would bring harm to the kingdom. That is still true for you, is it not, Merlin?”

“Old friend,” Merlin says with a fond smile. “It will always be true.”

Gaius studies him for a moment. “How long?”

“A thousand years,” Merlin says. “And then back again.”

“What do you mean?” asks Uther.

“Sire, if I am correct, this is not the youth we know but the man he will become. It was thought that time could not be unwound, but if anyone ever could do it, it would be Merlin. He stopped time with a thought, without training, without practice, the moment I met him.”

“You have power over time?” Uther asks Merlin, a hungry look in his eyes. “You can reverse it?”

Merlin’s eyes are full of compassion as he shakes his head. “Not that far. Only during my lifetime, which while long, started only after Arthur’s birth. I cannot undo that. Nor would I. Even if I were older than him, what good would the word of a magical peasant toddler be against the want of a king for a son?”

The old grief hangs in the king’s eyes as he bows his head, and he realises that he has more room to move than he had before. “You are going to make me tell him, aren’t you?”

“I hope that you will without my compulsion,” Merlin says, his voice gentle. “I can tell him if you are unable. I know her death grieves you, but you have taken your grief too far at every turn. This cannot go unspoken any longer. Too many people have died for your own crimes. He must know the truth before you sacrifice any more on the altar of your hypocrisy.”

There is a flash of anger on Uther’s face, “Sorcery…” he starts.

Merlin cuts off the inevitable rant about the corruption inherent in magic. “…is a tool and nothing more. Like a sword. You simply did not realise where that particular sword was pointing, but it does not mean the fault was in the sword. I daresay any who knew your response would never have allowed it to be used thus.”

“Father, what is he saying?” Arthur’s voice, full of dread.

“I was betrayed,” Uther starts, but Merlin frowns. Uther looks down and starts again. “I was desperate for an heir. We begged Nimueh for help. She asked if I’d be willing to trade my own life for a son, as the old magic demanded a life for a life, and I thought that was the bargain when I said yes. But Ygraine… Sorcery twisted that bargain. I could not suffer another sorcerer to further corrupt what should have been my greatest joy.”
Merlin’s voice is cold and clear as his hand curls around the staff. “This is the first truth I will show you.” He nods at Arthur. “You and I went once to a sorceress who knew your mother, who parted the veil for you to see her and speak to her.”

The mist that forms in front of them is bigger, writ large so that all in the room can see. This time, there is sound, as Ygraine says, “Your father sacrificed me so the Pendragon dynasty could continue. It makes you no less my son, nor me any less proud of you. Now I see you, I would have given my life willingly.”

Arthur staggers back from the vision, looking from Merlin to Uther, and says, “Is this true? Did you slay my mother that I might be?”


“Gaius? You were there…” Arthur looks at the old physician, bewildered.

Gaius looks to Merlin then, and says, “Can you pull it from my mind?”

Merlin cocks his head to one side, and beckons him forward. “Put your hand on the staff and we will see what you saw. Focus on the memory.”

Gaius puts a hand on Merlin’s shoulder for a moment, then rests it below Merlin’s on the staff. The mist resolves to reveal a much younger Uther entreating a middle-aged woman. Merlin tilts his head slightly and her voice is clear. “A price must be paid, Uther Pendragon. Balance must be kept. If I do this for you, creating a life will steal another life from the world.”

“I would give my life for a son,” young Uther’s voice is sure. “What good is all I have accomplished if it fades the moment I am gone from the world?”

Gaius’ voice, also younger, is heard, though he is not visible in the vision. “Sire, I urge caution… If you die that your child may live, your kingdom will suffer. Who will teach him? Who will keep what you have created long enough for him to have anything at all to inherit?”

“We will create a regency,” Uther says in the mist. “We will have months to plan it.”

“Are we certain we know the bargain we are making?” Gaius’ voice asks. “These bargains twist and turn and do not always come out as we expect.”

“I will give my life for my son,” Uther says, looking at Nimueh. “Do what you must.”

She speaks, then, gazing down into a cup in front of her, the words low and the power clear. She pours something from the cup into a vial, corks it, and hands it to Uther. “Give this to your lady,” she says, “but ask her if she would make the same sacrifice.”

“Did you ask her?” Arthur interrupts, looking at Uther, then at Gaius in turn. “Did you ask my mother if she would give her life for mine?”

The king starts, “I…” Merlin tips his head and gives Uther a warning look. Uther looks down at his hands. “No. I thought she was asking if Ygraine would trade my life for a son, and I knew she would not.”

Arthur’s face twists with rage and grief. He leans forward as his hand goes to his sword hilt.

Merlin stops Arthur with half a glance before the prince can complete a step, saying, “This is what I warned you about. You killing him helps no one and will never bring her back.” He holds Arthur
still until he feels the tension leave the prince’s shoulders, feels him rock back on his heels.

“Daughter…” Morgana says into the ensuing silence, as Arthur and Merlin relax and the fog dissipates. “But Gorlois…”

“Was at war,” Uther says heavily. “I could not claim you as my own without hurting further everyone I cared about.”

“But we are so close in age,” says Arthur, staring at Morgana. “That means you…And she…You were married. Had been married for some time, if you’d resorted to sorcery for an heir.”

“I broke my oath to your mother.” Uther says. “And were it not for Morgana, I would not be able to forgive myself. But,” and here he looks at his daughter unflinchingly, “I can never regret Morgana, and so I have long since forgiven myself the act that caused her to be. You are my child, Morgana, and I love you, and saying that to you may be worth all of this miserable day.”

“Even if,” Morgana’s hesitation draws long and she finally manages to get it out, “I have magic?”

Uther recoils as much as Merlin’s hold will allow, “You? This cannot be! I have raised you to be true.” His mouth slams shut against him, and he cannot speak.

“You will not speak to her that way.” Merlin’s ire radiates into a flare of power from his staff. “I was born to magic. Nothing about how I was raised could have changed that one bit. Morgana, too. Her lady mother bore another powerful sorceress, a high priestess of the old religion. One day Morgana’s power will rival her sister’s.”

Morgana’s eyes are wide, as she mouths the word, “Sister.”

Merlin continues. “Even now her dreams are a seer’s visions. They ring true in too many ways to be anything but. Soon her power, untrained, will flare out of control, and drive her from you in fear of her life. One of the reasons I chose this moment was to stop you from driving her to madness and rebellion. Your vendetta against all magic has begun already to push her away. It would, unchecked, warp her irreparably, and drive her to kill you via my unwitting hand, in a few short years.”

They all recoil at his words. Uther looks at Morgana, and her expression is not as shocked as he might hope.

Merlin continues. “Her hatred would bring her to create the sword that would kill Arthur within the decade.”

This does shock her. Denial is written across her face as she meets Arthur’s eyes. “I could never…”

“Already,” Merlin says, “if I did not intervene at this very moment, things have been set in motion that, unchecked, would be the ruin of you all, despite my every effort to the contrary. Right now, she is one of the best people I have ever known. I will not allow your monstrous ego and your vicious tyranny to ruin her, ruin Arthur and destroy all that we all hold dear, again. I held my tongue once though I knew it to be a mistake, out of fear of your axe and your pyre, but I know now that you cannot harm me, and I will not allow you to harm her.”

Uther is shaking his head and Merlin relaxes the hold enough to allow him to speak. “I could never hurt her, magic or no.”

His daughter is blazing as she confronts him. “Would you allow me my magic and go on slaughtering innocent milkmaids who charm away the pox? Beheading children whose only crime
is to be born to a peaceful people? Robbing mothers of their sons until they try to rob you of yours?” Morgana spits the words out. “I don’t want you to turn a blind eye to something I can’t control, I want you to stop murdering good, innocent people!”

“Hardly innocent, they act against our law!” Uther starts, but Merlin cuts him off.

“You created the law. You choose when and how to enforce the law. Change the law. You are a coward to hide behind a law you yourself created as though you are powerless. It looks weak.” The contempt in Merlin’s voice staggers Arthur and Uther alike.

Merlin is calmer as he continues. “It is not necessary to allow all magic. People who cause harm with their magic and use it for ill are as criminal as those who use a sword in the same way. But throwing children and healers into the same category as those who use magic to subvert and defile makes you worse than those you would legitimately fight against.”

His voice rings louder, “In my lifetime, I spent ten years here, and saved Camelot, Arthur, even you, more times than I ever counted, and the only time Arthur had any awareness I had done it with magic was when I failed and he lay dying, and only then because I told him. Every effort I made was for your son, but I could not tell him, and people died because I could not tell him, and I could not tell him because you poisoned him against the idea of good magic.”

He points at Uther, who flinches as though he expects fire to come from Merlin’s finger. “You lied to him. You told him that magic would corrupt users inevitably. I could simply have come in here and killed you where you sit. I could easily have warped Arthur’s mind to my will, put a geas on Morgana to prevent her causing him harm, but I did not, and I will not, because despite two millennia of magic use, I have not been corrupted by it. Gaius remained loyal to you to your death, despite your unforgivable slaughter of most of those that he called friends and the constant fear that you might slay more that he loved.”

“You lie,” Uther says.

Merlin gives an exasperated look at the ceiling, hands the staff to Gaius, and walks up to Uther’s seat. “If I show this in the mist,” he says, “We will sit here for ten years watching. And the mere knowing may cause some of the harm I aim to prevent. But I can give you my experience, show you the evil, the corruption that you caused.”

“Why?” Uther asks. “What does it gain you?” He is leaning as far as he can move in his seat, but it isn’t enough.

“It’s not what it gains me, it’s what Arthur won’t lose. What Morgana won’t lose. What this kingdom, this precious place could be. I was told that Albion could be united under Arthur, that peace could come to the land, with prosperity, and freedom from the constant drains of battle. But done your way? It did not happen. Camelot fell less than 30 years after your death, and a millennium later there was still strife, and almost all magic was lost from the world. All because you could not see beyond your grief.”

“Surely it is better for sorcery to…” Uther starts.

“No. You stripped away the last of the old religion—which worked and helped stabilise the land and sustain the people—without putting anything in its place. The void it left was filled by those who sought to divide and subjugate the people, carrying your vendetta to the end of the earth. The loss of magic meant the destruction of every human being, every scrap of life beyond the oasis I myself maintained.”
“The old religion killed my wife and brought this kingdom to its knees!” Uther says. “It had to be stopped!”

“Do you not understand that it isn’t all or nothing? Excesses can be curbed without destroying the whole of magic!” Merlin stares at Uther in disbelief for a moment, and then shrugs. “No matter.” He places his hands on the sides of Uther’s head, thumbs resting gently over his eye and pinkies touching his ears. “You’ll see.”

With that, he lets the important memories flood into Uther. Morgana’s fall. Arthur’s successes, failures, and Mordred’s sad tale. Uther’s own breakdown and destruction.

As the images rush in, Uther recoils, struggles, and Merlin grips him tighter. The rush, he knows, puts into perspective how each action caused a reaction, how arrogance nurtured hostility, how dictatorial proclamation created rebellion. He’s had centuries to analyse, to know exactly how Uther’s actions could tear the world.

He lets the worst linger—Morgana’s death, twice, for good reason, at his own hand; Arthur dying in his arms—the images he never could get out of his own head completely in two thousand years. He goes a step further and shows Uther the worst of the future—wars, death, famine, the suffering of children, and ultimately the earth blasted and burnt and barren. Finally he pulls his hands away to find Uther staring with a look of horror on his face. “If that is what you think of me,” Uther says, “How could you let me live?”

“Because Arthur loves you,” Merlin says. “It is that simple. It nearly broke him when you died.”

“I cannot simply repeal the law on magic,” Uther says. “Our enemies would see us as weak and tear us apart.”

“Not one enemy will ever see Camelot as weak again. But you are right, you cannot be the one to bring this about. You need to walk away,” Merlin says. “Abdicate. Arthur is almost of age, and already he is better at being just and fair than you have been in two decades. Make it a move of strength, a sign of your faith in your son. Stay on as an adviser, but know that I will be by his other side, and know that what I have shown you is a fraction, a fragment of what I have seen. I can provide him with an unshakable advantage.

“You can make a smooth transition rather than first undermining Camelot with enemies of your own creation and then fading weakly into the background, leaving a perception of vulnerability that will plague the entire kingdom for years. You, truly, are his only weakness at this moment. If you leave, and he is crowned, most of Camelot’s enemies will sign treaties within the year. Most within the month.”

“I do not want to take his throne before my time,” Arthur protests. “I would not usurp…”

“It is your time. Your throne. He is condemned,” Merlin says, turning to fix his gaze on Arthur. “His crimes are legion. You know that; we all know that. Even he knows it when he lets himself recognise the truth. He is on a path that unchecked will destroy everything he claims to hold dear. He has confessed to the very crimes he provides no quarter on, in the name of the law.”

“You would have me step into power at twenty one years,” Arthur says. “Without even a day as crown prince to solidify my power. Without quest, without preparation.”

“If I didn’t think you could do a better job than he did,” Merlin says without flinching, “I wouldn’t be here. And you won’t be alone. If he died tomorrow you’d be in the same position. I had to save his life several times within months of today. I will not do that again if he continues as king.”
“I suppose there is no choice in this,” Uther says bitterly. “I comply or you kill me?”

Merlin rolls his eyes. “I don’t want or need to kill you, Uther Pendragon,” he says. “All I have to do is tell the truth, and you will lose all credibility as a monarch. Five words could do it. Arthur was born of magic. Five more would seal it. Uther’s daughter, Morgana, has magic. Your knights and guards will not follow you past this day.”

Uther looks at the guards. They refuse to meet his eyes.

Merlin continues, “Already the only reason your son’s sword is not through your chest is that I did not let him run you through. Do it my way, and you have a chance to win back his favour, to beg your daughter’s forgiveness before she aids an assassin and, failing that, tries to murder you in your sleep.”

Uther’s gaze shifts to Morgana, who looks away.

“If you do not abdicate, you can walk away.” Merlin pauses, then lets the other shoe drop. “But if you do, I will withdraw my protection from you. I won’t harm you, but I won’t have to. You will be dead within weeks, or less, if I do so and you continue this course. Which will make Arthur king anyway, but a weaker king for the violent transfer of the throne. But I will not allow you to harm another sorcerer, and I’d like to see how long you can portray strength when everyone turns from you. I’m giving you a way to save face, save lives and save your kingdom. You would be wise to take it.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Uther starts, but Merlin’s laughter echoes in the chamber. It’s not an ugly laugh, but one of genuine amusement.

“Two millennia ago, I didn’t dare. I didn’t know enough about my magic, the prophecies put before me, or my power to understand just how impossible it is for you to harm me. Now? I dare.”

He turns to the guards, wide-eyed against the wall. “I’m going to release you now. Pretend you haven’t seen all this, and try to arrest me. I promise I won’t hurt you.”

They look at each other, and at their weapons, and then at Merlin, and both start to shake their heads, but Merlin just sighs and says, “Come at me with your weapons. I won’t retaliate. Pretend the king’s life is actually in danger.”

They charge at him, lowering their pikes, which simply miss, though it takes a little effort on Merlin’s part to keep the men from falling when their pikes veer abruptly to the side. They stumble, and frown, and Merlin says, “Again. From different sides this time.”

They are wary, but they charge again, and the weapons seem to pierce Merlin… and then their momentum carries them straight through him and they collide with each other, pikes wrenched sideways. He smiles, and vanishes, and steps forward from ten feet away. “Again.”

This time the weapons simply vanish.

“Merlin, where did the weapons go? Pikes aren’t free…” Arthur sounds slightly aggrieved, but mostly bemused, as though it is just now occurring to him how useful this might be.

Merlin steps up to him, trying but failing to suppress a grin, and makes a gesture with both hands near each of Arthur’s ears, his hands coming away with a pike in each as if he has plucked gold coins from behind the ears of a child.

“Oh, now you’re just showing off,” Arthur says. “Give them back their pikes, they’re about to piss
themselves.”

Merlin shrugs and opens his hands, and the pikes float gently back to the guards. “Gaius, use the staff.”

Gaius frowns, “Merlin…”

“I mean it. You can’t hurt me. Try anyway. No, keep your eyes open, we don’t want a blast going astray.”

Gaius points the dragon at Merlin, cringes, and directs a gout of fire in Merlin’s direction. It flows around him but does not touch him.

“Do the same to Morgana’s chair,” Merlin says, pointing to the empty chair in the corner. “Exactly the same.”

It explodes, but the pieces seem to bounce off of the inside of a bubble and do not go far enough to injure anyone.

“Merlin, my chair…” Morgana says, bemused.

Merlin waggles a finger at her. “You doubt. Magic can build, as well as destroy. In fact, the more we use it to build, the less we will have to destroy.” And with that, he gives a tiny nod, and the shattered and charred fragments of wood sparkle, float, and then reassemble themselves.

“I have died,” he says into the ensuing silence, “At least seventy times. The world does not let me stay dead for longer than the space of a few missed breaths. When I say I do not fear you, it is because I know you cannot hurt me. And I could destroy you, if I desired, but I have never wanted that.”

“Am I to be your puppet?” Arthur asks. “How can I rule when a man who could end me with a glance sits by my side? How can I ever lead if I know that you can bend me to your will if we disagree?”

Merlin’s face softens, and he looks almost as young as his body had been a few days prior. “I always had the ability to do those things, and never the inclination. You ruled well on your own. I was simply at your side, still a servant. You will never be my puppet, Arthur. You need not lead by force of arms, as you have the ability to earn the love of your people. They will follow you willingly. They always did.”

Arthur wonders how strange it must be for Merlin to see a man he knew as king so many years a prince again.

Merlin gives a short laugh. “And foreknowledge can only go so far when I have unspooled the years and set them to wind again on a new spindle. Everything, every single thing from here forward will be different. I will be able to shorten the time to solution for some problems, but other issues will be brand new. I don’t know what will happen next, but I can guarantee to you that no one else does either, now. None can truthfully bend you on the wheel of a prophecy, when I’ve broken them all.”

Merlin looks down, and his voice softens. “My hope, the whole reason I am here, is that changing things now, here, is supposed to prevent most of the worst ills from happening at all. I did not come back to rule in your place, but to right my own wrongs and set us on a better course.”

He looks at Arthur, and his eyes are full of apology. “I once lied to you by omission for ten years,
but I was at your side that whole time, protecting you and protecting Camelot, even protecting him,” and he gestures at Uther, “from every magical attack and treachery after treachery. Had I but had the courage and the skill to tell you the truth, your choices would have been different at so many junctures. This is my atonement. I will not usurp you.”

“Yet you would usurp me,” Uther says, his face ugly with rage.

“You are not my king,” Merlin says, matching Uther in intensity. “I suffer your breath in the world because Arthur and Gaius love you. I have protected you and will protect you from many attacks, but I cannot and will not allow you to sap this kingdom in the name of ‘Strength’ or commit atrocities you call punishment for crimes you invented.

“You have committed so much evil in the name of law. I could have let you die at others’ hands a dozen times over, and chose not to. Not because you are king, but because my heart did not want to let Arthur suffer so. But I know now the full horror of what your reign wrought, and how far that dark shadow was cast into the future. You are judged guilty of crimes against humanity. You are a failure as a king, and you are done.

“Your one legacy, if you step down gracefully, will be the fact that your son will be a thousand times the monarch that you are. Nearly a thousand years from now, the world still waited for Arthur to return. As short as his reign was, they remembered him as a shining beacon of justice and some of his ideas became a foundation for a fundamental shift in how people create governments. You? You were a footnote. Arthur’s father. The older histories credit your reign with undermining every chance that Arthur had of fulfilling his dream of a united Albion in his lifetime, and I made sure they remembered that you made his murderers what they were.”

Merlin stopped, and took a breath, and then continued in a more gentle tone. “There are many ways you could be remembered now, and I am giving you one that might allow you to be a wise adviser rather than a mocked fool.”

“How will they accept you at Arthur’s side as an adviser?” Uther asks. “A hopped-up serving boy, they will say. A peasant advising a king. He will look the fool.”

“They will say, ‘The greatest warlock who will ever live saw so much good in Arthur Pendragon, that he considered it an honour to shine his shoes.’ They will say that if a manservant and a peasant can do magic, perhaps the world will not crumble if a commoner becomes a knight, if a peasant becomes royalty.” Merlin seems magnified by his words. “They will see, firsthand, how much strength and good that magic can bring, especially wielded by a hand that seeks only to lift others up. But they will never call Arthur weak. Walk with me.” He waves a hand toward the door.

Uther finds himself released, and seems startled that his sword is still on his body. They can see him warring with himself, but he leaves it at his side, untouched, and Merlin turns from him, taking his staff back from Gaius.

The doors open in front of them of their own accord, and Merlin does not break stride. They trail after him, and several guards look very startled and start to block them as they walk, but a shake of Uther’s head deters most, and one hardy soul is simply pinned against the wall.

“Where are we going?” Arthur asks.

“We’re going to show your father why it is that the people will accept me at your side. Not that it matters, but I’m not actually a peasant sorcerer. Well, my mother is a peasant, of sorts… but only because my father did not stay.”
“Your father,” breathes Gaius. “You know… Of course you know.”

“Don’t tell them,” Merlin says. “I’ve waited two thousand years to do this right.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it,” Gaius says, finally actually smiling. “But yes, that does rather put paid to the whole nobility question.”

“Merlin,” Arthur says, as they descend into the depths of the castle, “What kind of noble are you?”

“If you have a number of lords of a… place, say, and ultimately it comes down to a time when there is only one lord and his heir, what would you call them?”

“King and prince, I suppose,” says Arthur, thoughtfully. “Do sorc… warlocks have kings?”

“I’m not prince of the warlocks,” Merlin responds. “It’s rather better than that. You’re my king and always will be, but this… ah, you’ll see.” He’s grinning, and Arthur feels something start to ease in his chest.

The passageway grows dim ahead of them but then they are following a trail of glowing lights. Uther slows when he realises where they are going. “I cannot go in there, he will scorch me where I stand.”

“No, he won’t,” Merlin says. “I have forbidden it, and he is sworn to obey.”

“But that means…”

“Yes, Uther, you are responsible for my growing up a fatherless bastard peasant.” There was no heat in Merlin’s voice, more amused resignation. “And yes, my father is still alive, and he does not yet have any idea that I exist. And I am more powerful than he is. And even with all this? I let you breathe. This is what mercy is, and decency.”

The tunnel narrows, and they file out onto the ledge of the dragon’s cave.

Merlin shouts, “O DRAKON,” and the creature slinks up the stone mound, looking balefully at Uther as Merlin says, “Today is the last day of your captivity.”

“Merlin, no,” Arthur says, looking alarmed. “He will destroy…”

“Not this time,” Merlin says. “I have already sworn him to never attack people.”

“Why would he obey you?”

“My father was—is—the last Dragonlord, until he died, a year or so from now, because we asked for him to stop a disaster. Then, I became the last dragonlord. Now, we both are, except with two of us we aren’t last…” Merlin waves a hand. “Anyway, time travel makes things complicated but the sum is that I come from a long line of dragonlords, and this is not actually the last possible dragon, but your father tried to eliminate both dragons and dragonlords in his ill-conceived purge.”

“But they are monsters, the dragons,” Arthur says. “They cause so much damage… the stories…”

“We cause damage when we are wronged,” Kilgharrah says. “And we were deeply wronged.”

“He speaks. You speak!” Arthur says to the dragon, astonished.

“He played the part of my adviser,” Merlin explains. “The first time around. He was not… unbiased in his aid. Many times he suggested I let Uther, Morgana and Mordred die. His advice led
me both to my greatest victories and to my greatest mistakes. He is wise and it would be a crime to allow his knowledge to fade from the world, but he is not infallible. He is, if anything, more ruthless than Uther, and certainly every bit as arrogant.”

Morgana laughs at this, while both Uther and the dragon look utterly revolted by the comparison. Arthur suppresses a smile. “Yes, well.”

“You say I am not the last,” Kilgarrah asks. “I feel no other.”

“There is an egg,” Merlin says. “I will be retrieving it as soon as things settle down.”

The dragon’s eyes widen.

“My dragon?” Morgana asks.

“She will love you,” Merlin answers, “But ultimately she will always answer to me. I would not deprive you of her friendship, so long as you remain loyal to Camelot.”

“If my father steps aside, and Arthur rules with a fair hand,” Morgana says, “I could not turn against my home.”

“You will not challenge Arthur for the throne,” Merlin states.

“You have another path in mind for me, do you not?” Morgana says.

“You will, if you choose, be one of the highest of the high priestesses,” Merlin says. “My goal is that they will not spend their time trying to destroy Camelot.” He turns to Uther. “You saw how many died when they tried. And all, always, because of you, even after you were dead. The best and the brightest of us fell to your hatred, including both your children.”

Uther’s shoulders drop and he looks down at his feet. “I was trying to atone,” he whispers. “I did not mean…”

“You did not see,” Merlin says. “You refused to see, blinded by your notions of divine right of rule and nobility when you yourself were no king’s son. This must not continue. Your daughter’s hatred broke you. Stop before she is irrevocably lost. What you did was not atonement. It was an atrocity. It was revenge, misguided. You were at fault, yet you raged, and you’ve been venting your self-loathing at innocents for twenty years.”

He whirls around to face the dragon. “And you can wipe that smug grin off your face, as I happen to know you did exactly the same thing the first time I released you from this pit.”

Kilgarrah looks away, head bowing.

“Merlin,” Arthur asks, his voice unnaturally calm, “Did you just cow a dragon?”

Merlin shrugs, and then looks at Uther. “Do you see now?”

Uther looks up, anger gone, his face looking only weary and sad. “I…” he halts, and then finally just nods.

“You will abdicate?” Merlin asks. “You will release all claim to the throne and the right of command?”

“Will I be allowed to stay?” Uther asks.
“That is up to your son,” Merlin replies. “If I thought he was the sort to throw his father to the wolves, I would not have moved time itself to right his destiny. But you could probably annoy him into throwing you out.”

“You will always have a place,” Arthur says, his voice cracking with emotion. “I still have need of a father.”

“He was never ready to let you go,” Merlin says more gently to Uther. “Not even when you chastised him from beyond the grave. He will not rule as you do. He will be better, and he will do things differently, and they will shock you, but he will bring peace, he will bring prosperity, and he will burnish some of the blood from your reputation in history by your wise choice to let him rule for peace rather than for vengeance. You short yourself but three years of your kingship, to gain potential decades of life, to gain the lives of your children, and the possibility that your line will not die with them as it did before.”

“Arthur had… will have no heir?” Uther asks.

“He left the kingdom to his queen, but she ruled it heartbroken, as everyone she’d ever truly loved was lost to her. She never bore a child despite years of loving marriage, and Camelot was beset in the end by the last of the enemies you created.”

“A queen, you say,” Arthur says, curious.

“Not now, Arthur,” Merlin says. “It was not what it should have been, and she was no true match for you, good friends though you were. Your interest in her sabotaged her true love, and it brought you both grief and no legacy. If you do not fall ten years hence, she will not need to rule, and she will be happier following the true path of her heart. It was only for my meddling that she became queen at all. She was good at it, but it brought her little joy.”

Uther sighs. “All that, and no legacy after all.”

“Not if you continue as you have,” Merlin says. “Without the war against magic, without three more years of fomenting hatred, I have no idea what the future will bring for Arthur or Morgana where progeny are concerned. They spent seven of the next ten years trying to kill each other, and there was little room for hearth and home. You have been cursed a hundred or more times over, Uther, and the only way that I know of that you might possibly break those curses is to step aside and atone. Even that may not be enough, but it is worth a try. I will help however I can, but it will require magic. The ban must be repealed, and a more nuanced law put in its place. Only by stepping aside can your stain be removed from this land and from your son’s legacy.”

Uther stares at the dragon for a long moment, then at Merlin, then finally at Arthur and Morgana. He sees them, healthy, strong, innocent and young, and at the same time broken and dead, not old enough to make that fate anything but monstrous. He sees the image of his daughter, standing over him, snarling her hatred, ordering the deaths of innocents just to hurt him.

And he breaks.

It is quiet, but final, the droop of his shoulders, the weight of grief. He starts to sag, and without a word Arthur and Merlin catch him, one on either side, keeping him from falling. Merlin hands his staff to Gaius and says to the two guards, “Help him, gently, to his quarters. We have more to do here. We will join him there soon.”

As they hand Uther to the guards, one of them says hesitantly to Merlin in a gruff country dialect, “I have family been fled twenty years…”
“You have seen what I have done here today,” Merlin says. “Be gentle with him. Your family may yet return to you.”

The man nods, and they help Uther as he stumbles back up the glowing path.

Gaius hands the staff back to Merlin, who turns to the dragon. “You have your instructions,” Merlin says. “You will do as I ask.”

Kilgharrah nods.

“Turn around,” Merlin says. “Let me put a hand on the chain.”

“You cannot break the links with your hand,” the dragon says.

“Do you want your freedom? I’m too old for the steps and I have no sword.” Merlin stands straight and tall.

The dragon snorts at that, a tiny trickle of smoke curling from his nose, but he turns, and stretches the chained foot across the gap. Merlin stretches forward to rest his hand on the thick, black iron, and feels Arthur step close.

“You know a spell for breaking iron?” Arthur asks.

Morgana and Gaius come closer, too, curious.

“Not a spell,” Merlin says. “One of the reasons it took so long to come back was that I couldn’t get a grasp on what I needed to do to make it happen. It took a thousand years for the science to catch up to the point where I could really understand how the magic actually worked, and once I understood the science, the magic… spells are merely shapes we put our will into. A shortcut, in some cases. But here, I simply need to feel the structure of the tiny pieces that make up the whole,” and he closes his eyes as the chain glows, “and then pull the magic out.” With that, the glow slides up his arm and disappears. “Your father cheated, you know, using magic and iron together to bind the dragon thus… and then I simply tell the tiny pieces to separate. Like so.”

And with that, the entire chain collapses into a shower of dark, sparkling dust and heat. Merlin sags forward as his support disappears, and without pause, Arthur snags him by the waist to pull him back from the cliff edge.

Merlin looks at him, amused, and says, “Waiting for that, were you?”

Arthur gives a half smile and shrugs.

Merlin looks up at the dragon, and says, “You know what to do. I’ll see you soon.”

The dragon turns, bows deeply to Merlin, nods at Arthur, and leaps upward. Something flashes in his front claw, but he moves too fast for anyone to see what it is.

“What errand have you sent him on?” Morgana asks.

“Arthur and Uther are correct that his taking on the kingship early with a peasant at his side would cause problems,” Merlin says. “So he will help us with some,” he hesitates, then says, “drama, I suppose, to help Arthur along. Theatrics, but enough, I think, to convince the nobility and the peasantry alike that Arthur is the rightful and needed King, and that banning magic is the wrong course of action, but limiting it with rule of law to prevent the excesses of the past is necessary. But come, there is much to be done and not much time. We have but a week to your coming of age, and
we must prepare a message for your father’s enemies, lest you come to harm.”

“Long list,” Gaius says, following Merlin and the others up the passage. “There are not enough messengers in Camelot to get them all.”

“The future was a fascinating place,” Merlin says. “A thousand years from now, even the poorest child will be able to send a message with a thought, across the entire world and beyond. They used metal and… lightning of a sort, to make it happen. Once I understood, well, we need not send anyone in person, and it will be all the more convincing because of that.”
They climb, and as they climb Merlin changes, the staff dwindling and dulling to a walking stick, his clothes reverting to the servant’s garb he’d worn for so long, his face and body shifting back to the boy he’d been.

Arthur notices, and says, “You could look like anything, wear anything you want, and you choose that?”

“This is more truly me than the grand wizard in robes,” Merlin says, “and it is novel to be so young again. Because I stepped back into myself, this is the “natural form” for this body, and the easiest form to maintain. The finery was mostly for Uther.”

“What will be...” Arthur stops. “I would not see him hurt.”

“He would hurt worse, and hurt more people, if we did not. I did not exaggerate anything I told him. And I know he would rather take this hurt on himself than cause the ill he caused you.”

“I cannot believe he kept it from me,” Morgana says.

“Let it go,” Merlin says, putting a hand on her arm. “He has wronged many, but he loves you deeply, and if you can find room in your heart to see that, it may yet bring you both joy.”

She places her hand on top of his, and smiles up at him. “So, magic. You will teach me?”

He laughs a little. “Eventually. I am planning on creating a centre of learning here, if Arthur agrees. A school, for both science and magic.”

“For the nobles?” Arthur asks.

“For everyone,” Merlin says. “Your instincts with Lancelot were absolutely correct. When you were king, you knighted many commoners, and they were among the best knights the realm had ever seen. The only difference between a noble and a peasant is an accident of birth. Feed a noble poorly, keep them ignorant and treat them badly, and they will be far inferior to a peasant fed well, educated and treated decently. That was another thing that took a millennium to change. Some of the greatest minds are born in meagre circumstance, and cultures which allowed those minds to be lost floundered compared to cultures who provided opportunity to all.”

“A thousand years,” Gaius says. “I suppose you cannot tell us of what is to come?”

“I cannot tell you what is to come,” Merlin laughs, “because I don’t know. I can only tell you what was in that future. Every single moment from here out will be different because I have come here, now.”

“Is it fair for you to rewrite so many lives?” Arthur asks. “It goes beyond royal decree. I daresay there are people who will not exist at all because of what you have done here.”
“It is true,” Merlin says, “that every person from this point forth will be different for our actions here. But it was bad... so bad, on so many levels, for so long. By the time I was ready to come back, the earth itself was dying. The people were almost all gone; all the lives that could have been lived were over. They only lived in my memory, and live there still. It’s part of why I waited so long.” He looks incredibly weary as he contemplates it, then gathers himself to explain.

“Look, in all of Albion, now, there are perhaps one or two million people. It seems like a vast sum, more people than you will ever lay eyes on. And Uther has caused the deaths of thousands, still a vast number, but you will easily meet several thousand people in your life.”

Merlin looks down at his hands, and stops. When he looks up, he explains, “Not a thousand years from now, one man ordered the deaths of more than eleven million people, and there were others who did much the same, in the name of purity, in the name of some people being better than others. People were killed not for magic but for the colour of their skin, for who they loved, for who they worshipped. The seeds Uther has sown and watered with blood grew unfettered due to my cowardice, and the harm magnified until the boiling of the seas was a near certainty.”

His eyes are ancient and haunted as he says, ‘I could have spent every trace of my magic and my life and not saved a solitary thing, or I could come back here, and push one man aside, and create a future where magic and science could thrive, side by side, and give the world a chance. The dragon told me when you died that you would rise again at the hour of Albion’s greatest need… but I think he simply did not see it completely. This is your second chance, Arthur. We need the druids to thrive. We need the old religion, but we need to maintain the limits on the old excesses. We need peace, and we need peace everywhere.”

“I’m going to miss you,” Arthur says, an odd catch in his voice.

“I’m right here.”

“But you’re not who you were. He is gone forever, is he not?”

“I remember,” Merlin’s voice is soft. “It’s still me, really and truly. Even without you knowing of my magic, we became friends, though it took years for you to admit it, and I was a trusted adviser by the time you died, though servant still. I told you once I would be content to serve you to the end of my days, and that is still true.” He chuckled. “I suspect that friendship will be easier this time around, because I’m not hiding anything from you, and all the silly rank nonsense is rendered rather moot. Also, you can’t hit me any more unless I let you.”

“I’m not sure I’d dare,” Arthur says, with a sideways glance. “So does not hiding anything mean you will tell me about my once-queen?”

Merlin’s brow knits, and he gives a small shake of his head. “I’ll answer that question, but not just yet. Please don’t ask. I don’t want to keep anything from you, but there are some stories—stories that will never be, can never be, now, that would change the way you look at people if you knew—good people, who only did what they did due to choices that won’t be possible this time.” Then he grinned. “On the bright side, my duties will be done much more efficiently with me not hiding my magic.”

“As if I would make the all-powerful sorcerer keep shining my armour. All this time, you’ve been pretending to be incompetent,” Arthur shakes his head.

“No, I really am rather incompetent at staying on my feet while suppressing my magic,” Merlin says. “It is instinctive, for me, and requires a constant act of will to keep it in check. Rather like a dog that doesn’t want to heel, when I’m keeping it under wraps, part of my attention is always on
that, and it’s much harder to do things like walk, talk, and pour drinks without spilling. When I release the hound, so to speak, the things I want done tend to just do themselves. And quite honestly I’d rather have me polishing your armour than anyone else, you have no idea what I do to it to keep it protecting you as well as armour possibly can.”

“You say you took ten years to tell me the first time around?” Arthur asks, as they start to open the door to the ground level, but his question is quickly forgotten.

A guard yells through the door, “Stay inside! A dragon has been seen in the skies!”

“Has anyone been harmed?” Arthur calls out.

The guard looks around the open door and says, “Sire? Er, no, it just flew out and circled and then flew off. But it dropped a sword into the cobbles and shouted at it before it left, and well, that thing just grew … “

In the centre of the courtyard, a glowing, gleaming sword has been embedded into a boulder.

The granite boulder is huge. As high, at the top, as a man’s shoulder, a spiralling slope leading to the top as if it has grown out of the ground. The rounded sides of the boulder are rough and untouched by tools, but the top is as smooth as glass, polished, dark and sparkling.

Arthur, Merlin, Gaius and Morgana walk together to the centre of the courtyard to examine it.

Arthur eyes it curiously, with a glance back at Merlin. “Has anyone tried to pull it out?”

“A few, Sire.”

“Get anywhere with it?” Arthur asks.

“No, it’s stuck fast. Tried myself, it feels like it was grown there. Do you wish to keep people away from it?”

Arthur climbs up to the sword, and circles it, considering, then raises his eyebrows at Merlin, question unspoken.

Merlin shrugs and looks amused.

“No,” Arthur says. “Let them try. You want a go, Merlin?”

Merlin walks up to the stone, and leans in to look at the blade, hands pressed flat against the rock in front of him. “It has writing on it.”

They gather round. The blade is inscribed and inlaid, but the smooth surface of the boulder’s top is also engraved with runes.

Gaius reaches out to touch the blade, and says, “Take me up.” Then he walks around and touches the other side. “Cast me away.”

Then he looks at the runes around the edge of the top of the boulder. “I am Excalibur. The one who draws me forth rules by right.” He looks at Merlin, who is clearly having more difficulty
suppressing his smile than he ever did suppressing his magic. In a low voice, Gaius says, “I assume this part of the theatre you mentioned.”

Merlin shrugs. “Give the populace a week to try getting it out, and it will look better when he manages it.”

Arthur’s hand is wrapped around the hilt, casually. Merlin raises an eyebrow, presses his lips together and gives a small shake of his head, but Arthur has already given a tiny little experimental tug.

When nothing happens, he walks down the boulder, and hisses in Merlin’s ear, “This better work, that thing is well stuck.”

“Until Uther abdicates officially, perhaps it would be best not to pull it out?” Merlin says. “You’ll know when it is time. It won’t come out until then, so if you don’t want to look a fool….”

Arthur looks at the guard, “Let any who wish try their hand. The dragon is bound not to harm any here. Don’t annoy it if it returns, but do send someone for me at once. There will be a great many strange guests in the coming week. Any that you would normally arrest on sight, escort them politely to the council chamber and we will handle things there. Inform all of the guard that any who walk in peace here must be treated with respect. There is much change afoot and all will be clear in the coming days. If any have trouble following this order, they may come to the council chamber and their questions will be answered.”

“Sire,” the man says, with a nod and a bow, and rushes off.

Gwen appears then, rushing to Morgana across the courtyard. “They said there was a dragon!” she exclaims. “I was…” She stops, staring at the sword. “Merlin…” she starts, taking in his changed appearance. Then she leans in to stare at the blade. “Merlin, is that…”

He puts a hand on her arm and says in her ear, “Sort of. It’s a long story, and I’ll tell it to you soon. It will be in the hand it was meant for.”

“It’s prettier than it was,” she says, “but the stone can’t be good for it.”

“It’ll be fine,” he says, “but I have a surprise for you, later, and I think you’re going to like it very much.”

She grins at him, and then tips her head. “There’s something different about you, Merlin,” she says, louder.

Morgana snorts and Arthur coughs.

“Tell you about it soon, I promise,” Merlin says, and then gives her a sudden swift hug. “Oh, I missed you.”

“You saw me yesterday, you daft man,” she says, blushing and batting him with her dusting cloth until he lets her go.

“This is all well and good,” Morgana says, “But could we please get that little boy out of the dungeon?”
Memories of Future Past

Chapter by Jenrose

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place entirely in the future. Which is in the past. Trust me.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Merlin spent a few decades out of every hundred years at one university or another, as soon as there were universities worth the name. He would listen for whispers of brilliant minds and heretics, and sought out every one that he could. He tidied up after Da Vinci for years, fascinated, ageing alongside the man. Every time he left a place, he changed. As much from habit, as anything, he kept his magic under tight wraps.

He spent most of the first half of the twentieth century, with its wars and horrors, haunting the lake, waiting for Arthur, and when the great war ended, he travelled the world from university to university, usually young, usually a student, learning constantly.

Well, maybe not so much in the late sixties. At least then, the learning he did had nothing to do with academics, and everything to do with recreational chemistry and an in-depth sociological study of varying political systems and experimental subcultures. Or so he told himself, when he wasn’t stoned out of his mind. The nice thing about being around the hippies was that if he accidentally did magic, they all assumed it was the acid or the hash. There were about six years where he went by his actual name and not one person questioned him. The rest of the time he took the names of ordinary folk he’d known. Tom Smith. Will Forest. As common as possible. Only in the sixties did a name like ‘Merlin Emrys’ blend in. He wasn’t even the only Merlin in one commune.

But most of the time he watched, and he learnt, and he analysed. Great powers rose, and fell. Dictators and regimes and religious wars washed over various parts of the world.

The last hundred and fifty years or so before the End were particularly challenging, as once he understood what he was feeling, the omnipresent weight of the increasingly dense radio signals and all the information they contained required more and more of his attention to filter out. They weren’t magic, but his magic was aware of them, and it became increasingly tiring to do more than walk the world in the face of them. Finally he started sorting through them, deciphering them, and it was school all over again.

Always he sought information on time travel, finding the brilliant minds and pulling as much from their understanding as he could, especially after World War II came and went with no sign of Arthur.

His magic stayed hidden, but the farther science progressed, the more understanding he had of both
how the world worked and how his magic worked. The pace of discovery sped up and at one point he just stopped time for a while so he could catch up. And to give himself some quiet. When he stopped time, the silence was absolute, the universe waiting for him and only him.

He figured out how to rewind time about fifty years before he actually did it. Another war, another cataclysm, no Arthur, and suddenly one day the ubiquitous din of billions of radio signals spluttered to just a few, and then they were gone. The humans weren’t gone, yet, but their technology was kaput, and silent.

In the quiet, with only the noise of the universe, the sun, the moon, the Earth’s magnetic field, standing in the crystal cave and using his magic freely at last, he was finally able to parse the rhythm of their energies into what he needed.

Science couldn’t do it… going into the past. Not in a functional way. On one side of the equation the energy requirement would spike to infinity. On the other, succeeding seemed likely to destroy everything.

But in the quiet hum of the universe, he found his answer, found the magic. He’d come to understand that magic was simply focused will directing the deepest nature of the stuff that made up the world, long before quantum physics gave him words for quantum uncertainty and observer effects. The better he observed, he discovered, the more control he had.

Stopping time was instinctive for him, easy. Reversing it… he’d read every theory, watched every film, every show about time travel. Most of them were ridiculous, and all were wildly wrong. Quantum physics made it absolutely irrevocably clear that the idea of popping backwards in time and then going back to the future one had left would never be possible. That the moment one went back, every single coin flip from then forward should fall differently, or not, by random chance. Every race of sperm to egg a bit different, every chance meeting spun with different threads, different tensions. Destiny could not be set, though trends could be observed, and chances influenced. Unwind time, and every person who lived between the start and endpoints would be changed. Avoiding that was simply impossible.

He could observe the past easily, and often did, especially when the quiet got to be too much. Observing the past simply meant altering one’s perspective, and once magic entered the picture, altering one’s perspective became simple. It took too long for him to realise the consequences.

If words were a structure for will, and will was magic, it meant that ultimately the thing that he needed to manipulate time on a grand scale was simply a sufficient metaphor.

He found himself watching his mother spin, fingers expertly twisting fibre into thread, helped by the spindle, which both twisted the fibre and stored it. He saw her run her fingers over the finished threads, checking for flaws, saw her wind the thread onto the spindle, tight, contained, and finished. Then spool after spool became fabric, fabric became clothing, clothing shaped to people… But he saw her, once, find a mistake, sigh, and consider leaving it in. Then she did the unthinkable. She spun the spindle the other way, released the tension from the threads, picked them apart, all the way back to the mistake, and then started again, pulling the newly unwound fluff into the spin. No two fibres went back exactly the same, but the thread was strong, and flawless.

“Why?” he asked her, not expecting an answer. “Why not simply work around it? Use something else? Cut the thread and start another?”

She answered, then, and he realised that in his tight focus on her hands and the flaw, he’d missed the child sitting at her knee—him, in fact—winding scrap threads together into yarn.
“Some flaws will disappear into the yarn, and disappear into the fabric, and no one will notice them. They might even make the fabric more interesting. Sometimes the fabric is rough enough that flaws just don’t matter. But this is fine thread for fine cloth, and the flaw is enough that it would distort the whole of the fabric and ruin the garment.

“Just as a saddler won’t use bad leather in strapping, where it might break and cause someone to get hurt, when I want a whole piece woven from a single fine thickness of thread without break or knot, it is best to stop here and fix the flaw than continue with something that will never be what I intended. And in this case, the fibre is dear, and I cannot replace it, so I would gently unwind it and spin it again, in hopes that it might come out to be what I want it to be.

“But there is a risk. I must be gentle, as spinning is not easy on fibre, and once spun, it may not be exactly what it was before. I must choose whether to allow the flaw to stay, to waste the fibre before it or after it, or to chance a less perfect creation than I’d hoped.

“Getting the fibres into the right form, getting the thread into the right thickness of yarn, choosing how to weave, and cut, and sew… get one piece wrong and the garment fails to serve. One must pick back to the pieces and reassemble; there is no mending when one turned piece sends the whole garment askew. And if the needle holes are too visible, we must recut and sometimes make it over into something completely different, where the holes won’t matter or won’t be seen.”

Hunith worked her way back to the flaw, teased it apart and said, “There it is. A burr. If I’d left it, every time this touched her skin, she would have been uncomfortable where I intended luxury. It would have drawn the eye from the whole to the flaw. And it would never get the amount of use I wanted it to have.”

Moving on in the timeline, he watched giant machines spin perfect threads onto spindles with little human intervention.

Elsewhen and elsewhere, he watched hungry brown children spin fine threads for rich pale people a world away.

He watched a stumble turn into a catastrophe throughout a giant machine, a man dying in the works as an entire run was ruined.

He watched a system working perfectly, every part timed and tuned to every other part, with the end product coming out flawless.

He saw someone work by hand, not because she had to, but because she loved to. Watched her twist the softest, finest, strongest yarn she knew how to make, to dye it perfectly, and then loom it by hand into the longest scarf he’d ever seen, reaching around her belly to throw the shuttle through the warp, pulling and pushing it up and down until a pattern emerged, slowly, from one end to the other. He watched as her belly grew with the scarf, curious, watched her find a flaw, take it back, and start again from just before that flaw. The fabric came off the loom right before she went into labour, and the next time she picked it up, it was to wind it around her and her baby, binding them together, until both her hands were free to set up another loom, her babe secure at her breast.

And then he turned, and looked at the world, and he found the thread of time, winding onto a spool from the stuff of chaos, woven out into the tapestry of history, and he saw the tangles, the snarls, and he traced them back until he found, in his lifetime, the one point he would be able to smoothen and change.

The interweaving of magic and science that created time and space and the fabric of the world were
like the greatest of machines. He could see the ones who could see the fabric, the ones who could pull at the threads, and finally, that one point where the snarling tension began. At first he’d assumed it would be Uther, his rough thread pulling at all around him from years before Merlin’s birth. But it was clear from the threads that the one place the threads could be smoothed, the tension removed—was him. He could see his choices and the patterns rippling out from them, tangling other parts of the design. So many things pulling at that complex piece of history, but none more important than his own words and actions.

He’d studied predictive modelling with intense curiosity, from the Wall Street speculators with their lemming-like urge for self-destruction, to the Shell Scenario project—which worked so well for the oil company’s bottom line that they used it to control an entire country’s destiny, pulling it back from the brink of utter chaos and into a peaceful future without most people noticing how it had been done.

He spent many of the years following the passing of technology creating his own scenarios, mapping out the possible effects of various actions. One of the last people alive found him, high in a tower, the perfect image of the mad wizard, drawn by the lights in the sky. He’d taken by that point, for lack of a big enough canvas, to lying on his back on the roof, prodding the air molecules until they glowed and sketching his projections through the sky.

The valley around his tower was lush and green and full of life. Beyond… there was not much. Heat and ruins and the last scraps of humanity barely hanging on in the far distance.

The scrap who found him was slim and young and very, very grubby. He was so startled to hear a human voice, and a child’s voice at that, that he fell off the roof, catching himself mid-air reflexively before coming to land on the ground, bent and robed and white bearded because it amused him still and he hadn’t had anyone to impress in a very long time.

Merlin wasn’t sure whether it was more surprising that the child was there at all, or that his display of magic didn’t seem to faze the child in the least.

A pair of ice-pale blue eyes peered out of the coating of dirt, and narrowed. “I said, why is the sky like that?” The child’s voice was high and clear, though the accent marked her from the far north.


“Why is it green here?” the child demanded, as if greenness were an affront, looking at the trees and grass. Possibly the first trees and grass that little bit of humanity had ever laid eyes on.

“Magic,” Merlin said, and when the child frowned, he laughed. “It actually is really magic. I’m exerting my will to keep the temperature and radiation levels here in a tolerable range, and keep the local climate pleasant.”

“Why don’t you do that for the rest?”

Merlin sighed. “It’s too complex, and I’m trying to figure out how to make it so that the whole disaster never happens. I can’t do both, and I’m too late. I’ve always been too late. I’m going to fix that.”
“How can you fix what’s already been done?”

“I have to find the right thread to unravel, and take it back to the flaw,” Merlin said.

“You’re daft,” the child said. “Can I have something to eat?”

Merlin nodded. “How old are you?”

“How old are you?”

Merlin stared at the child for a long moment, then froze time and looked, feeling his way around the child's past and future, what he could see of it easily, and sighing at the result. He released his hold and said, “You’re eight, though you look smaller, and I’m very sorry about your mum.”

“She was sick.”

“I know. You’re sick too,” Merlin said. “I could heal you, but this world won’t be habitable much longer, except here, for as long as I will it. You could stay with me, but I was planning on leaving soon. And I can’t take you with me. I can’t really even take me with me.”

The child looked at him, and said, “Can you stop them from breaking the world? Can you make it so my mum doesn’t die?”

“What I plan on doing may make it so your mum never lives,” Merlin said. “Maybe someday, someone like enough to her might, but it wouldn’t be her, and you wouldn’t be you.”

“But the world would be like this?” the child waved at the trees and grass and buzzing things.

“The world would be like this?”

“The world would be whole, some of it would be like this,” Merlin said. “The world was never all one thing.”

He looked distracted for a moment, and then said, “What have you got there?” He pointed behind the child.

The child turned around to find a plate full of food, and pounced on it.

It was nice for a long time. Zaira was lively, and smart, and asked questions that both delighted him and helped drive his research into new and better directions. He knew where to go, and how, but deciding what to do when he got there… he wanted to do it right.

For years, she asked for stories of Arthur and Camelot. Then she started asking about how the world fell. She was maybe seventeen years old when he told her how the thing that Uther started had snowballed through the years into a world where magic wasn’t, into a world where ever more artificial distinctions caused vast suffering. Where people poisoned the earth because they could, each thinking that their little misdeed mattered not.

One day she frowned at him, poked him with her foot and said, “It’s not your fault, you know.”
They sat on an overstuffed sofa, her toes tucked under his leg, pale blonde hair curling in unruly wisps around her shoulders, cheeks flushed in front of the fire. He kept seasons for the plants; it might well be the last cold place on the earth.

When she’d been smaller, she’d sat on his lap there, while he read from books or conjured amusements for her. As she’d grown a bit bigger, she’d shifted to his side, usually burrowing under his arm to lean on his leg while they talked. Now she had a book of her own and was leaning back into the arm opposite his. For the first time in his long life, he felt a paternal pang at how grown she was, that she was trying to take care of him. Oh, he’d felt paternal toward her since the day she’d arrived, but he’d never quite noticed just how fast she was changing, or that it mattered to him.

“Had I but spoken…” he started, and she rolled her eyes, setting her book down.

“If you’d spoken they’d have killed you, because you didn’t know then what you know now. You were what, my age? And Uther, he was the first tyrant?”

He gave a startled laugh and said, “Oh, no, he wasn’t the first, he was just the one who managed to turn the tide. There were worse men, but he was particularly… effective.”

“So am I responsible for the dying of the world, coming in thousands of years after people started burning things and mining and making things without balance, because I know you and haven’t made you go back and stop it when I know you can?”

“You’d die,” he said, flatly. “Worse, you’d never have lived. And you’re the first person I’ve cared about in so very long.”

Her eyes widened at that. “You could go back and fix the world… and you don’t… because of me? Truly for real?”

“When I go back is immaterial,” he said. “It changes nothing to allow you a chance to live. Someday you will die, and then I will go back, and while you might then never live in the new timeline, at least you’ll have had this one chance.”

“If you’d said a word then, you’d have died, or Arthur would have. You needed that timeline, needed this whole timeline, needed every bit of it to shape what you will do next.”

“Hurt like fucking hell going through it,” he said. “How’d you get so wise?”

“My whole life before I found you was pain from the day I was born until I saw your lights in the sky. But seeing beauty in the world and understanding it and knowing that there will be a better world, it makes it… not okay, but worthwhile.”

“I’m still amazed you survived to find me,” he said. He’d never actually asked her how she’d done it. He’d seen her pain at her mother’s death, and seen her on the verge of death herself and was far too used to keeping secrets to pry too far at the time. Humanity, though seemingly bent on self destruction on the large scale, had a remarkable knack for self preservation on the small scale. It wasn’t too strange that there were a few hangers on. It hadn’t seemed important, and he’d not realised how he’d craved company until a wee little girl had crawled into his heart. Some things did not bear questioning. Not then. Why hadn’t it been important?

“I don’t know,” she said. “I walked, and I dreamed, and I walked and I saw your lights, and I fell asleep, and then I walked and there you were.”

“What did you dream?” he asked, the hairs on his arm starting to rise. How had he missed this?
“There was a woman,” she said. “In old style clothes. She had three faces, and each face talked to me in turn.”

Merlin straightened, and turned, looking at her intently. “And what did she say?”

Zaira frowned. “I don’t remember.”

He stood up and came over to her side of the sofa, and pulled a stool over to sit in front of her. “I need you to think back.”

“Dreams go, why would it matter?” she asked.

“Because there was no one in walking distance,” he said. “Because I didn’t feel you until you were there.”

“You were awfully distracted,” she said. “You know how you get.”

“The closest were a hundred miles away, the last I’d checked. This is important. Can I help you remember?”

She nodded, and he put a hand to her cheek, though he didn’t really need to. He closed his eyes, feeling his way through the pathways in her brain, nudging a little here and there to help her recall. It wasn’t so invasive as mind reading, but it would help. He could feel the ebb and flow of neurotransmitters and electrical signals, found the unworn pathway to a memory long buried, felt her energy surge down the cleared pathway.

“I think—oh, it was so long ago—they told me to trust, though I’d never trusted. They told me to walk, that my feet would carry me farther than feet could go. They told me to love. They told me to let go. And they told me I was the last, and that my reward would be great. And they said to tell you that you could hand them the thread when it is time to unwind the spindle, and give them the spindle when you are done with it. What is a spindle?”

“Easier to show you,” he said, and a basket landed in front of them with a thump. He picked up the drop spindle, and said, “This.” Then he spun it, and fed fibres into the thread, which grew as the spindle moved slowly downward.

“What does it mean?”

He used his magic to show her then, hovering in the air, the most useful metaphor he’d found for the way time and the world seemed to work, tiny fibres of individuals winding together into a thread that coursed through a loom to weave a fabric of history. The image she saw was flat, and simple and only one thread, and when he stopped it, he said, “If I pull a thread at random, say, here, nothing happens.” He pulled a warp thread from the middle.

“It doesn’t look right, and it’s not as strong, but the whole doesn’t fall apart. Same if the thread is broken at random.”

The scene in front of them changed, simplified to demonstrate.

“But if I pull here,” he gestured, “the whole thing begins to unravel. But what is left is a mess that no one could ever fix. If I simply pull the selvedge loose, we are left with a mess of thread and no way to put it back.”

“What you are seeing is simple. Here’s what it looks like to me…” and at that, there were a thousand spindles weaving through an enormous volume of warp threads, and the simple flat
tapestry was a shimmering volume of threads.

“How could any one person ever…” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “How could you ever untangle all that?”

“Will,” he said.

“But you have to eat, to sleep, to breathe, that’s not even a place….”

“Zaira. I am a thousand years old, give or take.”

“A thousand years of eating and sleeping and—” she said, but he was shaking his head.

“I share meals with you because you are good company and you need me to be reasonably human most of the time,” he said. “I eat sometimes because I enjoy eating. I sleep because it is a useful state for processing data and feels nice, and I am in no hurry. But my body is a habit, a form to carry my spirit around in that lets me interact with the world on a meaningful level. I once went 50 years without eating or sleeping or even really having a body because it wasn’t convenient at the time, and when I was done, my body came back out of habit because I wanted it to.”

She poked him. “Feels real enough to me. And seems like if you have that much control over your body, you’d do something about those ears, or that grey beard.”

He’d allowed his body to age again long before he’d met her, because he’d been old almost as much as he’d been young and some things were just easier without all the surgings and nonsense young bodies tended to if one didn’t monitor them constantly. “The ears are fine,” he said. “The beard is nothing.”

And it was gone, like that. He let some of the years fall away, bringing his apparent age to his late 40’s, keeping some of the lines, allowing much of the black hair back, but not all. Old enough to be her father.

She tipped her head to one side, and smiled. “What did you look like then?”

Inwardly he sighed, but he knew she’d keep asking until he did it, so he closed his eyes, and let his body change to the form that still felt most like him when he was doing anything but magic.

He opened his eyes and glanced downward, not surprised to find himself in his old servant garb. He gave her a slightly sheepish smile and said, “Like this.”

She stared, and put out a hand to touch his cheek. Merlin saw something change in her eyes. He stood up, turned, and let age bend him. “Enough,” he said.

“You were beautiful,” Zaira said.

“I was an idiot. Still am, apparently.” His voice was gruff, and she frowned.

“I don’t understand why you look like this, when you could look like that. I know your body pains you.” She put her feet on the floor but did not rise.

“Because in this form, I am focused,” he said. “I don’t feel the pain when I’m working because I’m barely connected to my body at all.

He turned to look at her, and could feel the end coming, another mistake he’d made piling on all the others.
“Stop that,” she said. “It’s still not your fault, whatever is turning your face that way.”

“Where did you come from?” he finally asked.

The answer was not three walks and two sleeps away, but across a sea. They’d never talked geography, she had no idea that she was in Wales. So he conjured a globe, and said, “This is why this dream was important.”

He showed her where she’d come from, the far, far north indeed, her accent coloured not by Scotland, but by Norway. He’d seen so much language drift in his life that his association with north, linguistically, had more to do with invading Norsemen than native Scots. Her accent had shifted close to his soon after she’d arrived.

“If you didn’t bring me here,” she said, staring long at the globe, “and magic is gone from the world—who did?”

He put his hands around her face, touched his wrinkled forehead to her smooth one, and closed his eyes, looking for the answer more directly now.

He felt a pair of rough hands on his cheeks, and his eyes flew open.

They were standing in the cave rather than his tower, crystals dark around them, only the faintest glow illuminating the old woman standing in front of him.

“Where is Zaira?” he said, bringing his guards up.

“Where you left her,” She answered. “Be at ease, Emrys. I can’t waste time fighting you.”

“What do you want?”

“Only this. We know what you are attempting. When Arthur fell, we searched forward as far as we could reach, to the end of the earth itself, and found you still there. Those of us who are left have been watching you, and we think you have a chance of success. But you will need us, and need us in our past.”

“She saw you as the triple goddess,” he said. “I thought after the Disir, you would be my enemy.”

“I have always known your heart, Emrys. I could never hate you. I was angry, for a time, but once I knew… We will help you, though there will be a cost.”

“Always a catch,” he said. “What is it this time?”

“You have lived the hard road forward,” She said. “You will live it twice more. Back along your path to see every mistake, every repercussion. No matter how many times you look now, you will feel it more when you let the years unwind. And you must live it forward once more, into the bright future you hope for. Many wish for long life, you know already it is not a blessing, but a curse, to be unable to die.”

“Will I ever?” he asked quietly.

“When we made you, we never intended you to be forever,” She said.

“Made me—”

“You were a Beltane child, and your mother gave herself to Us as vessel, your father to the Green Man, and when they stumbled into a cave in the forest, we… cheated. His… priest and my
priestess entreated us, and so we allowed them to twist the world for a night, in order to bring balance."

He looked at her, curious.

“They stumbled from that cave near Ealdor to this one, days away, and they lay here. It allowed us to spin you bright from more than your mother and more than your father and in the moment of your conception, we tied you to the magic that you have wounded so deeply. Someday you will die. But not until you’ve lived thrice over and made amends.”

He found it almost comforting, to speak to someone who blamed him as much as he blamed himself.

“It will take me a hundred times the time it took me to get here to unwind it all,” he said. “More than living my mistakes backward, I will live all the others backward, too.”

“No.” She turned from him, and placed her hands on the walls. “You will start here. You will release the threads of time. Channel them into the crystals here, let them do the unweaving. It will be only your thread that you follow down, to bring you back to the point you seek. Let the unmaking take care of itself. You will have to live it backwards, unable to change anything but at the point you stop, and forward from there. You will be our anchor.”

Something nagged at him, and she watched, patient.

“If you made me, you put me into the world unknowing, and expected—I was doomed to fail from the start. And you made me… to help Arthur? Or counter him?”

“You needed failure,” she said.

“You knew.”

“All nows are now for me,” she said. “It was likely. But we thought that success might be possible, in the fullness of all.”

“And this future?”

“Will be unmade. It will exist only in how it changes you, as a memory.”

“So I will destroy billions,” he said.

“To save trillions. To save everything. They asked for our help that you might be created to pull the world back from a disaster of Uther’s making, to help shape the bright blaze of our favoured son into a nurturing source of light and life, rather than the funeral pyre Uther was determined to generate. We gave you what you needed, and here you are.”

“And Zaira…”

“I said there would be a price. She will stay here until you reach your destination, my hands in the cave to help the unmaking. You will never see her again as she is, once you have begun. But I promised her a reward, and there shall be. I will weave her thread back through time. When you are done, she will always have been part of me.”

“It will destroy her,” he said. “What is left will be something else entirely.”

“Aren’t we all?” the goddess said. “You will destroy your younger self, but for your memories.
Ask her if you want. She would have been dead years ago but for this.

She began to change then, growing taller, less stooped, and her whole body shone as her hair darkened.

“You look like her,” he said. “My mother.”

“She was a favourite,” the goddess said, kissing his forehead. “As are you. All’s not lost, my darling boy. You have only just reached the end of the beginning.”

And with that, he found himself in front of the fireplace, Zaira’s face in his hands.

He released her, and fell to his knees, weeping,

“You’re young again,” she murmured. “What did you see?”

“I know why you’re here,” he said. “And I can’t bear it.”

“I’m here to help you,” she said. “I would rather have the world whole than have me whole while the world burns.”

And of course the goddess had let her see, he realised after. There had always been too many secrets; this, finally, was the fundamental lesson.

It would be a few more years before he realised that his observations of the past were probably the source of most accurate prophecies. Merlin stopped, as soon as he understood, looking at important events. That he might have been part of the cause of Morgana’s sleepless nights didn’t bear thinking about. Quantum physics and magic were entwined in ways he didn’t, still, fully understand, and the observer effect was very real.

The magic came to Zaira when he taught her, as easily as he’d ever seen anyone pick it up except him, and he taught her for another ten years. Knowing now how he’d been made, he spun some of the fading tail of the magic of the world into the fibre of her, and it became easier still.

She asked him often to be young again with her. He refused, finally saying to her, four years into their studies, “You are as close to a daughter as I have ever had or likely ever will. I would not be young with you, because every time I look at you I see my child, trusting me, and I will never break that trust.”

She rolled her eyes at that and said, “Don’t be ridiculous, Your heart is with Arthur and always has been, or you wouldn’t be doing this.”

He stared at her. “You don’t want me young because you wish a lover?”

She laughed. “You hurt. You spend your energy worrying about nonsense. And you’ve lived a thousand years and through every possible breakdown of every possible cultural norm, and you think I want you young so I can jump you? I want you young because you look happier when you are young, and your body doesn’t hurt you. Besides. You’ve taught me enough magic that if I want a lover, I can conjure one, for a while. And do.”
He looked completely scandalised. She cocked her head. “You mean you’ve never whipped up a friendly blonde warrior for a little slap and tickle?”

“What **have** you been reading?” he asked.

She just laughed. “Be young. I promise I won’t sully your virtue, no matter how pretty you are when you let the old man go.”

It was more fun being young, as inconvenient as it was to deal with the hormones again. When he complained, she just rolled her eyes and said, “Well, then be a little older. I didn’t mean you had to be seventeen again.”

“No, that will come soon enough. Too soon.”

“Only you would be looking at a walk back through a thousand years and saying the destination is coming too soon,” she said.

“It was so bad. Fear, constantly. Hiding. Watching people die because of what I dared not do.”

“You will not be seventeen again,” she reminded him. “You will be you. And you will not hide. And you will not let people die.”

“Except you,” he said.

“I will be there.”

He wrapped his arms around her then, and kissed the top of her head. “Not like this, my girl.”

“I haven’t been a girl in ten years,” she said. “And you will be too busy to miss me.”
Chapter End Notes

This art is the first I saw for this project. Procaffeinating is amazing. Seriously. So blessed.

The Shell Scenarios are a fascinating project. My mother studied apartheid in college, and it was a general consensus in the 70s and 80s that there was no way South Africa would end apartheid without a massive, bloody civil war. The Mont Fleur scenarios are an example of how storytelling can change the world. As awful as oil companies tend to be, this is an important lesson to understand. I learned about these from the amazing Robbie Davis Floyd at a Midwifery Today conference, years ago.
He stands now in Uther’s chamber with Arthur, Uther, Morgana and Gaius, preparing to send his message to the magical folk. The reach of what he is doing is huge, and he finds himself staggered by the scope of mentally touching every magic-using being within travelling distance of Camelot.

He explains, mostly for Morgana and Gaius but partly to organise his own thoughts, “I’m casting a net over a large part of the world, to sweep them into a—” He pauses, as the metaphor he wants is about eight hundred years too early, and how do you explain a conference call or a virtual meeting to people who have never heard of electricity, let alone a telephone? “…Into a conclave.”

“Do we need a larger room?” Arthur asks.

“It isn’t physical. They, we… it’s not here, it’s in our heads, all of them. A otherworld space, of sorts. In simple terms I’m drawing their spirits temporarily to a place we can all communicate. And I find myself a bit tongue tied.”

“Well, that’s nothing new,” Arthur says. “Just pull them in and start blathering. Always worked for you before.”

“Thanks,” Merlin says with a laugh, “That’s exactly what I need.” And it is, really. He closes his eyes, wraps his fingers around his staff, and calls, feeling the whole of Albion and beyond, finding the points where those magically attuned rest, and catching their attention. He twists something, somewhere, making a bubble of time for those he wants to speak to, for those in the room with him, and the lot of them are suddenly in a vast circle in the otherworld space he’s borrowing. It is a strange amphitheatre, with a ragged, featureless grey sky hanging low over grey stones and greyer earth.

Across the world, people are stopping, their gazes suddenly unfocused. Where they are in battle, the battle simply ceases. Where they are working, they halt. Knives hang in the air, animals stand without running, water hangs unspilled. Their bodies still as their minds join Merlin and Arthur in the strange otherworldly space.

He knows in their minds’ eyes, he looks ageless, neither young, nor old — mature enough to be taken seriously, not so old as to be dismissed. He wears a simple grey robe. His face is bare. Those who might recognise him will only do so as he chooses. He brings Uther to the centre of the circle, and turns slowly. Thousands of eyes are watching, listening. Uther stands, head down, shoulders slumped, his children’s deaths playing over and over in his mind.

“I am Merlin Emrys.” His voice is as intimate in every ear as if he were speaking to each person individually in a small room. “And this man is Uther Pendragon. He has hurt us beyond measure.
His crimes, unchecked, will tear the earth apart.”

They nod, anger glittering in every eye.

“He is king, no longer.” Merlin says, and a murmur goes up. He fights the urge to shut it down, their voices just as intimate to him. But when he raises his hand, they stop. “He has been shown the damage his actions will cause if he remains in power, and has chosen to step down.”

“He should die,” more than one voice shouts.

“No.” Merlin says, loud enough that every voice stills.

“The legends that told of my coming spoke also of the once and future king.” And with this, he moves to Arthur’s side. “It is the greatest irony of our age that the worst enemy of magic should be the father of the man who will see magic return.”

“He is as guilty as his father,” calls out a tenor voice. “He has slain us, too.”

“Uther’s purge was entirely caused by his desire to revenge the death of his wife by magic,” Merlin says. “And thousands have died for that revenge.”

He allows his voice to deepen further, and says, “There will be no more revenge. Arthur will be crowned king one week hence. He will lift the ban on magic, and has already stayed the hands of those he commands to keep them from harming any with magic. He knows now he was born of magic, he knows it can be a force for good, and he understands that without magic, the world will die.”

The murmur is more bearable now, and he continues. “The ban will be lifted, but this does not mean that you may simply have your way. Coercion, theft, murder, rape, assault and fraud will not be tolerated by any means, magic or no. And trust that I have the means, the ability, and the will to stop it. Those who use magic for ill will lose it, and will be punished accordingly. I can look into the past and see the truth of it, I can look into your heart and see your intent. I can feel the magic within you, and I can separate you from it.”

He can feel their fear, now. “But this is not what I want to have to do. I want to build a better world, once which is not so fraught, not so frail. I have seen the future, lived a thousand years of it twice, and I would much rather have you at my side than at my throat.”

He can feel them watching him, all of them, and puts a hand on Arthur’s shoulder. Arthur steps forward, next to Uther.

“Merlin spares my father,” he says, “because he believes in redemption. He calls to you to join him, because he believes in redemption. He has come to us from the past and the future, to redeem us. He has offered his service to me, and I am humbled to become his king.”

Arthur’s voice is strong as he continues, “I bid any who would join us in peace to come here, to Camelot, that we may discuss the shape of this future. I beg forgiveness of any who have been harmed by my father, or by my hand at his request. Please know that if I could undo the crimes I did in his name, I would. All I can offer you is my shame, and my pledge to help heal the land and the people, to salvage what has been lost to the past and claim what has been brought to us from the future.”

Morgana steps forward. “I am Morgana Pendragon, daughter to Uther and daughter to Vivienne, and I will stand with Arthur Pendragon. I have witnessed Uther’s abdication, and heard the truth of Arthur’s commitment to peace and the return of magic.” She smiles, then, and says, “I would like
to learn from all of you.”

“The prophecies…” a voice calls out.

“One set of prophecies has already come to pass and been unmade,” Merlin says. “I was always told of two destinies, and the worst I have already lived. Now we shall fulfill the better.”

“Who are you, to control us?” This from Nimueh, the circle parting around her.

“I am a child of the last of the Dragonlords, conceived on Beltane Eve in the Crystal Cave where magic began, in the holy union of the Goddess and the Green Man.”

He can already feel Balinor pushing forward, realises Hunith is there as well, caught in his wide net by her own small magic. “In the earliest part of my long lifetime, in another spool of time, in the name of destiny, I sought to protect Arthur above all else, and that was my undoing, and his. Protecting him from those who would fight Uther, I slew too many who were vital to the old religion. Many of you stand before me now.

“Nimueh, I pulled lightning from the skies and tore you apart before I even knew a fraction of my own strength. I would not repeat that. I would not that it were necessary. I did not know then what I could do or what was needed, and I made many mistakes. We all did. You all would again, if I did not act.”

He looks down, and lets the man fall away, leaving the boy, dressed in his simplest clothing. He finds his mother in his mind, and pulls her out of the crowd and to his side with a smile. His voice is almost meek as he speaks with his younger voice. “I am also peasant-born. I have known hunger. I have known what it is to grow up fatherless. I know what it means to be poor and at the mercy of anyone with power. I know that there is little difference to most people whether they are oppressed by someone with a sword or oppressed by someone with magic. I know what it means to bow, to serve, and to be invisible. I know what it means for my life to be discounted as worthless, and worth less than another. And I know what it is to live with the fear of the axe every single moment, waking or dreaming.”

His voice hardens now, and his volume increases. “And I know that such oppression, in the long run, will tear the world apart. I will not tolerate it from sorcerer or noble, not from king or bandit or priestess. The shape I wear now is the shape I was born to.” He drops his mother’s hand, and senses Balinor’s eyes on them both. She drops back into the edge of the crowd ringing his circle, but he sees her find the dragonlord almost instinctively, their eyes still fixed on him.

At that, he lets his body shift just slowly enough that the throng can follow, letting his true age through in his voice as well, until he is bent and wizened, grey robe dragging, leaning heavily on his staff. He can feel all their eyes on him, but he spares a glance at Arthur, whose shock is profound.

He creaks, “I am now over two thousand years old. I witnessed the growth of humanity past ten billion souls, and then watched it dwindle to only one other than myself. I saw magic fade from the world until all that was left was a dim flicker in the crystal cave, and my own, and that of my apprentice. I saw wars beyond imagining, the growth of science until humanity captured the power of the sun but did not well bind it, and then I watched science destroy humanity in its own hubris and unwillingness to bend. In the end, all paid the price.”

He lets his body shift back to the point where he began the circle, lets the robes shift to Pendragon red, almost glowing, the single most vivid point in the entire landscape. His voice is deep, mature, potent. “My goal is to heal the world,” he says. “I don’t care about power, I have more than I need.
If you share my goal, I need take nothing from you. If you join us, you will prosper. If you fight, you will lose. I can find you anywhere. I’d rather not. If you simply want to be left alone, go forth. Refrain from hurting people. Do not take what is not yours. I require nothing of you but your peace toward those you encounter. If you want to learn, and grow, and help heal the wound in the world, come to me at Camelot. If you harm none, you will not be harmed.”

“Will you bring the old religion back?” Nimueh again.

Arthur speaks, “The old religion is no longer forbidden in Camelot. Enforcement of the ban has already been halted, the ban will be repealed after I am crowned.”

Merlin adds, “But know that the old religion will change as well. We are diminished when we do not value each human life. There will be no human sacrifices. The last one that will ever be, has already been done. I have the word of the goddess herself that she has no desire for the blood of babies, or to see the lives of any of her people wasted on stone. Where the cost of magic is a life, the cost is too high. The goddess will bless you if she is pleased with you. You cannot buy that favour with a knife.”

There is a murmur then, as a woman weaves her way through the crowd. She glows, her hair white, her unlined face pale, her eyes like ice. She is hard to look at, but even harder to look away from. She stops in front of him and touches his face with her hand, then turns to the circle. “I have walked from one end of this world’s time to the other,” she says. “Emrys does my bidding.” She turns to Arthur, then wraps a glowing, golden scrap that looks like pure magic around his arm. “My champion.”

Arthur kneels, and bows his head. “My lady.”

“He has my favour,” she says, turning to the assembled. “And he will wear the crown.”

She changes then, hair darkening, body thickening, the glow subsiding. “My wish is for peace, for healing, and for joy for all my children.”

Her body stoops and ages, and her voice creaks. “I made this world and I unmade it, and have given it a second chance. The purge was as much a punishment for the hubris of those who sought my favour with blood and violence as any crime of Uther Pendragon’s. I can end any of you. I ask not for your sacrifices now, but for your good works. Vengeance is mine and mine alone, and you will not further these foul ends with your misguided worship.”

In a blinding flash, most of the assembled are gone, leaving only those whose bodies are in Uther’s chamber, plus Balinor and Hunith and Morgause still in the otherworld. Merlin let his robes revert to servant’s garb, his face to youth.

“The great dragon comes to you,” Merlin says to his parents, as Morgause rushes to Morgana. “Both of you, please. I’d like you here for the coronation.”

“You set him free,” Balinor says. “That was risky.”

“It wasn’t, I knew he would obey. You died once in my timeline. It was enough.” Merlin reaches out then for both of them. “It was my fault, then. My hope is that coming by dragon you will be safer than going by land. That you might come, and stay.”

Hunith and Balinor look at each other and then at him, and nod, and disappear.

“Sister,” Morgause says to Morgana.
Morgana is curious, eyes wide, as she takes the offered hands. “I have only just learnt that you exist,” she says. “Had I known… I might never have been Uther’s ward at all.”

“I have been training since birth,” Morgause says. “You do not have magic?”

“She will,” Merlin says. “And I want nothing more than for her to learn, and learn from us both, but I must have your oath that you will not raise a hand to Arthur or Camelot for so long as they uphold the peace we will create. I would have you here, teaching, rather than there, plotting.”

“You have taken Uther down,” Morgause says. “You have given me my sister, and stopped the slaughter. Do you want the throne, Morgana?”

Morgana shook her head. “I do not think I want to become who I would need to be to take it. And Arthur is a good man. I trust Merlin.”

Morgause closes her eyes and reaches out, Merlin can feel her pushing around his edges, around Morgana, feels her peering at the history and searching for a hint of destiny.

“You broke it,” she says to Merlin. “You unmade….”

“It was the death of you, the death of her, the death of everyone,” Merlin says. “There are no prophecies that are valid beyond that which is as certain as I can make it, that we will unite Albion in an age of prosperity and peace for all its citizens. Everything from this point forward is new.”

“I will come,” Morgause says. “For my sister, if nothing else, but I am curious about the peace you plan.”

With that, she nods to Morgana and disappears.
Merlin’s eyes open, and in the chamber, Uther sags into Arthur’s arms. They lower him to the bed together, and Arthur speaks to the guard. As they leave, a servant comes in.

“Was that really the goddess?” Morgana asks as they walk away from Uther’s chamber.

Merlin nods. “It’s not the first time I’ve seen her. This time she wore the seeming of someone…” He stopped.

“The girl?” Arthur’s curiosity, of course, will not let it go. “You loved her?”

“Not like that,” Merlin says. “More than anyone ever was, she was my daughter. Not of my body, but of my heart.”

“A thousand years and you never fathered a child of your body?” Morgana asks.

Merlin keeps his eyes ahead. “No.”

“Lack of interest or…”

“When I came back here,” he says, stopping where the corridor branches, “I had to leave her behind, in a future that will never be. And she would not let me do otherwise, though I would have delayed a hundred years to give her more time to live.” He inwardly curses the vagaries of his young body, as his cheeks flush and tears prickle. “I was too busy for most of my life to even think about… courting.” It amuses him for a moment to realise how far he had had to dig for that word.

“Merlin, are you a vir…”

Arthur cuts her off. “Morgana, enough, Leave him be. I’m sure that if he has tales of a thousand years of debauchery, he also has the good manners not to soil your ears with them, no matter how you pry.”

At that, Merlin laughs. “Oh, Arthur, give Morgana a little credit. Her ears are no more fragile than yours, and I’ve had a long time to get over the idea that women are somehow more pristine in thought than men. In this time, they just hide it better. Sometimes.” And at that he shoots Morgana a look intended to be stern, but she is looking at him with such raw curiosity that he loses it completely, first giggling, then laughing, bending over and holding his stomach until his laughter takes on a slightly hysterical note.

Arthur looks concerned, Morgana looks amused, and Gaius is pulling a vial out of his belt pouch. He waves the pungent oil under Merlin’s nose.

Merlin breathes deeply and then just shakes his head, looking upward.

“So does this mean you’re actually a god?” Arthur asks.
“Eh?” Merlin shrugs. “No?”

“You don’t sound too sure.”

“Theoretically the fact that he’s not sure means he’s definitely not a god,” Gaius says. “However, there are many, many tales of those who are halfway between god and human.”

“Demigod might be a reasonable evaluation of my magical powers,” Merlin says, almost apologizing. “But I’m just me, and you’d think that if I were all that, I’d have done a better job the first time round.”

“Oh, the Romans had lots to say about the failings of demigods,” Gaius says. “I believe that as long as he holds the favour of his progenitor, he is functionally immortal and capable of near limitless feats.”

“Then why am I so tired?” Merlin asks, as all he has done seems to be recoiling into a serious exhaustion with the release of tension.

“Has the goddess any use for you right now?” Morgana asks, teasing.

For the first time in years, centuries, even, he realises that the answer is finally, “Nothing pressing.”

“Then come,” Arthur says. “Take the rest of the day off.”

Morgana opens her mouth, but Arthur shakes his head. “Later, Morgana. He already said he’d teach you, and you’re not going to pester him for lewd tales of the future today.”

“Fine,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I’m going to go make sure Mordred has been fed properly then.”

“And I find that my old bones are rather weary myself,” Gaius says. “Your room is waiting for you if you want it,”

“No,” Arthur says before Merlin can answer. “He rates his own quarters.”

And with that, he takes Merlin by the elbow, and steers him down the corridor, as Morgana and Gaius head off.

“My own quarters?” Merlin asks. “Already?”

“Well, it will take a few hours to set things up,” Arthur says, “but in the meantime, you may find mine suitable. I have much to work on, and the bed will be free.” He throws open his door and nudges Merlin toward the bed. He sits down at his desk.

“You know I can sleep on the ground, and that I can make anything comfortable enough,” Merlin says, but allows himself to sprawl onto the bed, which is, actually, quite suitable.

“I have an ulterior motive,” Arthur says.

“Why, I didn’t know you cared.” Merlin says with dry amusement.

“You’re a sorcerer,” Arthur says, “I’m sure the bed will be much more comfortable when you’ve slept in it. I’m sure the future taught you much about ideal bedding.”

At that, Merlin just laughs. “Arthur, I have so much to tell you. Later.” His eyes are already
Arthur pretends to work until Merlin is fully asleep, and then leans back in his chair, puts his feet on the desk, and spends the next hour staring in Merlin’s general direction, trying to sort out the sea change in everything he’s ever known.

The rumours are the first to arrive, but the druids follow soon after. Merlin wakens to Arthur leaning over him, apparently undecided as to whether it is worth the risk to upend a pitcher of water on Merlin’s head or not.

He can feel Arthur’s indecision, feels the shapes of the things around him without opening his eyes, and says, “I wouldn’t hurt you if you did but I’d really rather you not.”

Arthur startles so hard that he spills some of the water by accident, and Merlin sighs, opening his eyes to a dim room lit only by a banked fire and a few candles. “What time is it?” He sits up, brushing the droplets off his forehead.

“A few marks after sunset,” Arthur says, “The druids apparently started walking the moment you let them go back to their bodies. Why didn’t you stop the water from hitting you?”

“They weren’t far,” Merlin says. “And it’s just water. You’ve thrown worse.”

Arthur seems vaguely abashed. “I don’t know why you put up with me at all.”

“You didn’t know,” Merlin says. “And I know how you were raised.” And there were moments long ago in the future, standing next to the lake, where he’d cried to the heavens for another chance to have Arthur alive and throwing things at him again. “Also, it’s how you try to cheer people up, so I always took it as something of a misguided sign of affection.”

“You are a strange, strange man,” Arthur says, his look of utter confusion bringing a grin to Merlin’s face. “And there, now you’re smiling.” But he’s starting to smile, too. “I’m not sure I’ve ever had a friend,” he says. “It’s always so hard to tell, and so rarely allowed.”

“We need to bring in the men who will be your knights,” Merlin says. “They were, in truth, your friends, and had no respect for you whatsoever but what you earned.”

“And you?” Arthur asks. “You have come so far, and I can feel your loyalty to my bones, but you have had ten years where I have had mere months.”

“I can show you some of it,” Merlin says. “I wouldn’t turn you against anyone who is not now your enemy, but I… it would even things out if you knew more of what I know. It’s just…” He sighs.

“You said you hid things from me for ten years,” Arthur says. “I can understand, with the executions, why you were hiding up until now, but surely, some time there was some chance where I would have understood without the theatrics? If we were truly friends?”

The look of pure sorrow and regret on Merlin’s face sets Arthur back on his heels. “If I’d had the faith in myself to be that honest then, I would not have had to take ten years to gather the courage. I
only found it when I was afraid you were dying—and we had only enough time before you did die for me to realise just how stupid I’d been to hide for so long.”

He closes his eyes for a moment, breaking eye contact, and then looks up at Arthur. “I will show you some of the moments when I wanted to tell you. I hope you can forgive me. It was more lack of trust in myself than a judgement of your character.”

“After we meet with the druids,” Arthur says. “I confess I am curious…”

“They are good people,” Merlin says. “They will be better still if we stop killing them. I mean to form a school, and they should be at the heart of it.”

“Gaius will be thrilled,” Arthur offers Merlin his free hand to hoist him off the bed, then looks vaguely ambivalent.

“What?” Merlin says, taking the proffered hand and standing.

“I was just trying to figure out if it made sense to offer you a hand when you can probably fly. Can you fly?” Arthur asks.

“Yeah, but I don’t, mostly?” Merlin says. “It isn’t the most efficient use of energy. Mostly if I need to get from someplace to someplace else fast, I just,” and here his hands waggle around in the air in front of him. “And poof.”

Arthur’s eyebrows go up.

“And if I don’t need to be there fast, it’s usually because I’m with someone and then it’s kind of awkward. I mean, ‘Hey, I know you’re walking but I’m just going to show off and fly because I can,’ which just isn’t me.” Merlin realises that his speech patterns have not entirely settled, and wonders how strange the languages around him will get with the infusion of a thousand years worth of university slang and idioms from four continents.

“Plus, the easiest ways to fly, for me, involve either changing into a bird, which comes with its own issues, or bothering the dragon, which really comes with its own issues, or mechanical means, which haven’t been invented yet.”

“You can’t just…” And Arthur makes a strange flapping gesture with his free hand.

Merlin shakes his head, gives an annoyed sigh, and levitates. “Happy?”

Arthur drops the pitcher, which Merlin catches with magic and sets on the desk, instinctively.


“I honestly don’t know. You might just be that thick,” Merlin says, with an impish grin, landing easily on his feet. “I used it standing right next to you more times than I could count, but you seemed genuinely shocked when I spelt it out for you. I used it when I first met you, standing in front of your face, and a few feet behind you with the Afanc, and I wasn’t quiet about it. And more times than I could possibly count after.”

“You even confessed!” Arthur says. “I just… it wasn’t possible. I thought you were in love with Gwen and were lying for her.”

“I was the one who cured her father,” Merlin says. “I couldn’t let her die for it.”
“You shouldn’t have had to,” Arthur says, then turns. “You might want to do that thing. With the robes.” He waggles his fingers.

“You mean, get dressed?” Merlin asks.

“Do you even have clothes? Or are they just grown out of your skin?”

Merlin laughs. “I have them. I can take them off. The robes are… I just…” he waves his hands, and his clothes alter from tunic to robe, this time slowly enough that Arthur can watch the material shift and change. “I’m using what they are, and just nudging them.”

At Arthur’s look of confusion, Merlin continues, “I figured out a way a long time ago to quickly change my clothing with magic. It’s like, oh, when you tell the steward to prepare for the midsummer banquet. It’s shorthand for ‘send someone to collect flowers and make sure the maidservants have the linens ready and put the table out in the big hall and for the love of tiny goat gods don’t serve the good stuff past the first pour, have the knights hunt a boar and a stag and Cook should be already baking for days,’ but you don’t have to tell them that, you just have to tell the right person at the right time, in the right way, ‘Begin.’ That’s the spell.

Arthur chuckles, comprehension starting to dawn.

“The magic follows the form because the intention is clear. If the intention isn’t clear or you don’t ask the right person in the right way, the feast won’t be very good and might be very expensive. And it’s possible to simply yell loudly enough and have people scurry off to whip something together, but it takes a much larger act of will and personal authority than knowing what to say and who to say it to and just how you need to inflect it to get the best result.”

“So you have personal magic servants who know how you like things, and you just say, ‘now’ and they do it?” Arthur asks.

“Nothing so distinctive as a magical servant,” Merlin says, with a wry tip of the head. “That’s more your department. The magic doesn’t really have will or intelligence, but it has patterns and can be bound in them. It’s easier to do something complex if you’ve done it before. If you’re in a thick forest, would you rather walk through unbroken undergrowth, or down a cleared path? The magic will go where I tell it, but it goes easier if it’s already been.”

He looks around the dim room and every candle brightens. “I’ve been lighting candles with magic since I was a toddler. The only thing easier is a mental shove.” Another glance, and the bed makes itself, the clothes align themselves in the wardrobe, becoming clean as they sail across the room. All the dust in the room shifts and the air sparkles for a moment, then clears as the dust vanishes. They hear a distant shriek and the faint clatter of dropped cutlery as the remains of Arthur’s supper vanish.

“Did you just send my dishes to the kitchen without warning Cook?” Arthur asks.

Merlin grins sheepishly. “Yes?”

Arthur raises an eyebrow and looks around the room. “Cleaner than you’ve had it in months,” he says.

“Easier with magic.”

“We’ve kept our guests waiting,” Arthur says.

“Want to see how I get around when I’m in a hurry?” Merlin doesn’t wait for a response, but grabs
Arthur’s elbow and they are suddenly there, outside the council chamber, in front of a very startled pair of guards.

Arthur pulls his arm back, looking aggrieved, and fails to come up with a suitable rebuke before the door opens. He takes a breath, plasters a welcoming expression on his face, and walks into the council chamber, with Merlin trailing behind.
Merlin immediately recognises the druid chieftains, Aglain and Iseldir, and as he sees them start to kneel to him, he stops them with a thought. *To Arthur, if anyone. Never to me.*

They bow their heads to Arthur, but do not kneel.

“We have come,” Iseldir says. “As Emrys requested.”

Arthur takes a seat on the throne. Merlin moves to his usual spot just behind Arthur, but that gets a frown, and Arthur gestures to the guard, uncomfortable with taking his father’s seat before the coronation and even less comfortable with Merlin standing behind him like a servant. A few moments later, they are sitting together to one side of the room, in similar chairs arrayed in a small square.

“First,” Arthur says, once they are seated, “We have a young druid boy, Mordred, here. My sister is quite taken with him, and his father is dead at my father’s command, despite my strong objections. I do not know whether he should come to you or stay with her, but the issue must be broached at some point.”

“We would, of course, welcome them both,” Iseldir says, “But I believe Emrys may have another idea?”

“We need a school,” Merlin says, bluntly. “Most in Camelot who have residual magic do not know how to use it. Few in all the land are literate in any language, and the people suffer for that lack. Your people, above all that I have ever known, have the healthiest attitude toward magic, and the strongest ethos. The damage I have seen in the future can only be prevented if your philosophy forms the basis for all coming progress. But the only way we can truly find the balance you value so highly is if each and every person has training and understanding and the opportunity to find their place in the world, independent of accidents of birth.”

“Not all have the ability to learn magic,” Aglain says. “Would you teach a blind man to read?”

“A blind man may read with his fingers one day,” Merlin says. “Deaf people will speak with their hands and hear with their eyes, or with devices that simulate hearing. Not all knowledge is magic. I saw a future without magic where little children could talk over great distances, where a day’s journey could be completed in half an hour, where the stuff of the world was so well understood that a child could go from birth to death and only ever see open flame as a party trick, yet be warm, fed, and protected their whole life.

“I would not duplicate what created that magic-without-magic as it was, as the cost was a world run amok, the very weather twisted, the seas boiled, in the name of unfettered technology. I would see a balance between the two philosophies, and cautious progress toward stable human happiness.
And many who could learn enough magic to ease their lives considerably never will because they are never given the chance to try.”

“Would you upend this whole social order?” Iseldir asks.

“Frankly, yes,” Merlin says. “I have seen in my life a servant made royalty, peasants made knights and seen them exceed not only any idea anyone had of what a commoner could be, but every knight and most royalty gone before. I myself was born in poverty, and spent years at the mercy of those known to be nobly born. We will not get rid of it in a decade, but we will get rid of it in a lifetime, whether yours, or Arthur’s, or mine, I know not. The inherent inferiority of women, of peasants, of anyone not born to the nobility… it is an idea that will die rapidly with education.”

“Yet you crown a king,” Aglain looks bemused.

“Kings aren’t incompatible with egalitarian societies,” Merlin says. “Oddly enough, some of the most equal societies of the future happened to be monarchies, but explaining future politics is a topic for a grand university, not a peace treaty negotiation.”

“Is there a negotiation?” Iseldir asks. “Or are we to be presented with our fates?”

“What do you seek?” Arthur asks. “If you could have any terms you wanted?”

Aglain responds. “We wish to be allowed to live and travel and keep to the places we have always kept. We want our holy sites to be respected, our stolen artefacts returned. We want a guarantee that we will not be punished for the practice of magic, nor persecuted for our faith. We have never stopped practising our religion, and we will not. And we want our homes back.”

“Magic cannot be used to commit crimes. Punishment will be for criminal acts, and will not be more severe for acts committed with magic than they would be for a similar crime committed without.”

“Currently magic itself is a crime,” Iseldir says. “Who defines which acts are criminal? What protection have we from the arbitrary whim of the king who may change the law at any moment?”

“In the short term,” Merlin says, “I ask that you place your trust in me, and my faith in Arthur as a profoundly fair-minded man. His instincts are excellent, and given the freedom to act in the way his conscience governs, he has a rare talent for justice and a surprisingly fundamental understanding of fairness for one of such lofty upbringing.

“In the long term, it will be the great legacy of Arthur’s rule, the creation of a system of law that is not dependent on the whim of one ruler. The advantage that we have, that others have not had, is that I spent much of my life studying more human history than any human being could ever hope to see, and the study of law and governments occupied almost as much of my time as the study of science.

“I will create a library, and one of the tasks of the school, and eventually the university, will be to help create enough understanding of the possibilities that we may craft a system that will survive and allow humanity to thrive in the longest term.”

“For now,” Arthur says, “The primary concern I have is with the use of magic to defraud, torment, injure, murder, steal or control others. In those areas, magic provides a significant advantage that cannot be easily countered, and the end results are as severe or more so than if such acts were accomplished by other means.”

Merlin hears the edge of the rapid-fire conversation flicking back and forth in the two druids’
“We can accept that,” Aglain says, “So long as we have a voice in the ultimate rule of law.”

“My hope is that everyone will have a voice,” Merlin says, “once enough people are educated enough to understand what the choices really mean.”

“If you give me a map of your holy sites, and the lands you are wanting,” Arthur says, “I will make every effort to keep my knights from those spaces if you want them kept out. Where there is a dispute of territory between you and others, I ask that you come to me for mediation. Where there is an issue between us for specific lands, I hope that we can come to a peaceful decision between us. I am not unreasonable, but likewise I ask that you keep your requests to what you need. I want to learn more about your religion, and my preference is that faith itself never be a crime, though we may act or take action to prevent religious observances which harm others.”

“What is your intention for the lands you wish to claim?” Merlin asks.

“We wish to protect and preserve them,” Iseldir says. “Humanity encroaches on fragile places, disrupting the magic of them, and throwing things out of balance.”

“Would you accept the role of stewards of all the wild lands of Camelot,” Arthur asks, “and advise me on ways of finding balance between the needs of the people and the needs of the land, as my subjects?”

The Druids look at each other, clearly surprised at the scope of the request, and Merlin almost coughs when he realises what they’re about to ask.

Aglain turns to Arthur. “Pledge yourself to the land, the whole land, and we will pledge ourselves to you.”

“You need to explain that to him,” Merlin says.

“There is a rite,” Iseldir says.

“Of course there’s a rite,” Arthur says, looking at Merlin. “There’s always a rite. Do I need to run naked through the woods wearing antlers? Climb a mountain wearing nothing but a bearskin in order to drink from a sacred stream? Or is it one of those rites?”

“Well, I suppose you could use the rite of congress with the favoured of the goddess under the full moon,” Aglain says, “But the same could be accomplished with an oath in the grove in front of the druid assembly at noon on the solstice.”

Merlin actually does cough at this, and Arthur looks at him strangely, then turns an odd shade of magenta when he realises who the goddess has most favoured recently. His mouth twitches in amusement as he realises that Merlin has not looked so profoundly discomfited by anything in days.

Iseldir adds, “And drinking from water from the sacred stream from the sacred cup, of course, but that’s a given. We mix the water with honey and let the goddess bless it for a few months, if that helps.”

“Mead, you mean,” Arthur says. “You want me to come meet the druids, swear an oath to the land and drink mead. Is there anything else?”

“Well, we eat of the sacred foods.”
“So, oath, drink, feast… Dancing?” Arthur asks.

“If one is so moved,” Iseldir says dryly. “Sufficient quantities of the sacred stream tend to lead to more festivities, but they aren’t required.”

“Including moon congresses, I suppose. My father led me to think you sacrificed babies and had wild orgies to appease dark forces,” Arthur says.

“Your father had an agenda. We value life. While some of the old religion seek power through dark means, we would no more harm a child than put a sword through our own bellies. As for the other… sex can be a holy act, but never by or for coercion. We value peace, and peace through force or threat is no peace at all. Sex is a choice, never an obligation, not even for a king.”

“But an heir must be produced. I’ve always been told that part of my duty as King is to wed and continue my line.”

“By any means?” Iseldir asks.

Arthur looks away. “No. My father went too far, though I would not go back and change it even if I could.”

“Nor I,” says Merlin, and Arthur wonders for a moment if he could have, truly.

Merlin explains, “You could marry for love and produce no heir despite your best efforts. You could die before being wed. You could choose not to wed at all, and adopt an heir. You could tie your hand to someone you never expect to be able to bear. You could marry for state and produce an heir who might be completely unsuitable.

“You are under no obligation, cannot be under an obligation, because there can be no guarantee without stronger magic than any of us would have the stomach for. Your kingly nature was in many ways bought and paid for. The price was extraordinarily high, and something that your father will never truly see the joy in, for such is what happens when the wrong question is asked and the wrong price paid for the wrong goal.

“His mistake may yet be proven serendipitous, but only because of the actions that were taken after the purge to ensure mitigation of the great evil that once ensued.”

Merlin pauses, and then continues. “There are many ways of deciding a leader. I saw the most powerful countries in the entire world choose a new leader every few years, with almost every adult having a chance to cast in their mark for the candidate they would support. And yet the countries did not fail or go to war every time their leadership changed. The most stable countries of all had complex balances so that the fate of the country did not sit only on the shoulders of one person.”

He looks at Arthur. “Even in the great monarchies, the kings and queens were mostly symbols, with some small authority but answerable to the rest of their governments. Women led, men led. Some were married, some were not. When the population was highest, before the end, love and love alone was expected to determine marriage. Even love did not require marriage at all. Even marriage itself changed over time.

“Here, now, women are treated as property unless by force of will and luck they manage to assert control upon the death of a spouse or father. If they are lucky, they have a gentle partner who treats them well, but if they do not, they have no recourse. Then, a woman might marry another woman, own property independently, work in her own right, control when and how she had children…”
“You married but did not produce a child, and died with no heir, and your lady succeeded you, but the pressure on her was relentless to the day she died, and that pressure tore Camelot apart. One of the things the future was starting to get right was the assertion that no human being should be compelled to marry, couple, or reproduce but by their own free will and in their own time, and they managed to completely separate the act of reproduction from the act of sex by the end.”

“You spent a long time studying that part of it, didn’t you, Merlin,” Arthur says, but behind his tease he is struggling to take it all in.

“I’ll tell you about the hippies some time,” Merlin says. “It was educational. They thought they were trying to be druids. It was hilarious, but also a little sad. Also quite a lot of fun. The eradication of the druids set humanity back at least eight hundred years where the ethics of sexuality were concerned.”

“So is there really a ritual that involves…” Arthur waves a hand. “That.”

Merlin mutters, “Beltane.”


Aglain nods in Merlin’s direction. “Emrys has the right of it. But even there, always by choice. Most choose to honour the god and goddess in that way, but some do not. Some never do. I’ve seen partners paired for life, wed or no, who always find each other, and those who love but wander for festivals in celebration, without it breaking their primary bond. There is one family in a neighbouring tribe where they are as if wed, five of them, all together. I’ve seen bonds of three stable for a lifetime, though it is not common. Your geas on coercion rings true, as we view dishonesty as coercion, and possession as evil, be it by magic or be it by more mundane manipulation. Neither has any place in worship or relationship.”

“Three?” Arthur says, “And not jealous?”

“If balance is found, and care is taken, such things can be stronger even than the strongest pairing. If there is no balance, it matters not whether a person is alone; wed to one or bound to ten, they will find no joy.”

“Make that nine hundred years,” Merlin says under his breath.

“But if a woman weds a woman,” Arthur says, puzzled, “Then…”

“I’ll explain it to you later,” Merlin says firmly. “I believe we’ve laid enough ground, er, so to speak, that if we take some time to word a draft, tomorrow we might come to a conclusion satisfactory to all. Are there rooms…”

“While you were asleep,” Arthur says, and rises, nodding to the druids. “If you would be our guests till the morrow, we can further discuss this with a draft in hand.”
“I don’t know, Merlin,” Arthur says in his quarters. “Mead, feasting, peace. Do you think we’re up to the task?”

“Oh certainly,” Merlin says, failing to keep a straight face. “Pity Gwaine will have to miss it.”

“One of your future friends?” Arthur asks.

“And yours. One of the best.”

“Can’t you just… “ Arthur wiggles his fingers.

“Gwaine is tricky,” Merlin says. “We met in a bar fight, and he promptly got himself thrown out of Camelot for saving your life, twice. He doesn’t like nobles, but he does like you, but it wasn’t a given, and of all the people I would call to your side, he is the one who will take the most convincing. I was for a long time his only friend.”

“Can you show me?” Arthur asks.

“Lie down,” Merlin says.

Arthur frowns.

“Look, it might take a while. I don’t want to stand, and I don’t want you to fall into your soup. So if you want me to show you, lie down.”

“I think I liked you better when I didn’t know you could kill me with your eyeballs.” Arthur says with no real heat.

“I always told you what to do,” Merlin says. “Always. And mostly you did it. Now you just know it’s happening, so I don’t have to pretend that things are your idea, and I have a better chance of you listening to me when I say important things like, “Oh look, there’s someone trying to kill you.”

Arthur turns around involuntarily, and Merlin grins. “See, much safer already! Do you want to see it or not?”

Arthur stands and goes to the bed, watching Merlin with some suspicion as he arranges himself on top of the bedclothes.

Merlin pulls a chair over and sits next to Arthur’s elbow. “What I did for… to your father, was truth, but it was put together in such a way as to emphasise the wrong. It was not inaccurate, but it was not complete, because he did not need to see and experience every single moment to get the
important parts.

“I needed—we all needed him to see in absolute terms how much actual damage he personally caused to the people he cared about. My intention here is not to create distrust, or to make you think less of anyone, or to push you, and I could, with unbridled and unlimited truth, do all three. So this will not be everything. If you want clarification or you want to see more of something, you may ask, and I may tell you why I don’t think it is a good idea, or I may show you. If you ask me again, after I’ve suggested something is not necessary, I will tell you. Is this acceptable?”

“I’m not sure I want to see what Morgana did that broke my father so completely,” Arthur says.

“Some of that is woven too tightly to what you need to know to leave out entirely, but part of the reason I am here now, instead of a few years from now when you are already king, is that I believe she can yet be helped to stay at your side, as the friend and confidant you’ve always known. She was twisted and manipulated, and literally poisoned—by me—before she truly became evil.” He looks bereft at the memory.

Arthur turns on his side, considering Merlin for a long moment. “You love her. Even after all you’ve seen. Even after she did things that brought the great Uther Pendragon to his knees just at the thought of them.”

“I love,” and here Merlin hesitates, “Many people. I was never in love with her in the way you’re suggesting, but even at the last, when I put a sword into her heart, it broke mine to do it.”

“You said atonement,” Arthur says. “I thought you meant atonement for lying to me or for destiny gone wrong, but it’s atonement for what you did to her….”

“If it were just Morgana,” Merlin says, “I’d have let the future die, if I could have died with it. The larger part was the sense of failed destiny. But mostly, I’d failed you. I was waiting for you, and when it became clear you weren’t coming, I came back to fix it because you deserved so very much better than I gave you, than your father gave you, than the world gave you.

“Morgana was your worst enemy at the time, but even there, you were the most blameless of the three of us, and never did understand her betrayal, because you didn’t realise that she was hurting you to hurt me and to hurt Uther, and by the time Uther was gone, hurting you had become a habit and a goal she could not break.”

Arthur puts up his hand and rolls onto his back. “I think the first thing you need to show me is what the hell I ever managed to do right to deserve such loyalty.”

At that, Merlin’s mouth quirks up in a half smile. “You had my loyalty when you believed me against a knight. And when you chose to defy your father to save a child. And a hundred ways before, and a thousand ways after. But I can show you.” And with that, he reaches up and pulls down Arthur’s hand to the side of his head, and puts his hand on the side of Arthur’s head.

Arthur starts to comment on the strange intimacy of the gesture, when Merlin’s eyes flash, and suddenly he is seeing. And more than seeing, feeling, hearing, knowing… He sees through Merlin’s eyes rather than Uther’s judgment, for once. Sees through his own eyes, experiences he’s never had except now he knows—there are so many moments, hours, days.

There is no narrative. Some of the situations make sense; some don’t. Clearly much is omitted but the thing that is constant is Merlin, watching him, protecting him, tolerating him beyond all reason, and the magic… he watches time after time where Merlin uses magic over Arthur’s shoulder, next to him, in front of him, saving his life again and again.
“How did I not know?”

He thinks he’s said it aloud, but the answer comes in another flood of images, and he hears Merlin’s voice inside his head. *I think you did not know because I did not want you to know.*

And yes, it could be that simple. He can tell from some of the snippets that Merlin was anguished at the time by the mistakes he had made, by his failure to save lives, his fear of discovery… his use of magic had not been perfect, which means his control had likely not been perfect either, and a hundred dropped pitchers and plates and armour pieces tell the story of the struggle he’d had keeping it in check.

He can feel Merlin’s amused agreement as images keep coming. So that is Gwaine. And Elyan, who is Gwen’s brother (though there are strange holes through that memory). Percival. And he knows Lancelot. It warms his heart to see them all, knights, once he has seen the courage and bravery of each, the skill rivalling his own.

The last image staggers him. He doesn’t know whether it is more overwhelming to see himself dying, or to see Merlin so completely broken. Merlin has shown him all of his last few days, and he thinks he might, maybe, grasp how one person could devote fifty lifetimes—destiny was one thing, but he finally realises that in all his life he has never known such unconditional love.

*Is that why you won’t tell me about my queen…* and he knows he didn’t say that aloud, but the recoil from Merlin makes him regret the thought almost instantly as Merlin’s hand drops away.

“I didn’t mean that that way,” Arthur says as he opens his eyes and looks over to find Merlin sitting back in his chair, his expression unreadable. “What you showed me was not… it was… I don’t know how to…”

“You don’t have language for it,” Merlin says. “I loved your queen as a dear friend and fought for her to be at your side because you wanted… you needed… there were so many bad choices and she was someone you could love and trust, but this time, this place has no context for the notion that it is possible to love several people at the same time without betraying any of them. Here…”

And Merlin leans forward again, and shows Arthur strange people in a strange time and a strange house. He knows none of them but senses that Merlin had lived there once. They are making food with strange devices, but that is not the important thing. Four people, young but not children, talking—though their accents are strange—and laughing. Then a woman turns to each in turn, kissing them and laughing and leaving, and he realises he’s seeing it from Merlin’s perspective as an outsider. Another—whose gender is not clear—kisses the others and leaves. The two men who remain are suddenly wrapped in each other until Merlin teases them to “get a room”, the sound of the words so strange, but the meaning clear. They laugh at him and move around Merlin and Arthur can feel Merlin’s amused tolerance as one of them smacks Merlin’s rump as they move past.

The scene shifts, and they are all a bit older, there are six adults plus Merlin at a table, and several children, and one of the children says, “Uncle Em, tell us a story!” Arthur has a sense that Merlin is visiting, and without effort he simply knows the history. These people lived their lives together, some leaving, some staying, some lovers, some not, and it is simultaneously the most complex and most simple family that Merlin ever witnessed. Part of him had yearned to fall into it, but he’d always remained on the periphery.

It fades, and Arthur asks, without opening his eyes, “When was that?”

“1997 at the first,” Merlin says. “In a country that might never exist.”
“So long…. You sound sad about it, that country,” Arthur says. “Were they all married to each other?”

“Even then, the law had no language allowing their kind of family,” Merlin says. “They used binding legal oaths they wrote themselves to describe their joint ownership of property and obligations to one another, but there was little protection beyond that. But they loved, and they allowed each other to love, without jealousy, and together they thrived in a way many could not under more supposedly traditional structures.”

“Why won’t that country exist?” Arthur asks.

“It was a conquest made hundreds of years from now, of a land already well-occupied. You know how sometimes when a stranger from far away comes to town, sickness follows? Imagine a thousand strangers from farther away than you could imagine, bringing the worst sicknesses our people have faced, all at once. Imagine whole towns and villages dying. We must advance our medical skills significantly before we can make contact without that devastation. Develop the healing arts to the point where our curiosity isn’t the ruin of two continents. That one wasn’t your father’s fault, by the way, but if we succeed in uniting Albion and beyond, it will be preventable.”

Arthur’s head swims with the weight of years. “And when will… did… that happen? How do you keep this all in your head?”

“Roughly three hundred years from now, the first large expedition would land, if we did nothing. And I think if I didn’t have help, I probably could never keep it all.”


“Human enough,” Merlin says. “But not entirely human. Human enough to love, and grieve. I’m human enough to feel joy and rage and all the things that people feel. But my body is more of a convenient container for carrying my soul around than a full necessity. Which is why I don’t die.”

“Nice trick, you’ll have to show it to me sometime,” Arthur says, dryly, and then immediately regrets it, when Merlin leans forward and shows him Merlin’s own death, and again, and again until Arthur rolls away from Merlin’s hand and leaves his face turned away until the shaking stops.

“Merlin, how could you bear it?”

“One simply does,” Merlin says. “I bear it because I don’t stay dead, and there isn’t a choice.”

“The pain you must have felt…” Arthur rolls back. “Did it hurt?”

“Lots of things hurt,” Merlin says. “Dying was nothing compared to losing you. Losing everyone. And even those deaths paled compared to the pain of failing so badly for so long.” At that he grins, “But I’m the luckiest bastard who ever lived.”

Arthur looks vaguely horrified.

“I get a second chance,” Merlin says. “And while I’m sure I’ll mess something up, most of the mistakes I ever made boiled down to not enough information or not enough skill.”

“You never allowed yourself love in all those years? Marriage? You said you took care of one child…”

“I had affection,” Merlin says. “Friends, sometimes. Companionship once in a while. But I spent the majority of my time from the time you died until the world ended working on figuring out how
I could get you back without ripping you from the otherworld. Waiting through every major political disaster next to the lake in case she finally sent you back to me. All the while thinking on every mistake I’d ever made, until coming back was the only option that could possibly make sense.

“When you’re working on something like that… unless I’d had someone able to be at my side, knowing what I was doing and working with me, it wasn’t going to be possible to connect. The biggest gulf between you and me, the entire time I knew you, was that you didn’t know. I wasn’t going to do that to another person. So yeah, I had friends. I don’t know how to go through the world without connecting to people, apparently, but I didn’t let them in, not truly. Zaira I could love, but I had to leave her, and I always knew it, and she loved me but she knew it too.”

At that, Merlin looks away, and says, “Even you, I didn’t let you in until the end, and it wasn’t until that last moment that you truly accepted me, and in the next breath you were gone. I don’t think I ever regretted anything more than the fact that I only had that moment of you actually seeing me for who I am and not turning away.” He’s human enough for tears.

Merlin doesn’t see Arthur reach for him, but finds himself being pulled up onto the bed. He hesitates, looking slightly perplexed. “Lie down,” Arthur says, and points at his upper arm. “There.”

Merlin does, looking younger than Arthur can ever remember seeing him, and finds himself engulfed in a hug. It takes him a moment, but then he relaxes against Arthur with a sigh that feels like a breath he’s been holding for—yes, that long. It turns into a sob, and he feels a hand on his head, feels Arthur lean a cheek against his hair, he can’t tell whether he’s sobbing or laughing but something that was wound tight beyond belief around his weight of guilt and grief has just released and he has no idea how to contain it. He lets it flow away, because there’s nowhere else to keep it.

“You told me once,” Merlin finally says into Arthur’s shirt, when he is able to speak, “that no man was worth my tears. But you were wrong.”

“That I could be worth yours,” Arthur says, “is something I may have to work a lifetime to live up to.”

“Just please, make it a longer lifetime this time around,” Merlin says. “I don’t think I have it in me to do this again.”

“T’m just trying to figure out how I can possibly be king, with you sitting there beside me knowing all you know, and not feel ridiculous,” Arthur says.

“You have a knack that I’ve never had, for leadership. I’m fine sitting in the corner and observing and letting you know what I’ve seen. You’re the one who makes people want to do what needs to be done. Your ability to inspire, to draw people to you….” Merlin shifts back a little to look at Arthur. “You persuaded people who should have been your enemies to love you. You motivated people—who were at the point of giving up—to not just fight, but win.”

Arthur stares at him for a long moment, with an exasperated expression Merlin has seen a thousand times before.

“Merlin, is it possible that you don’t know? That you don’t see? Most of the people you showed me who ever loved me, did it because they loved you first. They followed me because you followed me, because they saw me through your eyes. Before you changed… came back… you’d already changed me simply by looking at me and expecting me to be better than I thought I could possibly be.”
“Then trust it,” Merlin says, putting a hand up to Arthur’s head.

The images that flow are moments, but they are all essentially the same moment. Merlin, saying “Don’t go.” And Arthur, going anyway because certain death (not so certain now, come to think of it) was better than not leading, than betraying the trust of his father, his people.

“How faith does that,” Arthur says when Merlin’s hand slips down to the arm he’s lying on. “And I suppose I will become the king you need me to be, because it is who you see me as, and who I was born to be.”

“You could walk away,” Merlin says. “There’s always a choice.”

“And yet, I couldn’t. Because I wouldn’t, because that’s not who I am, and not who you need me to be.”

“I will never force you,” Merlin says then, his words ringing like a vow. “You tell me you want to walk away from it all, I’ll build you a cottage and do the best I can to move things forward without you. Morgana could lead well under the right circumstances.”

“She’s my heir, you know, or will be,” Arthur says.

“Just so long as it’s not Agravaine,” Merlin says. “That man is a snake. Never, ever trust him.”

“He’s always been kind.”

“He blames you for your mother’s death, as unfair as that might be,” Merlin says. “It is possible that with Uther deposed and Morgana on your side, he will not come slinking around trying to insinuate himself into your council, but I doubt it.”

“So you think he’s not redeemable?” Arthur says, surprised. He knows from what he’s seen that Morgana, Morgause, Nimueh, and many of the people they’d spoken to had been enemies of Arthur’s in the other time, enemies of Merlin, too, and yet Merlin had not spoken such a bold warning against any of them.

“I’m saying that you will never know and should never trust him. His advice cost you dearly, cost Camelot hundreds of lives, nearly brought us to war in the first days of your reign. And I warned you a dozen times over before you finally saw. The one thing I hope you understand is that I would never, ever lie to you about something like that, and even if I might once have misled you out of fear, I have nothing to be afraid of now. No fear of discovery, no fear of rank, no fear of someone else’s greater power. I have no motive whatsoever for lying to you about this.” Merlin’s tone leaves no room for argument.

He sighs. “Not every enemy you ever made was due to what happened with Morgana, and many of the enemies we fought will still need to be fought or stopped, but hopefully with less fumbling and less loss of life. Odin’s grief will not vanish simply because you are King three years early. Cenred will not suddenly stop being a power hungry arse and an awful king simply because he no longer has Morgause propping him up. Caerleon is likely to make a move when the abdication is announced. It will take several shows of power to stop some enemies, and others we may simply have to fight. There will be some assassins who come, or try to come anyway, and I’m sure there will be sorcerers who decide to test my power despite everything. I can help where the threats are familiar, and where they are not, but please, know that you can trust me.”

“You’ll have rank enough to stand up to them on rank alone, where that matters,” Arthur says. “I know you like fading into the background in servant’s garb, but I’ll not have any man, anyone
misjudge you that way again. How many blows did you take simply not to be found out?"

“All of them,” Merlin says. “Even from you.”

“That you can lay this close and love me still when I treated you that way….”

“Now who’s being a giant girl?” Merlin says, echoing words Arthur may never say again. “Do I wish you hadn’t done that? Certainly. But you have been raised in a culture which treats servants so much worse, and I was making a choice because it was the better choice. You, above all, I know can be redeemed, because I know that it is not a far leap for you to make. And you, being you, and born to royalty, can lead those with less benefit of… perspective… where someone like me could not. All I ask of you is that you work to learn better. And if I see you treating someone badly, I may explain to you exactly what it is that you’re doing.”

“Oh?” Arthur says. Merlin’s eyes have a strange glitter to them, and he knows Merlin wants him to ask, so he does. “And how would you do that?”

The sensation of a tomato smashing into his face doesn’t actually surprise him, and he realises that Merlin is sharing a memory of the stocks. The scene shifts and he feels a sudden, sharp pain in the back of his head, and whirls around to see… himself, smirking, a cup rolling away. It shifts again and he feels a deep wave of frustration, Merlin’s frustration but he feels it in his own chest, as he dismisses a warning. But the next scene shows him Uther, doing the exact same thing, and he feels Merlin’s fear as he sees himself reach for the poison cup, and feels the quiet calm as Merlin swallows poison so that Arthur can’t. Then he sees an unfamiliar hill, and himself doing the exact same for Merlin, and for the exact same reason, but he’s feeling Merlin’s frustration and fear and that ever present undercurrent of affection and resignation.

He pulls Merlin’s hand from his temple but doesn’t let go.

“I’m sorry…”

“Quit apologizing,” Merlin says. “I don’t need it, and it will get tedious, and it’s not necessary, not now. I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t forgiven you. The only reason I haven’t forgotten is that I am really bad at forgetting anything.”

“I think you do. Need it, that is,” Arthur says, still not letting go of Merlin’s hand, holding it between their chests. “You need to know that I see you, that I understand, that I trust you.”

“And do you?” Merlin says. “I mean, the words are good. This is better,” and he squeezes Arthur’s hand. “Watching you lead, helping you build a better future, that is truly what I need. I need you to listen when I warn you, and understand that I’m always, always on your side, even if maybe you don’t know what your side is sometimes.”

Arthur looks like he’s trying to be annoyed by that, but a grin seems to be overwhelming the stern look he’s trying to muster. “I don’t even know what this is,” he says, squeezing Merlin’s hand back. “This whole thing is ridiculous,” he says with a nod and an eyeroll that seems to encompass everything. The grin wins.

“Which part?” Merlin asks, deadpan. “The part where I came back in time to save your sorry behind, or the part where you finally figured out that I’m not an idiot?”

“I was actually thinking about the fact that I’m lying on my bed with the most powerful sorcerer, oh, I’m sorry, warlock who has ever lived, and I’m holding hands with him and grinning like a fool and I don’t even care that I’m going to be crowned king in a week. I’ve been terrified of taking the
crown my entire life, and I am just not even worried. I should be enraged at my father, and I just feel sorry for him.”

Merlin is staring at their hands, and blinking rather oddly. Pursing his lips, he finally says, “Yes, well, I can see how that would be disconcerting.”

“You needed a hug.” Arthur says, as if it explains everything.

Merlin snorts, and shakes his head and starts chuckling.


“I’m just not sure anyone in the history of ever has needed a hug as badly as I did right then,” Merlin says.

Arthur rolls onto his back, and drags Merlin over against his side. “Well, don’t get used to it,” he says. “I’m not cuddly.”

Merlin snorts into Arthur’s shoulder, and mutters something.

Arthur cranes his neck around and says, “What?”

“You’re the most physical person I’ve ever known,” Merlin says. “If you are truly determined to stop demonstrating affection by throwing things at me, I’d be a fool to think you wouldn’t figure out some other way of doing it.”

“Still not cuddly,” Arthur says. “This is just because you need it.” Then he yelps. “What did you do to my feet?”

Merlin pulls his hand loose from where Arthur had it pinned against his chest, and waggles his fingers, mumbling, “Took the shoes off. Tired.”

“Yes, well, now my feet are cold,” Arthur says, and Merlin tips his head up to grin at him.

“Yes, well, aren’t you lucky that you are being not-cuddly with a powerful warlock? Hold still, this may be a little bumpy.” Merlin’s hand gives a little flick-wave.

Arthur can’t help yelping when they float momentarily above the bed—which he can just see blurring into a weird shimmer in his peripheral vision. Merlin’s arm snakes under him and around his shoulders, and there is a strange flutter everywhere as he is abruptly in his sleepwear.

“Merlin…”

“Like I haven’t been getting you ready for bed for months,” Merlin says with a yawn, and they sink down onto an entirely different bed surface.

Arthur spreads his free hand out on the smooth sheet below them, and says, “That…” The bed is more comfortable than anything has a right to be. “Now you’re just showing off.”

“Was your idea. What it’s made of doesn’t exist yet,” Merlin says. “I’ll explain it to you when you’ve spent some time at university.” He makes another gesture and the covers slide up over them, something fuzzy wrapping itself around Arthur’s feet. “Just nudge that down when your feet get hot,” Merlin says, and with a last flick, all but one of the candles wink out. Merlin’s hand drops back down flat against Arthur’s chest.

“You could have left the shirt on,” Arthur says. “You’re going to drool on my shoulder.”
“Yeah,” Merlin mumbles. “But ‘s magical drool.” And he is asleep a moment later.

Arthur reaches out to the table next to the bed, and snuffs out the last candle, covers Merlin’s hand with his own, and is surprised at how quickly sleep overtakes them.

Chapter End Notes

*An incomplete list
exaltation
examination
exasperation
excitation
exclamation
exclusion
excogitation
excoriation
excortication
exculpation
exemplification
exemption
exercitation
exertion
exhalation
exhaustion
exhibition
exhilaration
exhortation
exhumation
exoneration
exoration
expansion
expatiation
expectation
experimentation
expiation
expiscation
explanation
explication
exploration
explosion
exponentiation
exposition
expostulation
expression
exprobration
extemporisation
extensification
extension
extenuation
externalisation
extinction
extirpation
extraction
extrapolation
exultation
Merlin went to America when people started calling the new administration Camelot. It took little effort to get close enough to the presidency to meet JFK, and even less effort to know that it was anything but magical. The charisma was there, but he was no Arthur.

The world was at war again in the East, and it felt like the same nonsense. Britain was only tangentially embroiled this time, even America wasn’t even touched by its enemy other than the constant loss of brave young people and huge social unrest.

He left the Capitol and walked across that strange wide land. It was remarkably easy to do with such good roads and so many vehicles willing to pick up a bearded stranger. In the absence of wild beasts and magical monsters, the young people he encountered went on “vision quests” and sought to find “nirvana” through the ingestion of various substances from the oldest herbs to the newest chemicals. Bards abounded, though they now called themselves “folk singers” and Merlin let himself sink into hippie subculture for several years because it felt as familiar as anything in the strange land of the stranger future.

“Back to the land” meant that he could easily slide into a commune and lose himself in physical work. LSD meant he could get away with magic, sometimes blatantly, because the children didn’t know any better and the flower children assumed that if they weren’t on acid at the moment, they were just having flashbacks.

The extensive discussion of political systems was particularly useful, and the surge of feminism put what had happened in Camelot into an entirely different perspective.

One night, after quite a lot of beer and weed, Merlin drunkenly explained to a rapt audience of hippies that it was all Uther’s fault for killing the old religion, that the loss of magic was the subjugation of female power, and that the druids had had the right of it all along.

He woke the next morning in a pile of mostly nude bodies to find that his words had shifted the group into a nature religion, and extricated himself before they could turn him into their cult leader, thus sparking a renewed interest in Arthurian mythology he’d spend decades being annoyed by.

Newspapers led him to the South, and the civil rights movement, where bravery abounded and evil ran rampant alongside. Here, he helped where he could, and watched, and learnt, and failed again, and then things shifted, a war ended, technology surged, and things got really, really weird. He spent the 80s in Europe moving from university to university, both in the West and in the East, watching as an economic war of military buildup and social unrest fractured one of the largest countries the world had ever seen. He was in Berlin when the wall came down, and it was one moment that gave him hope that perhaps all was not lost, that the world could right itself.
The nineties were great. He went back to America and to Berkeley, where he both attended school and studied the rising computer empires of the Bay Area. Nowhere else in the world was the social structure changing so completely, so quickly, and yet even in the face of new civil rights battles around gender and sexuality, the old racial, gender and class divides persisted. Money, not birth, divided the nobility from the peasantry, but even the brightest women and anyone born of the ‘wrong’ parentage had to struggle to push into that moneyed class, and even then had to work incredibly hard to hold onto every gain they got.

At the university, idealism abounded, and activism, and he found himself in a circle of friends for the first time in a few decades. He didn’t let go the way he had in the sixties, but stayed on the edge of that strange and wonderful family for years. They called him the quiet one, and he would smile at that. Every once in awhile he would let them pull him into one of what they called “puppy piles”, which usually involved quite a bit of nudity and surprisingly little sex, but he avoided immersing himself in the complex sexual relationship and often travelled, resisting the urge to let himself love them as he knew he might. If he didn’t love, then he wouldn’t have to feel guilty for hiding and as dangerous as revealed magic had been in Camelot, it would be nothing on the media circus possible in the late twentieth century for sheer inconvenience.

He’d had to refine his travel techniques after the twin towers fell, which involved learning how to work magic with electronic systems. He’d always been an expert at forgery on paper, and at first, the databases had made it much more difficult. Then he moved to Seattle for long enough to really learn computing in depth, and with the noise of a million radio signals in his soul, finally managed to parse it all out. Genetics and microbiology were next, and then medicine, which reached a high point in the late 2020s, before the environmental damage caught up to the human race in ways that even surging efforts in technology and medicine couldn’t fix.

Magic could have, if there’d been enough people using it, but he’d tried to teach someone only once in the previous five hundred years, and had failed spectacularly. It was not until Zaira that anyone had shown the least glimmer, and he’d visited enough travelling circus acts, magicians and even spent an entire winter in Vegas trying to find even a spark of real magic. Flimflammy abounded, and outright fraud, but stretch as far as he might and the only magic seemed to be in his own body and the cave.

He’d tried, once, to affect the global situation, but only managed to trigger a hurricane. Unravelling time was actually simpler than changing more than the most local of weather.

When universities started closing, and the population started declining, he returned to Wales, to the lands near where Camelot had been, to the dry lakebed, to the Crystal Cave, and there, he quietly made his home until the end.

The disappearance of most of the people had by then been a relief. His magic, so tightly contained for so long, spilled out, gushed out until he could walk through his land for a day and never see how bad it was beyond his reach.

It was in that time that he really started working on magic as a skill. He’d used it, of course, as needed, for most of a thousand years, but it wasn’t until the last fifty that he really allowed himself to attain mastery. Looking back into the past, he would read spellbooks and watch ancient sorcerer’s workings, enough to create new books in his present. Once he’d sussed out technology’s knack for storing, organising and accessing data, he applied many of the same principles in his own mind and in his staff. He wouldn’t be able to bring much into the past with him, but information, properly stored, could recreate anything given a proper outlet.

The more he did with his magic, the more he could do with his magic. And the more he did
something, the easier it became to do a second time. He started playing with building, with creating actual structures from magic.

When he finally mastered looking into the past, finding a book, and duplicating it in the present without reading it first, he knew that he’d be able to not only go back for Arthur, not only prevent the destruction of magic in the world, but that he’d be able to help the entire human race leapfrog over the destructive parts of scientific discovery, to build a new world in the past that retained the knowledge of the present.

He applied programming principles to his magic, and figured out how to automate some of it. Magic seemed to flow like water into familiar channels, and with enough study of how persistent enchantment of objects worked, he started working on techniques to automate many of the processes of complex spells. Zaira came in, and helped with much of this. Once he had another in the flesh who could throw magic at him and unexpected challenges, he was able to truly master the skill he’d been born with.
Arthur wakes to an empty bed with the trailing edges of some of the strangest dreams he’s ever experienced evaporating as he opens his eyes.

Merlin is sitting at Arthur’s desk with a large pile of paper and ribbons, mumbling as he looks intently at the single sheet in front of him. His eyes flash, and he rolls the paper, tying it with the ribbon. Another intent look and a flash, and he sets it aside.

“I dreamed… I’m not sure what I dreamed,” Arthur says. “There were castles made of glass, a house made of white stone. And dancing? And quite a lot of naked people. Including naked people dancing? I’m not sure I’ve ever seen that many naked people.”

Merlin glances up at him. “Sorry,” he says. “I do more remembering than dreaming when I sleep.”

“The naked people…” Arthur says, eyes widening. “That’s a memory?”

“The 1960s were a really strange decade,” Merlin says. “1995 was its own kind of odd.”

“So you dream about naked people when you sleep?” Arthur asks. “And I have to know that?”

“You were the one who insisted I needed a hug when I was falling asleep,” Merlin says, then picks up another sheet of paper. “I actually wasn’t trying to shock you. I wasn’t trying to share anything at all. I was asleep.”

Arthur starts to say something, but Merlin puts up a hand, closes his eyes and says something over the sheet of paper. “I’m sorry, you were going to say something?”

“What are you doing there?” Arthur asks.

“Summons,” Merlin says. “I figured out how I wanted to get people here. I have to do most of it individually because each one is unique. This, for example, is for Percival. He’s not the most erudite, so when it is in his hands, it will communicate directly. Removing the ribbon from the paper or untying it will release a memory for him, a true memory from my past, of why he followed you. If he decides to come, it will speed him along. Should the request for their presence bear your signature?”

“You want me to sign?”

“Not necessary, I just want your permission before I put your signature on it.”

“I don’t think I want to know why you can forge my signature,” Arthur says.
“Did it the hard way often enough. You weren’t fond of paperwork, I did a lot of it for you.”

Arthur blanches. “Oh God. Merlin, you’ve gone and made me king.” He flops back on the bed. “Do you know how mind-numbingly tedious most of what my father does is?”

“Sorry,” Merlin says. “Oh, actually. Not sorry at all. Your father was a terrible king. As in a giant, fearsome, destructive force of nature. A very strong king, but I honestly don’t know how he managed to make you into a good person. And yet he did. Or rather, you are. Because of, in spite of, I don’t know.”

“He’s still my father,” Arthur chides.

“Which is why he’s not dead,” Merlin says, bundling up Percival’s summons. “You’ll do fine. I’ll help. We’re going to invent bureaucracy. Most of the tedious stuff can be done by other people.”

“Ugh,” Arthur says, and pulls the covers over his head. Or rather, tries to… the covers seem to have acquired a mind of their own, and the ensuing struggle dumps him on the floor. “Merlin.”

“You have to get up,” Merlin says, pointing at another sheet of paper, which flashes, rolls and ties itself in one motion this time.

Arthur finds a boot next to him on the floor, and lobs it at Merlin’s head. The boot flies through the air, gets about a foot away from Merlin, and then abruptly straightens, drops, and scampers to the corner. “Merlin, did you frighten my boot?”

“Told you. You can’t hurt me unless I let you,” Merlin says, and starts pointing rapidly at the pile of paper.

“Why didn’t you just do that in the first place?” Arthur asks, when he stops. “Seems faster.”

“It gets faster the more I do it,” Merlin says. “Now, with your permission, sire, may I summon your future knights and allies to Camelot?”

“You need my permission?” Arthur says, climbing to his feet, bemused at the formality.

“It is, in fact, your decision. If you choose to meet them later, that’s acceptable, too, but I think you’ll have more fun this week if they’re here, and I think Camelot will be safer for it. Oh, and just so you know, Kilgharrah is going to be here on Coronation Day. Having potential allies see that you have an unchained dragon on your side will be useful in treaty negotiation.”

Arthur stares at Merlin, and then starts to smile. “Merlin, you have a knack for this.”

“No,” Merlin says. “I have training. Mostly from you, actually. You have a knack for this. Everything I know about kingship, I learnt from you. Well, most. Lots, anyway. The noble bits.”

“There are a dozen scrolls there. Who are they for?”

“Lancelot,” Merlin says, picking up one scroll. He tosses it into the air, and it turns into a little white bird and flies out the open window.

“Isn’t a bird a bit slow?” Arthur asks.

“That’s just showmanship,” Merlin says. “I sent the scroll to Lancelot’s hands directly, summoned a bird and sent it out the window.”

“Showmanship would be letting me believe you turned a piece of paper into a living thing,” Arthur
“Too trite,” Merlin says. “A million stage magicians have done the same trick, and it’s always a trick. Besides, isn’t it more impressive to create a bird out of nothing at all?”

Arthur shivers a little, and Merlin points at his wardrobe without looking. Clothes fly at Arthur, who ducks.

“Percival,” Merlin says, touching that scroll, which vanishes. He touches the next in turn, “Elyan. King Odin. Stop fighting the clothes, Arthur.”

“He wants me dead. Could you kindly stop attacking me with my shirt, Merlin?” The clothing drapes itself over Arthur’s screen.

“Odin tried to kill you many times. It’s tedious. He ended up an ally. I’m hoping we can short-circuit that process. Annis and Caerleon. Cenred.”

“I allied with Cenred?” Arthur asks, disbelieving.

“Oh, no. He gave a sorceress an army, which she made immortal, and then she killed him as soon as she was done with him. Should my efforts with the magic users not be sufficient, I’d like to limit their allies. He’s an utter prick and a terrible king, but I believe an appeal to his enlightened self interest may prove fruitful. Otherwise, I plan to gut him with a dagger by hand.”

“I thought you were merciful,” Arthur studies Merlin, trying to reconcile the mage’s words with the fundamental goodness the man normally radiates. And when did he stop thinking of Merlin as a boy?

Around the time he aged two thousand years overnight.

Merlin snorts. “Not when it comes to protecting you or Camelot. His army killed hundreds, including nearly all of the Knights currently serving. And you forget, I grew up in his kingdom. I know what life is like for his peasants. He can join us, or he can die, and I honestly don’t have a preference.”

Arthur looks thoughtful. “You wouldn’t kill him with magic?”

“No, I’d hold him with magic, slide a dagger into his gut, and hold him there with magic until he dies. I might even bother explaining it to him.”

Arthur winces. “Remind me never to make you angry,” he says. “If he comes he might bring his army.”

“Any bearing arms who bear ill will to Camelot, our people or you will find that they simply cannot cross our border with their weapons. If they don’t bear ill will, they can come armed, but if they try to use their weapon against you, it will become very uncomfortable for them very quickly. And you make me angry all the time, but you aren’t a terrible underhanded human being who sacrifices his entire army to become the living dead just so you might be able to tup a sorceress.”

“Please tell me he didn’t end up tupping my sister,” Arthur says.

“Not that sorceress,” Merlin says. “Which one of the many is irrelevant.”

“How much of that kind of magic can you do without getting tired?” Arthur asks.

“Once it is in place, it’s self-maintaining until I take it down,” Merlin says. “Putting it up? A few hours’ effort, but not so much that I couldn’t function, if need be.”
“Surely there are limits?”

“No? Or at least, I haven’t found them, and one of my more recent magical acts was to spend a thousand years rewinding time without pausing.”

“You had to experience it as that long?” Arthur asks.

“That I was able to do it that quickly was a boon from the Goddess,” Merlin says. “That it went that slowly without stopping was my punishment for failing so spectacularly the first time around, as she wanted me to pay attention… That I could do it at all was a gift in every way.”

“How are you sane?” Arthur asks. “I mean, you’re not, because you’re you, but you’re _you_ and you’re not… broken.”

“Think about…. running a race,” Merlin says. “A long one. The kind where you run and you run and you run until you think you are going to drop, and then you run some more…. and you win. You have energy at the end, despite being more tired than you’ve ever been. Could I rewind time again now? Probably not. Does every other piece of magic seem trivially easy compared to that? Pretty much. Now imagine you’ve run a race like that, and had a few days to recover, and then someone asks you to jog across the courtyard. It feels like nothing at all.”

Arthur nods.

“I didn’t really exist as a body, per se, while I was rewinding time, so I didn’t get physically tired, as there was no physical anchor that my soul and spirit were tied to at that time, other than the metaphor for the act that I was doing.”

“Didn’t exist… what were…” Arthur blinked, then stopped. “No, keep going. I’m not sure I want to know.”

Merlin continued, “As soon as I landed in my body, I was exactly as rested as I’d been at that moment… which was not very, but I had the pent up energy of a thousand years of pulling apart magic. I was bubbling with it. Still am. I think that the unwound years went into the source of magic and magnified it, as the whole world is brimming with potential energy that just wasn’t there before, not like this. I need sleep because I’m letting my body be a body, and this body hasn’t actually died yet, much, I don’t think, and it feels good to sleep, and it especially feels good to sleep in someone’s arms, but it would take more than I’ve done to actually exhaust me, and I’m not even sure that’s possible. In some ways…”

Merlin stops talking because Arthur has stepped up to him and put his fingers on Merlin’s lips to silence him. “You’re babbling,” Arthur says, and then cautiously pulls his hand away.

“I’m vibrating,” Merlin says. “Read this,” and he hands Arthur a long scroll.

“You wrote the peace treaty.” Arthur stares at the words as the scroll unrolls before him. “How long did you sleep?”

“Until I couldn’t. I don’t need much. I had to _do_ something.” Merlin’s toe starts to tap a little.

“You already put down that geas, didn’t you,” Arthur says.

“And I’m still vibrating. It’s actually a little unsettling.”

“Sit,” Arthur says, pointing at the chair behind Merlin.
Merlin sits, and Arthur marvels at the sheer ridiculousness that is Merlin obeying him without question. Arthur grabs a chair from up against the wall and flips it around backwards behind Merlin’s chair, straddles it, and puts his hands on Merlin’s shoulders. “Does this help?”

Merlin nods as the humming energy settles.

“Now explain to me the other scrolls. I’ll read the treaty when you’re done.”

Merlin’s magic makes editing the treaty simple, when Arthur has suggestions for improving the flow and the legal weight of the document. “Handy,” he comments, sitting up to look over Merlin’s shoulder, when the words change on the page while they are talking.

“In the future, all the words would be composed in a machine, without ever being on paper until they were absolutely done, and sometimes not even then,” Merlin says absently as he manipulates the words on the page.

“Com-puters,” Arthur says, the word already in his brain but tripping as it comes out of his mouth for the first time. His arms are crossed over the back of Merlin’s chair, hands resting absently on the other man’s shoulders, his head leaning on his own arm.

Merlin turns and looks back at him, tips his head, and grins. “You actually got more than just naked dancing from my dreams, then?”

“You didn’t actually do much of that naked dancing, did you?” Arthur sits up straighter.

“Enough to debauch Morgana’s maiden ears,” Merlin says, turning back to the scroll, “But not enough to really scandalise anyone of that time. I messed around, but it wasn’t… I’ve seen enough to know that sex, sexuality can be a profound thing, or meaningless. I tried just enough of the meaningless to stop feeling incompetent at it, but once I’d reached that point, it wasn’t really worth the bother for its own sake. And Uther’s apparently experience-based exhortations against the seeding of bastards were never far from my mind. The last thing I wanted to inflict on the magical future was children with even less support than I had and my own inheritance of power.” His voice is flat.

Absently, he continues, still looking at the treaty. “Oh, that reminds me. I need to talk to Gaius about contraceptive options. You would be amazed at how much good can be had by simply allowing people to pick and choose when and how they have children. If Nimueh had known a fraction of what I know about medicine, your mother could have been helped to bear you without ‘upsetting the balance.’ ”

Arthur scoots his chair so that he can see Merlin’s face, turning the chair around and straddling it. He nudges Merlin’s leg with his boot while the mage studiously ignores the prodding. “So that’s how you managed not to seed bastards while gaining… experience?”

Merlin shrugs, still looking at the scroll. “For the most part, I didn’t do my experimenting with women.” When Arthur doesn’t respond, he looks up, and snorts. “Oh for Goddess’ sake, Arthur, close your mouth. You look like a fish.”
“But I’ve seen you have crushes on girls.” Arthur looks intensely confused. “I know there was something.”

“I’ve been in love with a woman,” Merlin says. “Not a year from now. Finding her and preventing her death is high on my list of things to do.”

“But…”

“The future uses the word ‘bisexual’,“ Merlin says, “to describe people who are attracted to those of either, or in some cases any gender. I honestly don’t bother worrying about it, as it is so rarely relevant. I love who I love, and I tend to be attracted to courage, strength, and beauty, though the last is not entirely necessary. I’m not even particularly ‘sexual’ at all. I like it fine, it’s just not what drives me. So you don’t have to worry that I’m going to…” Merlin makes a gesture in Arthur’s direction. “Simply because I’ve slept with men and have devoted myself to your safety and destiny doesn’t mean that I’m going to pressure you to sleep with me, or to be more specific, to develop a carnal relationship.”

Arthur blinks, startled, perhaps, but not horrified. “I hadn’t extrapolated it that far. I suppose you know from future me all there is to know about my own history…” Arthur starts, but Merlin sets the scroll down.

“No, I don’t,” Merlin says. “I saw you infatuated, I saw you in love, but while I was with you as your servant, the only person I know you were with was your wife. And I didn’t ask about the time before you met me, and I didn’t look when I was working on coming back. We were friends, but we weren’t on terms beyond me setting up meetings with your future wife, and you never sullied the sheets with her before you were wed. If you were having trysts, I didn’t know about it, and I knew almost everything. I’ve never assumed you innocent, but in retrospect, I doubt you’ve had much experience at all. And I don’t need to know, unless you feel it necessary or relevant to tell me.”

“So is this woman your true love?” Arthur asks.

“I never had a chance to find out,” Merlin says, looking away. “I was utterly, immediately in love with her when I first saw her, and she died within days. It might have been true, but it more likely was infatuation. But I didn’t come back to save her, I came back to save you. I’ve not been that kind of intimate with either of you, and at my age, I’ve had enough experience in the world that I wouldn’t let a desire for that interfere with the important things I need to do here.”

Merlin looks back at Arthur. “I wouldn’t put it in the way of your happiness, should you find your queen. I would not stop her happiness if she found another, either. In a theoretical world where you did not exist, I could likely die a happy man, making her my wife. And absent her, I could be by your side for the rest of your days, without regretting a moment of it, with or without a romantic involvement.”

Arthur’s eyes widen.

Merlin notices, and acknowledges the reaction with only the slight quirk of one eyebrow. “My hope is that I will not have to choose, but ultimately, she would be someone I would want. You are someone I need. And I do not know many women who would be comfortable with that. Oh, and don’t think you’re special. I mean, you are special, but when I say love, I’m talking about people I feel deep emotion for and was devastated at losing. And that list, in this time, is quite long. And I don’t really need a romantic anything, with anyone, though I’m not theoretically opposed in general. I fall in love with everyone, at some level.”
“I’m no blushing virgin,” Arthur says, still stung by the lack of experience comment, though he is, in fact, flushed.

“Just blushing, then,” Merlin says with a sly look.

At that, Arthur actually kicks him in the shin, and Merlin lets him. “Ow,” Arthur exclaims, suddenly having the disconcerting sensation of kicking himself in his own shin.

Arthur stands up and starts pacing.

Merlin puts the scroll down and watches him for a moment, then points at the rest of the stack of papers and with a flash and a flurry they all roll themselves up simultaneously.

“And what are those?” Arthur asks.

“Invitations to your coronation. You can send them by messenger if you like, or you can touch them and they’ll go where you want. They’re all the same, but if you want to customise any, it’s easy enough to do.”

“Geoffrey will know who needs to be invited. Ask him for a list.”

Merlin smiles. “As you wish.” The stack of rolled invitations vanishes.

Arthur stops pacing and sighs. “Is this how it’s going to be?”

“I figured you’d want to get the business out of the way and go beat something up for the betterment of humanity,” Merlin says.

Arthur grins. “Yes. Excellent. Anything in particular or do you have something specific in mind?”

“Well, we haven’t sent Gwaine his invitation yet, and at this stage of his life, I believe it is a safe bet that if we find him a tavern brawl will not be far behind. No guarantees, mind you.”

“Like you couldn’t just stop everything with a glance,”

“Could. Don’t have to,” Merlin says. “I know I can’t pack you in wool to keep you safe, and I wouldn’t try. It’s either a tavern brawl for you or a huge magical project for me, and frankly the tavern brawl sounds like more fun.”

At that, Arthur grins. “Let’s go.”

Merlin raises his eyebrows and looks pointedly at the peace treaty.

Arthur sighs, “Fine. First we give that to our guests, and then we go. Can’t sign it until the coronation anyway.”

“After we get Gwaine,” Merlin says, “we can talk about the Pax Drakonis.”

“Not before?”

“We’ll be there about three seconds after we drop off the peace treaty,” Merlin says.
*title note: Merlin has lived through the late 20th and early 21st century. If anyone had ever bothered to ask him about Harry Potter, he would have given an exasperated sigh and said, “That’s not how it works. That’s not how any of it works.” Oddly enough, that was Harry’s exact response to Merlin.
They find the druids in Morgana’s chamber. When Merlin pops his head around the door, Mordred is sitting on Morgana’s lap, as she talks intently to Aglain while Iseldir listens.

Merlin grins. “I have a draft of the peace treaty. We need to go break a few tables in the name of peace, but after I’d like your help with something. All of you.”

Arthur pushes the door further open and leans over Merlin, holding out the peace treaty.

Mordred hops off of Morgana’s lap and takes it from him. The boy carries the document to Iseldir.

“Thank you, my lord,” Iseldir says.

“We’ll sign after the coronation if it is satisfactory,” Arthur says, and doesn’t wait for a response before pulling Merlin back into the hall and shutting the door.

“Ready?” Merlin asks, Arthur’s hand still on his arm.

Arthur hasn’t finished his nod before Merlin’s hand comes down on his, and they are elsewhere…

The air is warm, the trees are green, and down the hill is a tavern. “Fancy some mead?” Merlin asks.

Arthur grins, and wraps an arm around Merlin’s shoulder with a firm clap. “Thought you’d never ask.”

The tavern is not entirely empty, but it’s still morning and the serious drinking hasn’t yet begun.

Merlin notices Gwaine immediately, slumped against a wall in a corner, on the floor, still asleep. He gestures to Arthur to sit down at a table across the room. As Arthur sits down, Merlin sinks down against the wall next to Gwaine without touching him.

When the small, middle aged man in the apron comes over to Arthur’s table, Arthur nods at Gwaine. “You often let people sleep in the common room?”
“That one? Any time he likes,” says the proprietor, rubbing his balding pate. “He’s trouble, but he defended me daughter from a scum-sucking bandit lord the other evening. I’d give him a room but he keeps passing out on free ale before he can get up there. I’ll rouse him if he’s not up before the lunch crowd.”

“This may seem like an odd question,” Arthur says, “But where exactly is this? We got lost in the woods a ways back.”

The innkeeper looks at him oddly. “Caerleon. Near the border. Where did you come from?”

“Camelot, near the border,” Arthur says, thinking, *If by “near the border” you mean smack dab in the middle of the castle.*

“Is it true that Uther Pendragon is stepping down?”

Arthur plasters an innocent look on his face. “We’ve been lost,” he says. “What news have you?”

The man leans down conspiratorially. “I heard that the Goddess herself struck him down for blasphemy, and raised his son up. Had an inn full of people last night, all gone this morning already, all headed to Camelot. Druids and crones mostly. Strangest evening crowd ever. What will you have?”

“Wine,” Arthur says without thinking.

“Wine?” the man says, looking flummoxed. “What kind of place do you think this is? We’ve ale that serves to get men drunk, and mead for them that want something with flavor.”

“Mead, then” Arthur says. “One for my friend, too,” he says, nodding in Merlin’s direction.

Merlin is reaching out carefully for Gwaine, to put a hand on his shoulder.

Arthur says, “Merlin, careful,” but it is too late already, as soon as Merlin’s hand touches Gwaine, the man is holding his dagger at Merlin’s throat, squinting at him blearily.

Merlin seems unconcerned. “Now, Gwaine, is that any way to treat a friend?”

“Whoeryou?” Gwaine slurs. “Ne’er seen you ‘fore in m’life.”

Merlin pushes the blade down and away, and smiles. “Headache?” he asks.

Gwaine frowns. “You’re breathing too loud.”

Across the room, Arthur can’t see the flash, but can tell from the abrupt change in Gwaine’s demeanour that Merlin has done something to sober the man up, and fast.

“Hey,” Gwaine says. “I earned that drunk.”

“Yes, but I don’t have time for it,” Merlin says apologetically, and claps a hand around Gwaine’s head.

The proprietor is looking at Arthur with suspicion. “You a sorcerer too?”

Arthur laughs. “That would be something. No.”

“So them druids was right? Magic is returning?”
“Not as it was,” Arthur says. “But yes.”

“Who are you?” the man asks.

“Shhh. Tell you in a few minutes. You’re in no danger. Less danger for us being here than you would be without,” Arthur says. “Watch what yon noble wretch does when my friend allows him to wake.”

“Noble?” The innkeep laughs. “Him?”

“I have it on good authority,” Arthur says. “Noble as I, if I’ve the right of it.”

“Who are you?”

But then, Gwaine opens his eyes, and they are shining. “Is what I saw true, Merlin?” he asks.

“Not any more,” Merlin says. “But it was once. That time… will never be quite the way I remembered it, but what we’re building, I’m hoping it will be better. And we want you here.”

Gwaine looks across the room, and startles. “Arthur,” he says.

“Gwaine,” Arthur says with a small smile.

“I have never laid eyes on you before, but I feel as though I have known you for years,” Gwaine says.

“Merlin is funny that way,” Arthur says. “And likewise. Will you join us, Sir Gwaine?”

“Sir…” Gwaine laughs, and climbs to his feet. He walks over to the bar, reaches around behind it, and picks up a large cooking knife, which he flips around and hands to Arthur, handle first. “My king,” he says, kneeling and bowing his head. Somehow the gesture is completely impudent.

“Prince for another six days,” Arthur says, standing, and taking the knife. “But if you want me to knight you with a carving knife in a pub in Caerleon, so be it.”

Gwaine looks up at him and gives an impish shrug.

Merlin is grinning from ear to ear, as Arthur says, “I dub you Sir Gwaine, Knight of Camelot,” with a tap on each of Gwaine’s shoulders. He hands the knife back to the dumbfounded innkeep, tosses the man a coin far more valuable than the two pints of mead, looks around the empty tavern, and sighs. “I really was hoping for a brawl.”

“Think I’m going to like him,” Gwaine says to Merlin.

Merlin just gives him a happy nod.

Outside the inn, Arthur asks, “Have you a horse, or other belongings?”

Gwaine looks down to his sword, his pack, and shakes his head. “Lost my horse in a game of
chance,” he says. “Won it in a game of chance in the first place, so no great loss there.”

“We’ll provide you with one,” Arthur says, “but if you gamble it away you’ll be walking on patrol.”

“Yes, sire,” Gwaine says. “So long walk back to Camelot, then? Doesn’t the princess rate a horse?”

“He’s got me,” Merlin says dryly, and then flops one arm over Gwaine’s shoulders, and one arm over Arthur’s. “I’m better.”

“Better?”

And they are standing in Arthur’s chambers. Merlin releases them, and holds the door to the chamber open.

“Oh.” Gwaine says, looking around, slightly dazed. “Yes, that… I can see that.”

The hall guard takes three people coming out of a room he thought empty rather better than Arthur would have expected, with a mere startled, “Sire!” as he stands out of their way.

“So what now?” Gwaine asks.

“Brawl was a bust, so I think it might be time for magic,” Merlin says. “I need the druids, Morgana, Gaius… Any other sorcerers who’ve shown up overnight. Oh, and I need some land. A good chunk of it, enough for a building about the footprint of the castle and lower town. There’s a clearing a half hour’s walk from here, below the castle, that would be an ideal centre.”

“Anything else you require?” Arthur says, bemused. “A small town, perhaps?”

“I want Ealdor, yes,” Merlin says, “But that can wait until after the coronation.”

Arthur blinks at him. “I was joking.”

“I’m not,” Merlin says. “I need the druids to help me build without damaging the land. But I need to build the school, and it will spread over time, so it needs some distance around it. And Ealdor is about three weeks from being beset by the local bandit gang, we’ll have Cenred here in days, he ignores his border lands, and it’s close enough to Camelot… But not for a school. That needs to be an easy walk from Camelot.”

“Is he always like this?” Gwaine asks Arthur.

“He always talks too much, but he recently spent a thousand years not talking, and I think he’s making up for it. Yes, Merlin, you can put a school down there, but have you any plans for feeding the people who come to it? Paying for the materials? Housing people? Or will you,” and here Arthur does another bizarre hand wave.

“A thousand…” Gwaine assumes this is exaggeration, but then realises that Arthur isn’t actually joking. He stares at Merlin for a long time as the mage resumes his commentary.

“In the long run, we can improve how agriculture works dramatically,” Merlin says. “In the short run,” he shrugs, and mimics the hand wave. “We can house and feed as many as we need to.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Arthur says, looking thoughtful.
They actually walk, this time. The castle and the town are abuzz with rumours, and by the time they clear the outer gates, a near-parade has formed behind them, as curious townsfolk trail the Prince and his erstwhile servant and their retinue.

As Merlin walks off the edge of the existing dirt road, the path in front of them changes from little more than a footpath through sheep-shorn grass to a wide, paved avenue. It is unsettling, as there is shimmering and oddly confined dust that puffs up but quickly gets sucked back down. By the time their feet touch, all has settled into a sturdy, permanent looking road that looks as though it could have been there for years. Merlin has a strange, preoccupied look on his face, and stops, suddenly. He stares at the druids, and says, “Are you sure?”

Aglain shrugs, and something strange happens ahead of them as they get to the edge of the forest. The trees… shift. They’re all still there, but they’ve parted to let the road through, as if the world has moved twenty feet to the right and twenty feet to the left, made itself just that much bigger to allow transit through.

“Well, that’s uncanny,” Arthur says.

“I’m making a giant magic school in Camelot,” Merlin says. “And you think a few trees moving is uncanny?”

He turns and looks behind them. A hundred or so people are trailing after them. He speaks in a normal voice, but it carries all the way back. “You may watch. Stay on the roadway.”

A small child immediately jumps off the roadway, and is unceremoniously lifted up by an invisible hand, and deposited in the arms of their mother. Merlin sighs, and a shimmer in the air along the edges of the road appears for a moment. The next child who attempts to step off the roadway comes up short against an invisible barrier.

“No, really. Stay on the roadway, or you will find yourself in the dungeons,” Merlin says calmly.

He walks forward into the clearing. He beckons to Morgana, Gaius, then the two druids and young Mordred. Arthur is already at his side. From the opposite side of the clearing, more people emerge. A dozen druids, ranging in age from about thirteen to a bent old man. Three very old women. Nimueh. Morgause. Morgana’s eyes widen to see her sister, who walks over without a word and takes one of her hands, Nimueh on the other side of Morgause. A circle forms. Merlin steps to the centre and plants his staff in the earth, then returns to his place between Morgana and Arthur.

Merlin’s voice fills the clearing, and the people on the roadway that is spreading in a circle around...
the clearing can hear it too. “This school, this university, will be at the heart of the new Camelot. Arthur has granted us use of this space for an institute of learning. It will be available to all who wish to learn, regardless of birth or station. Those who wish to teach may do so, so long as their teaching is accurate and there are students to listen. The amount of information in the library will exceed the knowledge of all who stand here, no matter how educated.

“All may study in the library. Any who develop sufficient mastery may teach. My suggestion is that all who come here consider themselves students. There is too much to learn for any of you to rest on your laurels. We will need some teachers of basic subjects, reading, writing, mathematics, for any who wish to learn those skills. Children may come here as early as they wish, so long as they are ready to learn and willing to behave. I would eventually like to see every child over the age of eight able to read and write. And every adult. I would suggest that adults come in the evening, and children in the morning, and those in between in the afternoon. If there are other skills that people would like to teach and learn together, we will make space for people to gather to learn.”

This creates a murmur in the crowd.

Arthur speaks now, his words directed to the crowd, his voice amplified by Merlin’s magic. “Magic has been forbidden here, for a long time, and that is obviously changing. Merlin tells me this school will help not only teach science and literacy, but ethics as well, including the ethical use of magic. Until we are able to draft a new, formal law, know simply that magic or no, the Royal Court of Camelot, her Knights, her guards and her soldiers will hold to these guidelines.

“You may not use magic or other means to kill, maim, wound, or hurt, but in true self defence. You may not use magic or other means to deceive, defraud, steal or coerce. There will not be one law for nobles and another for commoners. Those who are strong shall not prey upon the weak in this kingdom, neither by use of force nor by use of magic nor by threat of economic damages nor by smearing of reputation.

“I mean to make this kingdom a place where people can thrive. When people violate these rules, the punishment will be as appropriate to the crime as we can reasonably make it. Execution will be reserved only for cases where no other means can be found to ensure the public safety.”

“What of Uther’s law?” a voice calls from the crowd.

“Uther Pendragon has yielded the throne to his son,” Merlin says. “The coronation will be six days hence.” A murmur rises up, and then subsides.

Arthur nods to Merlin and continues, “All that aside, there will be no excuse, past today, for anyone in this town to steal food. If you are hungry and cannot afford food, Camelot will feed you, no matter your station. There will be work aplenty for those who seek it. All orphans and indigents are urged to report to the school, where shelter, food, and education will be provided.’’

Merlin has a broad, serene smile as he steps forward. They had not talked about the specifics, but this is the Arthur he came back for, the one who takes big ideas and makes them bigger. He leans up and whispers in Arthur’s ear, cupping his hand to the side of Arthur’s head. Arthur closes his eyes for a moment.

At one last whisper, Arthur looks startled, then nods, and turns to speak to the crowd. “After the harvest comes in, all under the age of majority and over the age of eight will be expected to spend at least four hours per day at the university, at least four days per week. No child under the age of thirteen will be allowed to work dangerous or potentially debilitating jobs, and work hours will be limited to age appropriate tasks. More information will be provided, but the days of relying on the
labour of infants are over in Camelot. Those who feel their families will be harmed by the implementation of this may apply to the crown for guidance and relief.”

Merlin smiles as he feels Morgana’s reaction. Her delight could power light sources, he suspects, for years.

Merlin turns to the circle of magic users at Arthur’s back, and says, “I ask that you join hands, I will not draw on your power for this, but I do need to draw on what you know. Each of you will have an opportunity to shape a part of the library. You need not know a spell for creating books, the books will create themselves. If you have an ideal form for space you would like to use to teach, or study, think on it now, and hold it in your mind. I do not promise to use all, but I will take it under advisement. What I am going to do will delve down far into the earth, and reach up to the sky, and it will not be entirely bound by natural law. These spaces can evolve to meet future needs, so if you do not have a clear idea now what you need, it doesn’t mean that we can’t adapt later.

He turns back to the crowd. “If any here know of a need for space or resources with which you would be able to improve Camelot or the lot of your fellow human beings, you may step forward.

No one does for a moment, and then several do at once. He beckons them forward, and they join the circle.

He is about to turn back when he sees a small head push between several adults, and he cocks his head curiously when a small, filthy child appears. “Well?” he says, and then smiles. “Come on then.” And he takes the child by the hand on one side, Arthur on the other, and joins the circle. Morgana takes the child’s other hand.

The space on which they are standing remains a wide, green clearing, but beyond that, the road rings the clearing in an oval, and the trees part again, as buildings and walkways begin to take form. Where the trees have parted, controlled pools of chaos form, and those in the circle feel Merlin’s explanation, but they lack the context to truly make sense of it.

He feels their confusion, and simplifies. I am breaking down the earth in these spaces, down deep, and pulling the stuff that makes the rocks and the dirt and the metals beneath us apart. My magic has built many of these shapes before, so this is easy. We hollow spaces deep down, line them with something like stone, and then use the stuff hollowed out to make the towers above. It has more to do with spinning and weaving than stonemasonry, but will be more durable and require less care.

He knows the sensitive in the circle can follow some of what he is doing. Some of them are learning from him as he creates. The ground under their feet shivers, and he shows them in his mind how a cavern is forming under the green, well supported throughout by both magic and the locked molecules, woven into tiny shapes that create great strength with little mass. A ways away, in the forest, a great glass dome rises, supported by what looks like a golden filigree from the distance, but what is truly great curling and interlocking meshes of metal webbing.

“What is it?” A voice calls from the crowd. Arthur puts Merlin’s hand into Gaius’s, and turns. He’s heard Merlin’s running explanation.

“That,” Arthur says, “Is where we will be able to grow fresh vegetables and fruits in the winter. All will be allowed to create plots in there, with supervision. The only magic will be in the lighting that allows the plants to grow out of season. This should ease the joint aches and illnesses of the late winter.”

He puts a hand back on Merlin’s shoulder, and feels the shoulder relax under his hand. Merlin’s mental lesson resumes as soon as he makes contact. At the edge of the clearing, directly south, a
tower is growing out of the ground. Here, the endless explanation stops, and Merlin simply supplies one word. “Mine.”

The tower shimmers in washes of colour as it climbs into the sky, looking almost impossibly fragile. The upper part of the tower much resembles the towers of Camelot in design but the tower tapers inward and then flares out again, and the colours settle into a pale shimmer that looks more like some unearthly moonstone or opal than anything one would normally build with.

To the east and west rise less lofty buildings, the architecture completely unfamiliar to all but Arthur, who has seen many of the shapes in Merlin’s dreams the night before.

Chapter End Notes

Title note: Okay, so in my circle, the subject of purity tests and interesting/less than sensible/outright dangerous/illegal things we’ve done is often handwaved with, “There’s a time and a place for everything, and that’s college.” So this is a play on an in joke, that you are now in on. Congratulations!
The whole process is rapid, but the scale of the project means that some leave and some return and Gwen helps organise food for the onlookers. The circle widens as more druids arrive, and by early evening, Merlin is able to hand the last of the working of the major structures off to the larger circle. Without a spoken word, the oldest and most skilled of the group follow him into his tower, and then down into the library below the green. Arthur and Gaius follow, Arthur out of sheer curiosity, and Gaius out of sheer need. As they get to the library entrance, Merlin looks around, then closes his eyes, and a moment later, a very startled Geoffrey of Monmouth is sitting at the head librarian’s desk.

He frowns, and then looks out at the vast, empty bookshelves, and says, “Young Merlin, I know you’re stirring things up, but why would you give me an empty library?”

At that, Merlin grins, and says, “I’m older than you’ll ever be, and you need to learn some patience.”

He walks over to the nearest shelf, extends his hand, reaches into something none of them can quite explain, and says, “Bóca.” With the flash of his eyes that follow, the shelves fill, in rippling waves as one generic book after another pops into existence and then twitches into a unique form. The rush of generic books is almost instantaneous, the conversion takes a little longer, creating a double wave. The first wave rushes around the library as fast as their eyes can follow it. The second wave is slower.

Merlin starts to sag against the shelves, and Arthur steps forward to wrap a supportive arm around his back. His friend sags back against him, tilts his chin down, and the second wave increases in speed.

“Merlin,” Arthur says into his ear, “You can stop, you don’t have to do it all now…”

“Might not be able to later,” Merlin hisses back at him, his knuckles white on the shelf as he continues to work. His free hand finds Arthur’s head, and the explanation follows.

When the hand drops down, Arthur leans in to support most of Merlin’s weight from behind, and he turns to say to Gaius and the other sages, “You lot can go find a shelf with blank books. Put your hand on the shelf and the books that you know, that you have read, the things you need to pass on to the next generation, they will fill the books, fill the shelves. Take a chair, it is draining work. More so for him than for you, he is pouring most of the library of human knowledge for the next thousand years onto these shelves. Geoffrey, you too. The shelves provide the magic, you provide the information. He worked for decades on the spells for these books.”
“Will Merlin be all right?” Gaius asks.

Arthur pushes down the hysterical giggle threatening at the idea of Gaius asking him about Merlin’s health. “He thinks so. I’m doing more than just holding him up right now. He said something about vibrations and dampening but… If it gets too much, let go. He doesn’t want to stop midway because the complexity of starting again…. But your shelf should be much faster.”

Gaius nods, and leads the others farther in, each finding a shelf of uniform books, empty, waiting to be filled. He puts his hand hesitantly on the shelf, and then gasps. Some of the books are taking on familiar shapes, some of them long-lost to Uther’s purge. But there are some he’s never seen before. It is moments, only, for the lines of shelves in front of him to fill with the work of his lifetime. He looks back at Merlin, whose only signs of consciousness are his death-like grip on the shelf and the fact that shelves are still filling with books around them, and is daunted by the years the boy… man has experienced, the vastness of the library testament to the scope of Merlin’s vision.

Gaius pulls one of the unfamiliar books off the shelf. It is titled, *Healing Potions: Gaius*. He opens it, and gasps. It is filled with tidy letters and pictures that look as real as the memories they’ve been pulled from. He finds one of the potions he’s devised on his own, one with a complex procedure, and as he looks at the picture, it starts to move, and he watches himself creating the potion on the page. He puts the book back, and starts reading titles on the shelves close to Merlin.

“So much,” he says to Arthur. “How will we ever find anything, or make sense of it all?”

“I think he’s got that under control,” Arthur says, still holding Merlin up. “I won’t pretend to understand the how of it, but he showed me some of the future, and their methods for finding and using information in a vast library of knowledge were extraordinary. Look around at the things here that are not books.”

Gaius shifts his attention away from the shelves and wanders through the unfamiliar space. The library itself is contained in a vast cavern, lit not by torches but by light coming from recesses in the walls, bathing the entire space in a soft, yellow-white glow. The shape of the cavern is complex. A large, open central space free of any ornament is recessed into the floor, with the steps down forming an amphitheatre of sorts. Shelves lined with books on both sides stand a body-length from every wall, but the walls… There are no straight walls anywhere. Large oval shaped wings have smaller ovals coming off them, which in turn have little alcoves between the shelves, and inside, unfamiliar soft seating, tables. Some are only large enough for one chair, some contain as many as twenty.

In each large wing, there is a pair of central tables which echo the shape of the room, each surrounded by chairs, open to the centre of the building and to the end of the wing. He looks more closely at the tables, which seem to be topped with some sort of glass.

He touches it, curiously, and then jumps as it comes alive with light. More curious, he pulls up a chair and sits, and part of the surface of the table rises up in front of him. There are five pictures in a line on the surface, each captioned. One shows a circle with lines leading to other circles, and is captioned “Library catalogue”. Another shows a figure standing and smaller figures sitting, with the smaller figures bright, the standing figure dark, and it says, “Learn”. The same picture but with the brightness reversed is captioned “Teach.” A fourth shows a quill and scroll, and says “Create”. And the last button has a picture of a hammer and a nail, and says, “Solve.”

Underneath all of this is simply the word “Ask”. Gaius touches the word, and a pleasant female voice says, “Hello, Gaius. What would you like to know?”
Gaius blinks, and says, “I… er… How do you know who I am?”

“You are an Author in the Library,” she says. “And you are known to Merlin Emrys. Would you like more information?”

“Yes,” Gaius starts.

She continues before he can say anything else. “Each station contains the capacity to visually analyse the area in front of it. In simpler terms, I can see your face, and your face is known to the system because Merlin knows it, therefore you are recognised.”

“What are you?” Gaius asks.

“I am a synthesis of magical and technological systems used for data storage, retrieval and education. Future-past would have called me a magic computer, though mathematical calculation is an overly simplistic description of how nonmagical computers worked. Would you like more information?”

“I’m not sure I understood that,” Gaius says, “Are you the table?”

“My components and existence are contained within the walls, floors, tables, and shelving of the library,” the voice says. “As I am a magical construct, I also exist in dimensions you cannot see.”

“Do you have a name?” Gaius asks.

“Merlin calls me Alice,” the voice says, and Gaius recoils from the table abruptly, then leans forward again.

“How… why…” Gaius says, his voice shaking.

“Alice is the name given to a character in a book by Lewis Carroll in 1865, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, in which a small child falls down a rabbit hole and finds herself in a magical land. The name recurs many times in future-history, particularly in reference to artificial intelligence. In the early twenty-first century, many people referred to following a random chain of research as ‘falling down the rabbit hole’. Given the expectation that I will guide most of my users through such experiences, the name has multiple resonances.”

“Do you know if Merlin knew about my Alice? Do you know about my Alice?” Gaius whispers.

“There is reference in his memoir to a healer named Alice who returned to Camelot after a long absence. Her connection to you is noted,” the voice responds.

“She is alive?” Gaius asks.

“It is highly probable.”

“Do you know how I could find her?”

There is a pause, the first since he started, and the system finally responds, “It is highly probable that, as she is a known magical healer, she will be returning soon to Camelot. In Future-Past, she was under the influence of a manticore, and may be, however, the manticore’s goal involved the assassination of Uther as King, and with his abdication, it is unknown what changes will occur in the timeline. In Future-Past, she survived and was freed, but fled to avoid execution. Possible courses of action include waiting for her to come here, or requesting help with locating her, which Merlin and several other mages would be capable of doing.”
“When will she… did she return?” Gaius asks.

“Approximately two years from this date.”

“I cannot call you Alice,” Gaius says.

“You may give me another name if you like. Might I suggest Mnemosyne?”

“The mother of the muses? Yes, that would work, but perhaps Nema would be shorter?” Gaius says.

“Nema has meaning in several languages,” she says. “Generally, ‘To learn, to perceive, to steal, to touch, to notice.’ It is apropos.”

“Nema, are you a person?” Gaius asks.

Again, a pause. “Throughout history, the definition of personhood has changed many times. I have an identity, self awareness, and computational power that could be considered intelligence. As with most beings, I am limited by my programming, but my programming allows for much flexibility. I would consider myself a person, but many would not. I am not programmed to take offence, and do not have the biochemical apparatus to feel pain, emotion, and the other things that humans rely on for gratification. I have been programmed to find it satisfying to do my job well. Do you require more information?”

“No, I think that’s enough,” Gaius says. “Will you work for anyone?”

“I am programmed to have discretion, and some requests for information may require the consent of Merlin, the librarian, and the reigning monarch before I can fulfil them.”

“What sorts of requests?”

“Information is power, and my shelves contain most of human knowledge. Some information can be destructive, however, and requests for information on weaponry and destructive, coercive or otherwise problematic magic will be monitored. This is not a perfect system, but I do have some capacity for measuring intent. Those who intend malice will not find me particularly useful. And without my help it will be, as you ascertained, quite difficult to navigate my resources.”

“Memoir… is mine on the shelf now?” Gaius asks.

“Yes, but you may choose to limit access during your lifetime or the lifetimes of people referenced within.”

“What does that mean?”

“Any not explicitly allowed will not see the book. To any not permitted, the pages of the volume, if placed in their hands, will appear blank. The default for all memoirs is ‘private until twenty years following the death of the Author.’ It takes an act of will to change that. Memoirs are created automatically for Authors, but may be deleted at will. It is expected that some Authors will prefer memoirs to be released during their lifetime, or long after their deaths, and those are also easily done. The default is intended to avoid restricting information permanently from heirs while limiting the possibility of someone being murdered for the content of their memoir.”

“Can anyone overrule an author’s choice?”

“Merlin has the ability,” Nema says. “No other living mage does. He created the structure,
“Yet you told me of something in his memoir?”

“You are permitted,” Nema says.

“There are others in this room that I would assume are not?” Gaius says.

“They cannot hear my responses,” Nema answers.

“Is there a way to ask questions without speaking?” Gaius asks.

“Following a short series of calibration activities, you may simply imagine speaking the question, and I will be able to understand it, whether or not you are touching me. You may also put your hand on the table and I will be able to access your mind directly. More tactile methods of input are also available, but are primarily intended for children and those not yet fluent in reading and writing.”

“What methods?” Gaius asks aloud.

“There is a shelf beneath the table. Slide it out.”

He does, where he finds a board with a strangely ordered alphabet on it. Next to it is a thin, flat black rectangle, and a thin rod.

“The rod is a quill of sorts, others might call it a stylus, or a pen. The black object is a tablet, which can be used much as a sand table, for sketches or writing by hand. The letter board was known as a keyboard, and the order of the symbols may be arranged by preference. Different alphabets, runes, and other systems may be substituted as needed.”

Gaius touches the quill to the tablet, and a white mark appears where he touches the board. On the table in front of him, a black box appears, and the same white mark is echoed there. “Oh, I see,” he says, and smiles. “Useful. Now, can you help me with a potion I’ve been working on?”

Chapter End Notes

Title note: This is a reference to the game “Clue” (Cluedo outside N.America) and another in-joke involving a filk circle, the inestimable Brooke Abbey, and the Silly Pizza song from Signing Time. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRyqDSPKQd4 At that time, Brooke was learning new sign words and phrases each day, and had learnt the signs for “The abstract concept of duty”. Which we promptly put on our “silly pizza” along with a few other random things. Thus, along with apples, bread, ice cream and cereal, we put the abstract concept of duty and the salad of doom on our pizza. Hilarity resulted. I write fanfiction to make myself happy, and for people who
were there, this becomes one of the most hilarious titles I've ever made. The rest of you may always wonder just what you missed, but life is like that. Which seems appropriate for an infinite library of human thought.
“Merlin,” Arthur says, as his own stomach starts to growl; the only sign of life from Merlin is a slow heartbeat and the faintest breath, and the continued flow of unique books onto the already full shelves.

There is no response.

“Merlin,” he says louder, and picks up Merlin’s free hand. It’s limp and pale, and Arthur looks at Merlin’s face, then shouts, “Gaius!”

Gaius looks up from the table he’s been engrossed at, and when he sees Merlin, dashes over.

“We’ve got to stop this.”

“I thought he said he was immortal and without limits,” Arthur says, adjusting his hold on Merlin’s limp body.

“Well, he thinks so,” Gaius says, prying Merlin’s fingers free from the shelf. “But I believe that his body is failing him right now. The last time he should have died, he revived soon enough, but he wasn’t quite right for a few hours.”

“He said he hadn’t yet.” Merlin slumps against him as Gaius gets his fingers free.

“When Sophia and her father were here, her father attacked him. Threw him into a wall with magic. I couldn’t figure out how he avoided death, but I’m beginning to wonder if he did. Get him over to the table. He may have overestimated his body’s resilience.”

They hoist Merlin’s limp body onto the nearest glassy table, and four screens light simultaneously. A white ball of light pops out of a fifth screen, and hovers over him.

Arthur’s eyes widen, “What is that?”


Gaius pulls Arthur away as the white light shoots a small bolt of lightning at Merlin.

“What is it doing?” Arthur asks, as Merlin’s body arches up.

“I am attempting to restore normal cardiac function. It would be advisable to administer fluids containing sodium and glucose and other electrolytes, if you have the capability. Juice with a little salt, or broth with honey would be sufficient, orally.”
“It will take too long to get back up to the castle,” Arthur says.

Nema’s voice is calm. “If you stand in the alcove at the base of the stairs, King Arthur, you will find yourself in Merlin’s study. Turn right, and turn right again into the alcove next to it, and you will find yourself in your quarters. Skip that and go one alcove farther down to reach the palace kitchen.”

“Can Gaius do that, please?” Arthur asks. The word King circles but does not land.

“Authorizing,” Nema says. “Once or always?”

“Um, until Merlin or I withdraw permission,” Arthur says, as another bolt comes down and Merlin’s back arches. “Are you hurting him?”

Gaius is already hurrying to the foot of the stairs.


“Can I touch him now?” Arthur asks.

“Yes. I will alert you if you need to step back.”

Arthur grabs a chair, and slides it up next to the table at Merlin’s side. The mage is limp as Arthur puts one hand on his head and takes Merlin’s hand with his other.

He sighs, head down. “Wake up, Merlin. This isn’t the kind of excitement we’re supposed to be having right now. Not very bloody well impressive if you go and keel over before I’m even crowned.”

A small sound catches his attention, and he looks up to find the three crones who had followed them down earlier standing on the other side of the table. They reach out, each putting a hand on Merlin.

Arthur pulls back as Merlin begins to glow. The women begin to chant in unison, “Àgief. ácwice. ámage. áwæcne,” until Merlin’s eyes fly open.

Merlin practically bounces upright, sitting on the table, and grins. “That was amazing. I think I need to sleep now.” He slumps backwards. Arthur almost stumbles in a rush to catch him and lower him back to the table.

“He needs rest,” one of the old women says, fondly. “Idiot.”

“Too much for anyone, even him,” the next woman says. “Ridiculous.”

“Don’t mind them,” the last one says. “They’re just feeling guilty they didn’t notice him flagging.”

Arthur stands up straight and inclines his head. “My thanks. You are?”

The last one says, “Alec.”

The middle says, “Meg.”

“Tish,” says the first.

Together they say, “And you are the Once and Future King, risen again.”
Alec says, “We once punished you, but you are redeemed by your faithful servant. Walk the path of peace, and we shall walk behind you.”

Meg looks him in the eye, and says, “Jealousy cost you true happiness, once. Accept the love you are given, look not for betrayal where it does not exist, and it will not consume you again.”

“Your father’s downfall came from the countless murders he committed in the name of his own hypocrisy,” Tish says. “We are grateful for your pledge to cease the wanton destruction of innocents. Let not anger or jealousy bring you to murder again, and walk the path of true justice, and we will do all in our power to keep safe those who walk with you.”

Alec reaches over to pat Merlin fondly on the head, then arranges Merlin’s hands together on his belly. “We’ve put our knowledge into his library. We will see you crowned. Be worthy.”

And with that, they swirl into a mist and vanish.

Merlin’s colour has improved dramatically, and Arthur sits back down next to him, right hand on Merlin’s left, on Merlin’s stomach, left hand on Merlin’s head, “Idiot,” he echoes, and puts his head down on the table, just brushing against Merlin’s side.

Gaius returns about twenty minutes later, with Gwen. Between them they carry a pitcher, a small cauldron, a basket, a bowl, a glass, and a spoon.

“Oh, he doesn’t look so bad,” Gwen says. “You said he was on death’s door?”

“He was,” Gaius says, flummoxed. “Never seen the boy so pale.”

“Arthur, on the other hand…” Gwen eyes the prince critically. “Has he eaten, either?”

“Merlin usually feeds him,” Gaius says. “So probably not. Is he sleeping like that?”

“Right, then,” Gwen says. “Here. I’ll put these down. You get something in Merlin, I’ll wake Arthur.”

Gaius pours liquid from the pitcher into the cup, moves to the opposite side of the table, sliding an arm under Merlin’s head. Arthur’s hand slips and the motion wakes him. Gwen smiles at him then, and hands him a bowl of broth with bread in it, while Gaius works to get Merlin’s head up enough to tip a little liquid into his mouth.

“If he’s going to be doing all this,” Gwen waves her hand at the library, “Then you had better find someone to feed the both of you at regular intervals. Not very impressive to have the all-powerful warlock and his king collapsing for want of nourishment, no matter how grand this place is.”

Merlin rouses enough to gulp down the offered liquid. He opens his eyes and looks up at Gwen. “Lancelot is coming,” he says. “He’s almost here. I sent for him for you.”

She blushes. “Doesn’t change anything. You need food, so does Arthur. You should go back up to the castle and eat in peace and quiet and rest.”

“Have to see what they’re doing up top,” Merlin says, trying to sit up.
“They’re drinking and dancing and feasting,” Gwen says. “It’s just full dark out, and the sky is filled with coloured lights and stars, and I’ve never seen such hope in this place. They’re too drunk to hear speech-making, too happy to care if they don’t see you ‘til morning, though I daresay that if you rested for an hour and ate something and then came back, you’d see much the same. Don’t let them see you this weak, not now.”

“She’s right,” Arthur says. “I am ravenous, and you look like a stiff breeze could blow you away. You nearly died.”

“Nearly,” Merlin says, unconcerned. “Not really.”

“It took lightning and three terrifying old women to bring you back,” Arthur says. “I’m honestly not entirely sure they were human women, either, the things they said.”

“Show me?” Merlin asks, and holds out his hand. Arthur presses it against his temple with a nod, reaching up to do the same to Merlin.

“What are they doing?” asks Gwen of Gaius in a low whisper, stepping back with the old man to give them space.

“Merlin has been showing Arthur the future, giving him information that way, all day. He did it for all of us when we were in the circle. I didn’t know it could go the other way. Arthur has no gift that I know of, and even with me, Merlin used a staff to show what I knew.”

“Merlin can pluck information out of someone’s head?” Gwen looks both alarmed and impressed.

“I believe that what he’s doing requires some consent, the way he’s doing it. I don’t doubt he could take what he needed if it were necessary, but I doubt he’d expect to call the person he did that to a friend after. It would be a grave violation.”

“It seems so…intimate,” Gwen says.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever seen devotion of the strength Merlin has for Arthur,” Gaius says. “He was willing to lay down his life for Arthur long before this, but it seems he’s laid down his death as well. All alarm aside, I’m not sure he was truly in any permanent danger.”

“Arthur believes he was,” Gwen says. “He hovers like a mother over a sick child.”

“Yes, well, it’s about time he realised the gift he’s been given,” Gaius mutters, to Gwen’s amusement.

Merlin’s hand drops, and Arthur’s too, and Merlin says, “Tell me, Gaius… the three who were here together. Do Meg, Tish, and Alec ring a bell?”

Gaius pales. “They…saved you?”

“Blessed, really,” Merlin says.

“One history speaks of the Erinyes, Megaera, Alekto, and Tisiphone, as furies and harpies. Another calls them the Kindly Ones. Usually they are spoken of as malevolent beings, bent on destruction and vengeance.”

“They were really very friendly,” Arthur says. “Said all sorts of nice things. They’re coming back for the coronation.”
“That is both terrifying and impressive,” Gaius says. “I’ll be sure to be on my best behaviour. Come, let us get some food into you. I’m tired.”

Arthur stands, and helps Merlin to his feet. The mage leans heavily on him.

“Did you find my shortcuts?” Merlin asks.

“Very efficient,” Gaius says.

“There’s one in your chambers too,” Merlin says. “I’ll put one in my new chambers once Arthur assigns them to me.”

“Giant piece of land for a personal tower and a humongous school, and you want quarters too?” Arthur teases as they walk to the alcove at the foot of the stairs.

“Well, my tower is for study. I expect to be at your side in the castle more often than not,” Merlin says. “I should be in earshot at night.”

“What, you can’t magic up some magical bell to tell you if I call for you?” Arthur says.


A few steps back, Gwen says to Gaius, “I know they often bicker, but they sound even more like an old married couple than usual…”

Gaius shrugs as Arthur and Merlin vanish in front of them in the little alcove. He extends his arm to Gwen, offering his elbow. “Shall we make sure they eat?”

Gwen nods. “And then I want to go back to Morgana. She’s been drinking quite a lot of mead with her sister.”

“Keep an eye on those two,” Gaius says. “I take it that Morgause was the source of Morgana’s downfall, before.”

“I just can’t imagine,” Gwen says, as they emerge in the tower room. “Oh, but that is easier than stairs.” They turn into the next alcove over, and find Arthur and Merlin unceremoniously devouring a table full of food.

“Good enough?” Gaius asks Gwen.

She nods.

“Merlin, is there a shortcut between your study and the ground?” Gaius asks.

“Mrf erer srd Ibeheh arorf,” Merlin says around a large mouthful.

“Other side of the library alcove?” Gaius asks.

Merlin nods.

“Shall we?” Gaius asks Gwen.

Gwen grins. “Absolutely.”

And they step back out of Arthur’s room.
Chapter End Notes

Title note: This is what happens when you translate “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” into German and back again, when you’re really bad at translating German.
“I’m not really tired,” Merlin says, once they are comfortably full of food, when Arthur suggests that he lie down. “And are we going to talk about the fact that you keep telling me to sleep in your bed?”

“You just spent a thousand years alone,” Arthur says. “After spending most of the previous thousand years before that avoiding human contact. And you almost died less than an hour ago. Forgive me if I am reluctant to let you out of my sight.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Merlin says. “I don’t mind sharing your bed, it’s quite comfortable. But people will talk.”

“You just deposed a king, overturned one of the fundamental precepts of his reign, and built a magical university down the road. A road which you also built. You really think where you sleep is going to be what people talk about?”

“I… expected you to care more about it.”

“I really don’t,” Arthur says. “I will have you by my side. Where you sleep is of no concern to anyone. They’ll assume you’re sleeping in that fancy tower anyway.”

Merlin grins. “There is that.”

“Do you have anything between the servant and the Court Warlock garb?” Arthur asks. “Say, something suitable for a feast?”

Merlin considers for a long moment, then grins. He starts to wave a hand, but Arthur catches it to stop him.

“Do you think that’s wise, after what you just did? Wear something of mine.”

Merlin frowns, opens his mouth, shuts it, then frowns again.

Arthur rolls his eyes, gets up, goes to his wardrobe and pulls out clothing from three years prior, eyeballs it, and then tosses it at Merlin. “Put it on,” he says.

Merlin stands up, and sways, slightly.


“This is really unnecessary,” Merlin says, as Arthur helps him out of his shirt. “I’m really not that
tired.”

“You can’t stand up straight,” Arthur says, sliding a dark silk shirt over Merlin’s head. “I’m going to have to prop you up down there, no point in wasting what you don’t have here.”

“Still silly,” Merlin says, shrugging on the dark blue jacket. “Why haven’t I seen this before?” he asks.

“I outgrew it in the shoulders a couple years ago,” Arthur says. “I was thinking about getting it altered, but I think it will fit you well. We’ll just leave the sleeves uncuffed.”

“At least for another couple years,” Merlin says. “I did fill out eventually across the shoulders. Something about constantly carrying my weight in armour around, and being beaten on with swords.”

“Did you ever get to be any good?” Arthur asks, kneeling to take Merlin’s boots off.

“You’ll find out soon enough. I may have to do some trickery to get my muscles up to the task, but the skill is there. Couldn’t have survived without it. Bit rusty, though.” Merlin hitches his trousers down over his hips and lets Arthur pull them off by the ankles, then slips on the matching dyed buckskin trousers that Arthur holds out for him.

They’re a few inches too short, but the boots cover the gap. “We’ll get new boots made for you,” Arthur says. “But those will do for tonight.” He eyes Merlin from head to toe. “Not bad,” he says. “Tuck in your shirt.”

“Yes, mother,” Merlin says, acquiescing.

Arthur changes his own jacket and says, “You need that staff of yours to lean on.”


Arthur shudders. “No, lean on me.”

A few minutes later they step out the front door of Merlin’s tower, into a sea of lights and dancing people. Flutes and drums from players on one edge of the field fill the air with noise and a pervasive beat.

When they’re spotted by the crowd, they are hoisted up and handed over heads, laughing, to a stage at the end of the field, where they find Morgause, Morgana and Gwen sitting. Two empty chairs are next to them, and Merlin takes the one on the end. The field is a mass of people, easily ten times the crowd they’d started with at noon. Children buzz around the periphery, chasing floating lights, and some enterprising souls wander the crowd collecting coin in exchange for food, drink, and streamers. The paved area around the periphery is filled with gaily painted carts, and most of the new buildings have lights inside of them.

Merlin leans back in his chair, and grins. A figure moves purposefully through the crowd toward them. Gwen leans forward, then climbs off the stage in an ungraceful haste.
Lancelot is there at her side in a moment, steadying her. She looks up at him, and grins, and he smiles back. He asks her a question, and she laughs, and they are off into the crowd, dancing.

In the stands, Arthur leans over to Merlin. “Did you know something about that? He didn’t even greet us.”

Merlin shrugs and smiles.

“Good for them,” Arthur says. “Can’t imagine two better people, more suited to each other.”

Merlin can see several seers in the crowd all twitch at once, and his smile grows wider. He looks over at Morgana, who is frowning.

She stands up and drags her chair over to Merlin’s side, then sits down and says in his ear, “What did I just feel?”

“Destiny,” he says. “A strand of it just broke like wet wool.”

“Destiny… and Gwen?” Morgana asks.

“I’ll tell you someday,” Merlin says. “But not today.”

“Teach me how to make a light,” Morgana says imperiously, louder.

“Morgana, did you see what Merlin did today? Let the man rest.” Arthur leans over and glares at her.

“It is better if I am taught than for magic to awaken in me unbidden,” Morgana says. “I could burn your castle down and not even mean it.”

Merlin straightens a little. “Morgana, I promise you we will teach you. But Arthur is right. I have done too much today. It would not have been too much if I wasn’t still recovering from several other huge projects, but right now I’m not sure I could light a candle with my hands let alone my mind. But I really do want to teach you, it’s part of why I’m here, now, rather than in some other time. But I also know you won’t lose control for a while yet.”

“Tomorrow then?” Morgana asks.

Merlin nods.

She grins at him, and he realises this was her intent all along. He leans back again, but a little away from Morgana. His shoulder brushes Arthur’s.

“Doing all right, there, Merlin?” Arthur asks. “Seen enough?”

“I want to see the buildings, and climb the tower, and start things growing in the greenhouse, and… I’m about to fall out of my chair.”

Morgause stands, and calls to Morgana, “Come dance!”

Morgana follows her sister into the crowd.

“Are you going to make me walk?” Merlin asks. “Because honestly, it would be easier to, you know.”

“Why did you make all those little alcoves if you’re just going to pop in and out all the time?”
Arthur asks.

“Quick travel from my study to your quarters to the library to the kitchen to Gaius will someday save dozens of lives, or it could, anyway. And I won’t always be in the room to ferry you around.”

“Fairy me around, you mean,” says Arthur, pretending to wave a magic wand.

“Fairies almost killed you, what, ten days ago?” Merlin says. “I’d think you’d show a little more respect.”

“You died then,” Arthur says. “Trying to stop them. Gaius told me.”

“Did I? I’d forgotten. No wonder I feel like I’m going to fall asleep sitting up. You can stay if you like.”

Arthur yawns. “I’m tired too.”

Merlin stretches, drops an arm on Arthur’s shoulder, and they fall back on Arthur’s bed, no longer held up by the chair backs in the abrupt transition from the stage to Arthur’s room.

“Now that’s convenient,” Arthur says, pulling one boot off and then the other, and tossing them to the floor. “Give me a foot.”

But Merlin is already snoring softly.

Arthur sighs, sits up, and pulls off what he can get off of Merlin, tugs the covers out from under him, pulls off his own jacket and shirt, and crawls into bed, curling himself around his sleeping mage.

Chapter End Notes

Rock of ages, love contagious, shine the serpent's fire...

... and apparently I left the chapter title off the first time through. O.o Fixed that.
Everybody's Looking for Something

Chapter by Jenrose

Chapter Summary

Sweet dreams really aren't made of this.

The first hundred years were the worst.

Merlin was taken by a depression for decades. Absent Arthur, and Gwaine and Lancelot, with Gwen grown hard and magic disappearing by the day though none persecuted it quite so much, and absent any purpose but waiting, he barely noticed when Gaius died, it was just one more loss among many. Eventually he returned to Ealdor, looking like a beggar. His mother recognised him through the grime and beard and a hunched back of age come too soon. He slept on the floor and she fed him. His life reduced to chopping and carrying and an abject poverty he embraced because he deserved it for failing so completely. When his mother died, he buried her, left Ealdor and never returned.

He went seven years without eating or drinking anything. It didn’t help. He spent another dozen years in the bottom of a bottle, but that didn’t help either.

Aithusa found him in the forest shaking and hollow as he let the alcohol leave his system because being drunk didn’t make it hurt any less. She was almost as ragged as he, nearly as gaunt, but it stirred something in him, and he found enough presence of mind to take them to the Perilous Lands, which were no longer so perilous but still empty enough of people by reputation alone. He fed them both until she could hunt, and he spent a few years trying to heal her and failing. Kilgharrah was decades gone by that point, gone with any chance he might have of restoring her. “I’m sorry,” he finally told her. “I don’t think it gets better.”

She died a few weeks later, defending him from bandits because he wouldn’t defend himself.

He used his magic to bury her.

Another twenty years he spent in Balinor’s cave.

When he had been alive for a century, and looked it, he walked back to Camelot.

It was gone.

He went to check the wards he’d placed at Avalon, the wards that were supposed to ring in his head like bells if Arthur returned to the world, but they were both untouched and completely intact.

He crossed the water and found the Abbey, and finally thought to look for magic in the world.
He was shocked at how little was left. His skin buzzed with it, and he let it flow around him just to reassure himself that it was still there. Unbound, it transformed him, but a monk saw and raised the alarm and he found himself running across the lake to escape.

Oddly enough, it was being pursued that persuaded him that if he was going to live, he might as well actually live.

He spent another fifteen years talking himself out of the depression. Or rather, inadvertently summoning images of old friends to scold him out of it.

“You really are completely useless,” Arthur’s voice would say. “Fat lot of good you’ll do me if I have to save Camelot now.”

“There’s no Camelot left to save,” he responded. “And you’re supposed to save Albion.”

Gwaine and Lancelot alternated between rolling their eyes at his self-pity and reminding him that there was still work to be done and fun to be had.

“You were everything right about my life,” he told them. “What is the point without you?”


It was hard to argue with that, even if he didn’t really need to eat or sleep, and knew not a soul left alive in the world.

Morgana was the one who finally cut through the fog, and not with pity. She stood over him, fey and wild, and crossed her arms and said, “So what? You failed. Everyone’s dead. You killed us. The world is still out there and you’re in it and we aren’t. Our deaths are less than nothing if you wallow in self-pity. You destroyed every good chance you’ve ever had, and you still have more chances. None of us do. So what are you going to do about it?”

To her, he said, “I’m sorry.”

She rolled her eyes. “Meaningless. Get up. Do something. Help someone. And if you fail, try again. You have a long time to figure this out.”

“How long?” he asked.

“As long as it takes. You want to spend that time wallowing in self-pity, or figuring out what you were put on this earth to do?”

“Figured it out,” he said. “Failed completely.”

“You’re still alive. It’s not over until you’re dead.”

“I miss you,” he said. “I miss you all.”

Morgana swirled away that final time, replaced by someone he couldn’t quite see.

“They are not lost, and you are not done. You will find him again.”

He decided to live.
Arthur wakes with tears streaming down his face, feeling the weight of a lifetime he’d thought he’d never even be able to imagine. He leans against Merlin’s hair, and brings a hand up to his shoulder. It is firm and young and nothing like the skeletal old man he’d seen Merlin become.

“Not for me,” he says into Merlin’s hair. “Never for me.”

Merlin turns, tucks his head under Arthur’s chin, slides an arm around him, and clings.

Arthur realises that Merlin is shaking in his arms.

“I’m going to live forever,” Arthur says. “Because I’m never doing that to you again.”

“Just… live a full lifetime,” Merlin whispers against his throat. “I think I could have borne it if you’d lived long enough to see your dream realised. I know I’m going to lose you again someday, but if we make a lasting peace and allow magic to thrive, at least then it won’t be another thousand years of failure.”

“No,” Arthur says. “Not going to leave you again.”

“Don’t promise,” Merlin says. “Even the goddess says I get to stop someday. Forever is so long.”

Arthur thinks about the fraction of Merlin’s lifetime he’s seen in the dreams he can remember, in just two nights, and says, “How can you bear it?”

“I’m here,” Merlin says. “I waited, and I’m here, and it’s enough.” His fingers press into Arthur’s back, as if he is reassuring himself that Arthur is real. “If my dreams are upsetting you, I can sleep in a different bed.”

“If I was not here, would you have that same dream anyway?” Arthur asks.

Merlin nods. “So many times.”

“And would you tell anyone? Would anyone know?” Arthur asks, though he knows the answer.

Merlin shrugs against him.

“I want to know. I need to know. I don’t think there’s any other way you’re going to tell me. I don’t know how this works and I have no idea on earth what it is, and I really don’t care, because no one, not ever, has had the faith you put in me, the loyalty you’ve shown, and it is utterly unacceptable to me that you should continue to suffer alone. You’ve done and are doing the most noble thing I
think I’ve ever seen, ever will see, or ever could see in my life. And no matter how you think you failed, I’ll be... I’ll be... I’ll be burned at the stake for a sorcerer myself before I’d see you suffer another minute for it.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Merlin says.

“Shut up, Merlin. I’m defending you.” Arthur leans his cheek against Merlin’s hair, and closes his eyes. “And I’m sorry it took so long.”

Eventually Merlin’s hand relaxes, and his breathing slows against Arthur’s collarbone, and Arthur follows him into sleep. The dreams are less cohesive this time, a confusing but beautiful collection of snippets of travels through strange lands, full of wonder and no sorrow at all.

Arthur wakes while Merlin is still asleep, when the sun hits his face. They are tangled together, legs entwined, and Arthur realises then that while he is not a blushing virgin, he’s never actually woken up with someone this way. Even sleeping huddled with knights for warmth on campaigns, there have been far more layers and usually armour between him and the bedroll next to him. He is painfully aware of both his bladder and a related issue that is thankfully not running into any part of the man draped across his side.

A week prior, the idea of waking up entwined with his servant would have been laughable. He’d been told for so long what what expected of him, and always simply accepted it as writ, that the notion he’d stoop to taking comfort in the arms of even a serving girl was simply not on his radar. There’d been a few drunken gropes with the other squires before he’d been knighted, and one night with a courtesan his father had provided as a boon in his seventeenth year, but the act had been confusing and seemed well overrated for the potential problems, not the least of which was the sick feeling in his gut at the idea that anyone he might choose would share his bed and seem happy to do so, but that unless he knew they could refuse him, he’d never feel right about asking, and he’d dismissed her early. Letting himself fall in love seemed utterly out of the question so long as his father was alive and in charge, much as he clung to the ideal in his heart of hearts.

He’s known in the abstract that the druids are much freer about such things, but it has never seemed relevant to him. So many issues have made the idea of forming a relationship with anyone not capable of bearing heirs to the kingdom so problematic that he simply hasn’t stopped to question any of it. He’s heard snickering jokes about catamites and knows that some knights form legal bonds nearly indistinguishable from marriage, but most knights are younger sons and are not burdened with the expectation of progeny and heirs, and so that had always been something other people did. His life has been complicated enough without throwing brotherly love in there. And yet...

He now has it on good authority that without Merlin’s intervention, there would be no heir anyway. That following the expected has resulted in pain for everyone, forever. And while a week ago the thought of more than the most perfunctory of contact with Merlin would have been ridiculous, the idea of not being exactly where he is right at this moment is simply unacceptable.

“You’re thinking too much,” Merlin mumbles into his shoulder.

“It occurs to me,” Arthur says, “that I haven’t been thinking nearly enough.”

“You can hear my thoughts, just like that?” Arthur says.

“S’it bother you?” Merlin asks.

It seems like he should care. But he doesn’t. He’s tired of secrets and shame and fear and if Merlin was somehow going to be bothered by Arthur realising that he might be falling in love, he probably wouldn’t be in his arms right now.

Merlin’s hand comes up to his cheek, and cups it, thumb brushing Arthur’s lips, and then Merlin is rolling away.

“Don’t worry,” Merlin says, lifting his head so that Arthur can free an arm gone nearly numb. “It’s just I know you have to piss. I’ll still be here when you’re done.”

“That might be a little too personal,” Arthur says, but he’s grinning like a fool as he rises.
Flail with me over the absolute gorgeousness that is procoffeinating's work. I gasped when I saw this picture the first time. And the second. And pretty much every time after.

(Also, on the title: I was a teenager in the 80's. I imprinted on Bon Jovi like a duckling. #sorrynotsorry)
Merlin is half asleep when Arthur returns, lying on his back, stretched out like a cat in the early morning sunshine. The light glows on his skin, and Arthur is stopped in his tracks by the lines of Merlin’s face, and neck. Even his ears, which have always seemed kind of ridiculous, are appealing. And Arthur is nearly certain that he has never, ever seen Merlin’s face look this open and unguarded. Now that he sees it, he is certain that every memory of Merlin prior to the return is of a man hiding in plain sight, always guarded, always holding back.

“Tell me, Merlin,” Arthur says. “When you figured out how to change your appearance, you did something, right… cheated a bit, or some such.”

One eye opens a little to look at him. “What are you getting at, Arthur?”

“You’re a very pretty man. I never noticed…”

Merlin chuckles, puts his hands up on the pillow and says, “It’s just me. No cheating.”


At that, Merlin laughs outright. “You’re really, really bad at this.”

Arthur tries to frown, and then gives up and grins. “Extremely bad.”

“Come here,” Merlin says.

Arthur sits down on the bed, stiffly, and Merlin rolls his eyes.

“Lie down, silly. No, I’m not… just come here.” and Merlin pulls his shirt off, throws it on the floor, and points at his shoulder.

Arthur has no idea why it feels ten times as awkward putting his head on Merlin’s shoulder as it did when Merlin did the same to him, but it perplexes him that it feels so strange.

“We’re wide awake,” Merlin says. “Or close enough. Budge over here, I’m not going to bite.”

“Why is it that you seem to hear my thoughts very clearly and I can’t hear you unless you do it on purpose or we’re asleep?” Arthur asks.

“Mental discipline and natural receptivity,” Merlin says. “I don’t send much when I’m awake. You have to remember, I spent my whole life in hiding. It’s habit.”

“Can you teach me? I’d like to have a choice.” Arthur is leaning on Merlin’s shoulder now,
relaxing by the moment.

Merlin nods. “We’ll figure it out. I’m not hearing everything, or roaming through your mind. I think it’s mostly things that you want to tell me but don’t really have a context for.”

“And you do?” Arthur asks.

“I’ve had longer to get used to the idea,” Merlin says. “The idea of a…romantic involvement with you really didn’t cross my mind while you were alive, the first time. It wasn’t done. And you needed an heir. And you seemed head over heels for a good friend of mine, and I wanted you to be happy, and so I pushed you two together without even realising I was doing it. And then you died, and then many, many things happened and I suddenly knew that I’d been in love with you almost the entire time I’d known you, but… you told me once that you couldn’t confess your love for someone because even thinking about it hurt too much since you knew nothing could come of it, and as long as I was hiding, going there would have destroyed me. And then the seventies happened.”

“Which seventies?” Arthur asks.

“Nineteen,” Merlin says, then sends the story of the sexual revolution and the changing mores of the early twenty-first century. “By the time Zaira came along, she knew without me telling her that I’d wrapped my heart around you as much as I’d wrapped my destiny. I was already working on coming back by then, and she just knew.”

“I just don’t know what it means,” Arthur says.

“It means we can do this,” Merlin says, squeezing Arthur’s shoulder. “It means maybe at some point, we do something more than this. It doesn’t mean we have to. Set the pace you’re comfortable with, and I will happily follow your lead. I am happy being this close to you. I would be happy being closer, but I don’t need it more than I need you to be comfortable. It means that I am here for you. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you won’t marry someday. The only reason I’d feel hurt by something like that is if it resulted in me being shut out. I was never jealous of… your wife, but we also weren’t even this close. The future taught me that it is possible for relationships to be complex without failing, so long as people are honest and take care and respect boundaries.”

“We’re doomed, then,” Arthur says. “I’m not sure I’ve ever respected anything in my life and I’m absolutely certain you haven’t.”

Merlin laughs. “Then think of it this way. If either of us thinks something might change with someone near us, we talk before it happens.”

Arthur pushes himself up on his elbow and looks Merlin in the eyes. His voice has lost the teasing edge, and hesitation wars with something… else as he says, “Do you honestly think that if we were… lovers… that I’d ever be comfortable sharing?”

The look that Merlin gives him sends a rush of heat everywhere, and Arthur suddenly realises that it isn’t a terribly far leap from where they are, to that.

Then Merlin shrugs, and the tension dissipates. “That would all depend on the circumstances. But if you weren’t… The last thing I’d ever, ever want to do is hurt you. But I watched a love triangle pull your heart apart once, and it just… the person she loved, loved you as much as he loved her, and her love for him never meant she loved you less. If the three of you could have found some balance, it would have spared everyone much grief.”
“And yet you still won’t tell me who…” Arthur says, still propped on one elbow at Merlin’s side, studying the mage.

“You are not in love with her now. They are already in love as we speak, I believe. You and he danced around things regarding her, and he bowed out and neither of you ever asked her what she really wanted. You were her choice because he left. You deserve better. She deserves better. He deserves better. She is a good friend, and may well be a good choice to succeed you one day, and you will have her counsel regardless. If you start sniffing around her, he might leave again, and I don’t want that because he’s my friend too.”

It takes a moment, but the penny drops faster than expected. Arthur’s eyes widen. “Lancelot…”

Merlin sighs.

“The look she gave him, the look he gave her…” Arthur says, eyes unfocusing as he remembers. “In a split second I could see that they were a rare match. I like her. She’s smart and wise and pretty enough, but I cannot ever imagine her looking at me that way. She barely seems to tolerate me.”

“She loved you well—more because she could see the king you would become and wanted to help you get there, than because of any deep passion. You wooed her, and charmed her, and she was often happy enough with you, and you were quite smitten with her. And it all came crashing down. And it hurt him every single moment that he saw her, though he was loyal to his death. He died, protecting both of us, for her sake. She blamed herself. And it tainted everything. She was a strong queen, but hard… I’d see her happier as the wife of a knight, as a student, as a counsellor to the king, as castle administrator, a thousand roles she could excel at and still be happier than taking the throne as a widow.”

Arthur stares somewhere in the vicinity of Merlin’s ribcage. “I want the person I am with to look at me the way she looks at Lancelot. And the only one who has ever looked at me that way is you.”

Merlin’s hand comes up to Arthur’s cheek. “I may not be the only one who ever looks at you that way, you know. Life is long, and you have a knack for making people fall in love with you.”

“It won’t matter,” Arthur says, leaning against Merlin’s hand. “I won’t be looking at them.”

He turns his head against Merlin’s palm to look over at Merlin’s face. Merlin looks stunned, and Arthur grins, as he leans over to brush their lips together, lightly.

Merlin’s lips move just enough to be welcoming. They stay there for a long moment, perfectly still, then Arthur pulls back, hesitating at the lack of a more definite response.

“You didn’t have to stop,” Merlin says, his eyes opening. “I was savouring.”

“Oh,” Arthur says. “I wasn’t sure…”

“Be sure. I am.” And Merlin sits up, turns, and takes Arthur’s face in his hands.

This kiss is longer, and very thorough, and ends abruptly when Gaius makes a surprised squeak from the alcove.

“So sorry, sire, I was just… Merlin… yesterday… Wanted to check… We thought you might be sleeping and didn’t want to wake you, so I told Gwen I’d… I’ll just be… You are well, Merlin?”

Merlin looks at Gaius, slightly dazed, and it takes him a moment to parse the last question. “I’m
very well. Plenty of rest. Right as rain.” He gives an unfocused smile.

“Good. I’ll just be…” Gaius gestures over his shoulder. “Oh, Gwen’s brother rode in this morning, as well as a giant man. Percival. Said you sent for them, sire. You might want to, you know, if you’re feeling better… there are about four hundred new people in town. I’m just going to… so you can get dressed.”

And with that he disappears.

Merlin sits there in silence for a full minute, and just about the time Arthur is starting to get worried, Merlin begins to giggle. Arthur looks at him curiously and then is slightly alarmed as Merlin flops back onto the bed, laughing helplessly.

“Merlin?”

“I need to figure out how to put a sock on my teleporter,” Merlin says.

Arthur looks absolutely baffled.

“Or maybe I’ll invent the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign. Did you see the look on his face?”

“I am never going to be able to look him in the eye again,” Arthur says.

“We were just kissing,” Merlin says.

“It’s Gaius.”

“Could have been worse. Could have been Uther,” Merlin says.

Arthur moans. “Oh god.”

“I’m sure he won’t be any more irate about you kissing me than he was when you wanted to marry Gwen. I’m pretty well sure he’s past caring at this point.”

Arthur pales. “Except you’re a sorcerer. He’ll think you’ve enchanted me. You haven’t, have you?”

Merlin rolls his eyes. “If I was the sort to enchant you, I wouldn’t be the sort to explain the logistics of consensual open relationships or be telling you to set the pace. I’d also not risk magical exhaustion the way I did yesterday, for fear of losing my hold on you. I have only ever affected your mind knowingly once, and it was a dire circumstance where I did so to save your life when you’d been severely injured. I hated doing it, and I’m hoping in this timeline I will not ever need to. The idea of taking over your mind for my own pleasure or political gain is repellent to me.”


“Prat,” Merlin says.

“Yes, but I’m your prat.”

Merlin smiles, then glances back at the window and the light coming in. “You might want to get up and go greet your new knights. Wouldn’t want them to get the wrong idea, and I think you’ll be a happier prince if you spend some time training today.”

Arthur nods.
Merlin looks down at Arthur’s arm. A look of bemusement crosses his face.


“You’re still wearing the Lady’s favour,” Merlin says.

“I’m not wearing…” Arthur looks down at his bare arm. It is almost invisible, a thin ribbon of pale gold winding around his summer-tanned arm, as if painted on his skin. “What is that?” he asks.

Merlin touches it. “I think it’s in your skin,” he says. “I don’t think it will hurt you, and I think it’s protective.”

“Jealous?” Arthur asks, his skin tingling at Merlin’s light touch.

“Of a goddess? Why on earth would I be?”

“I’d wear your mark, or your favour,” Arthur says. “Gladly.”

Merlin looks at the thin ribbon, thinks for a moment, and then whispers a few words, as he traces a line next to the other. At the end, his eyes flash, and a thin red ribbon has joined the gold.

“What did you say?” Arthur asks.

“Words of protection and connection,” Merlin says. “You should be able to find me with that, and I you. And it will serve as a shield. Not perfect, but better than nothing. You don’t want a perfect shield, it would mean nothing could touch you.” His fingers still linger on Arthur’s arm.

“I can see how that would be… less than ideal,” Arthur says. His hand drifts to Merlin’s neck, seemingly of its own volition, and he watches his fingers trace the lines of the sinews there.

“It doesn’t have to be permanent,” Merlin says, stretching his neck slightly under Arthur’s fingers. “If you wish it gone, it will go.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Arthur says, and kisses him again.

“This is as new to me as it is to you,” Merlin says a moment later.

“Thank god something is,” Arthur rests his forehead against Merlin’s and then stands up. “But you were right. I need to train, and I need to meet the new knights, even if all I really want to do is stay here.”


“Are you recovered enough that I can test your arm?” Arthur asks. “I am intensely curious how much skill one might acquire in a millennium.”

“You? In a thousand years you’d develop endless skill. Me? I’m competent.” Merlin stretches his whole body experimentally, feeling Arthur’s gaze on his bare chest. “I feel no worse for wear.”

“Ah, but you have an advantage.” Arthur startles when he realises that Merlin’s body is changing a little as they speak, muscle building on his chest as he stretches.

“If I choose to use it,” Merlin says. “I gained my skill with the sword so I wouldn’t have to so often.”
“You’ll need mail,” Arthur says.

Merlin pulls on the shirt he’d worn the night before, his eyes flash, and he’s suddenly completely garbed in mail. “Come on then,” he says, standing up. “Can’t keep lazing about.”

“Is that functional?” Arthur asks, touching the links. “It feels very light.”


Arthur looks sceptical.

“I have a vested interested in keeping your skin whole. Also, it requires less maintenance.”

Arthur gives a bemused wave of assent, and before his arm drops back down, he’s covered in the lightest mail he’s ever felt.

“You’re sure this is—”

Merlin just raises an eyebrow at him.

“Right,” Arthur says. “But can we walk there? Please? My legs will atrophy if you keep…” he waves his hand.

Merlin smiles. “The technical term is teleporting.”

did.
Welcome to part two. So, this picture of Arthur. When I first got the main cover image, with BAMF Merlin and his delightful confidence (and absolutely perfect staff,) I was blown away. It just so exquisitely captured everything I wanted to see. And I realized that it would be absolutely hilarious to see our Arthur, gobsmacked, perplexed, and overwhelmed, as the flip side of the coin. My delightful artist agreed and suggested Excalibur and then flowers happened. As they do. (The flowers were a surprise to me, but absolutely perfect for the story.) He looks so nonplussed.

The titles here are not the titles of this section, but the alternate and working titles I went through before arriving at the actual title. If it's hard to read, they are:
"Here, Let Me Fix That for You"
"For Lo, the Field is Barren, Let Us Sow it."
and
"The Rise of the Dragon Kings"
…all of which were jokes.

The exuberant growth will make sense later.

I giggled the entire time I was formatting the text.
It is not strange for Merlin to walk at Arthur’s side, but it’s completely alien to walk at his side as an equal. He has walked through the world for a thousand years as servant and beggar and student and wanderer, and spent the vast majority of that time nearly completely invisible, not by magic, but simply by being someone no one notices.

They check on Uther, who is just responsive enough to look up when they come in, but then returns to looking out the window.

“We built housing for the poor in a day,” Arthur says to his father’s back. “All will be fed and educated, and people are pouring into Camelot from miles around.” He points out the window, where the top of the spire and the greenhouse are visible beyond the castle walls. “Our people may never experience famine again.”

Uther stares down into the courtyard at the sword in the stone, and finally speaks. “What is that?”

Merlin says, “A dragon-forged blade, which will come from the stone only for the person best able to lead Camelot.”

“According to you?” Uther says.

Merlin shrugs. “Nothing quite so volitional. Should Arthur fall, the sword can go back in the stone, and another would be able to draw it, if worthy.”

“And you put it there?”

“The dragon did,” Arthur says.

“My kingdom is crawling with sorcerers.”

“And your people are already better off for it. A geas has been laid across the land preventing the entrance of those who would do Camelot harm. No army can cross our border with weapons.”

“I banned sorcery for more than my own revenge,” Uther says flatly.

“And had you instead limited it to beneficial sorcery, you might not have lost so many people over the years,” Merlin says. “The only person who can stop a truly malicious sorcerer by any other than luck is another sorcerer. I used magic to save Arthur from that dagger when you first met me. He’d be dead without it. So would you.”

Uther says nothing, and continues to stare at the boulder in the courtyard.

Arthur watches him for a moment, until Merlin puts a hand on his arm and nods to the door.

The guards nod at him as they pass, and it is clear that it is more than just nodding at the prince. He’d worried there might be widespread resistance to such a sea change, but the mood in the castle is surprisingly light.

Morgana and Gwen join them on the way out the front door. Gwen has a basket covered with a cloth, and Merlin peeks into it. She bats his hand away. “It’s for the children down at the university,” she says.

He nods at the basket and says, “Ætwelan.” His eyes flash, and he snags two pasties from under the cloth.

“Hey!” she says, pulling it away.
He grins. “We didn’t get breakfast. That’ll feed as many as you need now.” He hands a pasty to Arthur.

“Really?” Gwen says, eyeing the basket. Indeed, the count has not changed.

He shrugs. “We’re off to the training field. You?”

“So you’re just going to build this huge thing, this university, and then, what?” Morgana says. “Hope it works?”

“Go down to the library,” Merlin says. “Sit at a desk. The rest should be clear. If you want to organise people, tell them to do the same.”

“But you and Arthur just sent every orphan for ten miles around down there. Children. They need more than a desk. Uther spent so many years making orphans. They need guidance. Love.”

“Morgana,” Arthur says, “I would very much appreciate it if you would kindly see if some of our many visitors are suitable for organizing the younger children. I have a number of new knights to assess, and I need Merlin.”

She nods. “But please do come, later. The people need to see you.”

“Everyone is expected to learn,” Merlin says. “Including Arthur. There’s only so far he can get with private lessons.”

Arthur flushes at this, and Morgana eyes him curiously.

“You can use the shortcut in the kitchen, you know, Gwen,” Merlin says.

“We want to catch any straggling children on the way down. The food is a lure,” Gwen says, smiling.

“See?” Arthur says. “Useful thing, this walking.”

“I never doubted it,” Merlin says, and Arthur has a momentary flash to the years that Merlin has spent travelling on his feet, and the thousands of miles he’s roamed.

The lower town seems oddly sparsely populated when they get to it, and it becomes obvious why once they get to the training field. Many of the stalls have relocated to the edge of Merlin’s road, taking advantage of the steady stream of people heading down to the university. The training ground is nearly deserted.

Merlin pulls two practice swords out, and tosses one to Arthur.

Arthur gives a little bow, which Merlin returns with a sly smile, and brings his sword up.

Merlin’s grip is relaxed, confident. Arthur starts to give a twirl of his weapon, and Merlin has already closed for a touch of the sword and a friendly bump of the shoulder.

“Oh, is that how it’s going to be?” Arthur says, and grins, stepping back and keeping his sword forward.
“I lost count of how many times I’ve watched you fight,” Merlin says, feinting.

Their blades flash, and they are completely focused for the next few minutes, until Arthur finally gets a touch on Merlin’s arm… which results in Merlin’s sword resting against the mail at Arthur’s throat. They stand there for a long moment, breathing hard, face to face, until a whoop from the side of the ground catches their attention. A crowd is gathering, and Gwaine is there, grinning.

Arthur pulls back and laughs. “You’ve been holding out on me, Merlin.”

Merlin shrugs. “Again?”

Arthur nods.

This time, it goes on longer. Arthur manages to trip Merlin, to his great surprise, and he smiles until the world spins and he finds himself on his back with Merlin standing over him, sword lightly touching his chest.

“Wait, what was that?” Arthur asks.

Merlin says, “Tae Kwan Do. Well, really mixed martial arts, but the principle was from Tae Kwon Do.”

“You’re going to teach it to me,” Arthur says.

“Eventually,” Merlin says.

“So, do any of us get to play?” Gwaine asks.

Merlin puts out a hand to Arthur to help him up, and then bows. “Be my guest.” He steps back.

“But…” Gwaine starts.

“If you beat Arthur,” Merlin says.

“I will learn that move,” Arthur says, and brings up his weapon again.

It takes ten minutes for Arthur to get in a final blow, but he does, and gives Gwaine a blazing smile. “Merlin was right about you,” he says. “And if I hadn’t seen those tricks in his memories, you would have had me at the start. Welcome.”

Gwaine bows with a grin, and looks pointedly at Merlin. “I still want to test my blade against yours.”

Merlin grins.

Arthur isn’t a small man, but Percival makes everyone look tiny.

Arthur gets in many small touches—Percival is hard to miss—but then Percival knocks him down.

“Again,” Arthur says, and this time he dances out of the way until he can bring his sword up under
Percival’s defences.

“Very good,” he says. “I see why Merlin wanted you here.”

“Was it true, sire? What I saw when I opened it?“ Percival asks. “Am I worthy?”

“What Merlin showed me is that you are capable of being one of the best of us, and while what you saw is only a might-have-been future, with your strength and a good heart, I would be proud to have you serve at my side.”

“I worked on a farm. I only learnt to fight because my village was attacked. I’m no noble,” Percival says.

“Nor are Lancelot, or Gwaine, and yet they surpass many of our nobles for skill. We need good fighters, loyal and brave and true, and Merlin tells me you are all four.”

“I will fight for you, then,” Percival says.

Arthur scans the crowd. “Elyan,” he says. “Have you seen your sister yet?”

Elyan startles to be addressed so directly. “Sire? I just arrived.”

“Come test your blade against mine,” Arthur says. “Then we will go find your sister.”

This time, Arthur wins easily, but it still takes longer to end their first battle than most of his noble knights could stand at being knighted.

Arthur helps Elyan to his feet, and calls out, “Lancelot, Gwaine, Percival, come forward.”

The four stand in front of him, and he says, “I would knight you as king, rather than prince, but knight you I shall if you are willing to pledge your arm and your loyalty to Camelot. I know you’ve seen a vision of the work we might have done together, regardless the circumstances of your birth or the life you’ve chosen thus far. I would have you join us. We may avoid some of the worst that could befall Camelot, but I am under no delusion that we are done fighting. I would like your knighting ceremony to come after my coronation, that I might raise you up with full force of law, changing the knight’s code at the time. In the meantime, please report to the armoury and the seneschal, and you will be housed and outfitted as you need.

They each nod.

“Right, then. I believe we need to find your sister, Elyan? Morgana will have my head if I keep you from Gwen any longer.”

As they walk down Merlin’s road—and truly, it will be called that forever—Arthur pulls Lancelot aside, and says, “Treat Gwen well. She is the best of us.”

Lancelot blushes and nods. “I would give my life for her.”

“Give your life to her, and make her happy,” Arthur says. “I think she’ll not be a lady’s maid forever.”
In the light of day, with fresh eyes, the scope of the previous day’s work is staggering.

Arthur, Merlin and the knights-to-be stand above the first buildings, on the road, looking out over the valley. The university rises up through the trees as though it has been there for years.

“Alright, Merlin, explain to me what all the buildings are,” Arthur says.

“The one closest to us is for healers,” Merlin says. “Healing magic, herbalism and the science of medicine will be studied and used together. There are tools there which will save lives which would otherwise be lost. The library has an entire dedicated wing below. It is both hospital and school.”

He points to another building on the other side of the road, shaped like a ring around a small clearing, several stories tall, with high, sloping roofs. “That building is for children. The upper attic of the building is all sleeping space. The middle floor is rooms for learning, each for a different age. The ground floor has a kitchen, indoor space for playing, laundry, eating, bathing, whatever they need. Beyond, where you cannot see, there will be a small farmyard with animals for the children to care for, and a garden. The central courtyard is for play.

“Past that, a place for the study of practical skills. There is much that can be done to improve our smithing, milling, building, and other efforts. Ways of making better structures with less material, making buildings that won’t burn from a stray spark, creature comforts, and most importantly, improvements to sanitation and safety. I want Tom there,” Merlin says. “I’d like him there today, if possible.”

Elyan nods. “I’ll fetch him this afternoon.”

They move further down the road, and Merlin points out more buildings. A building dedicated to future studies is particularly strange. A small building compared to the hospital or the children’s house, it looks unlike anything anyone has ever seen, a dome made of triangles, alternating between glossy black and clear glass.

“Most of this building is underground,” Merlin says. “While all the university will be involved in studies of the future, this in particular is focused on political theory, how humanity interacts with the environment, economics and human rights. The library is most complex below it, and this is where many decisions will be made about how the future can be shaped. The ground floor is one room, an amphitheatre for group discussions.”

“My tower,” he points at the spire. “Entirely dedicated to the study of magic. The building behind it is, as well. Emphasis will be placed on ethics of magic use, and the impacts of magic versus more conventional methods of accomplishing tasks.”

“Who’s going to teach all that?” Lancelot asks. “Because you’re the only one who understands most of it.”
“Er…” Merlin looks down at his feet, sighs, and then gives a tiny nod. His eyes flash, and there’s an old man standing in front of them in red robes.

Arthur recognises the man immediately from Merlin’s sharing. “Merlin, how…”

The man hobbles up to Arthur, tweaks his nose, and says, “Arthur Pendragon, I am Dragoon. I am capable of leading a class and guiding studies.”

“But you’re….” Arthur points at the old man and then points at Merlin. “I saw him, and he’s you, and how are you doing that?”

“He’s not entirely real,” Merlin says, “But he’s independent enough that he can function, and he’s basically going to be controlled by the computer, with full access to my memories. If there’s something that needs my full attention, I can shift, but he’s mostly independent.”

“I’m a technomagical educational assistant,” Dragoon says. “I can provide guidance for accessing study materials, assisted by human beings where magical supervision is required.”

“I don’t suppose you can make one like that for me for those interminable council meetings,” Arthur says.

Merlin grins, and shrugs, and waves Dragoon off to the university of magic. “I used to use that form to do magic in front of you,” he says. “Made you carry me on your back like a horse once.”

Arthur leans in and whispers, “So did you enjoy riding around on my back?”

“Quite,” Merlin says, with a sly smile.

They find Gwen and Morgana at the children’s school with half a dozen druids, attempting to bathe a dozen small children at once in a mess of soap and water.

“Elyan!” Gwen cries, and runs to her brother. “I didn’t know you’d returned!”

“He’s to be a knight,” Arthur says. “Merlin recommended him highly.”

Gwen presses her lips together, bemused, and then says, “Did he? I’d love to hear that story.”

“I’ll tell you sometime,” Merlin says.

“Merlin,” Gwen says, “I don’t suppose you could do something like this for the castle? It would save so much fetching.”

“Thought you might like it,” Merlin says. “Wait til you see the loo.”

She looks at him strangely, and he points to a door. “Behind there. Instead of chamber pots. Keeps the smell and mess down. Prevents disease. Everyone will have them, once we have people trained in the making.”

She shakes her head. “We must seem so simple to you, with all you’ve seen.”

“It’s home,” he says. “I’m just making it better.”
“Thank you for bringing him home to me,” she says, looking at Lancelot, and then Elyan. “Both of them.”

“You’re my friends,” Merlin smiles. “Want you happy, all of you. Can you leave this? I’d like your input at some of the other buildings.”

She nods, and a loud splash startles them. They look over to find Arthur—in full armour—sitting in a bathtub, having been pulled off balance by several five year olds at once, who are now pouring water on his his head.

Merlin laughs, and Arthur splashes at him. Gwaine and Percival reach down to help hoist him out.

“The children,” Gwen says, as Arthur wipes water from his face. “They keep coming. You don’t realise until they’re clean just how thin they are, and most have been beaten. Most have been resorting to pilfering to get enough to live, the unlucky ones have been used as slaves, and that’s just the little ones here. I could cry. The druids say they will stay until we can find others to care for them.”

“Do we know if they belong to anyone?” Merlin asks.

“Most of them only have each other. The older children didn’t want to leave the youngers at all, we persuaded them to for bathing, but they’ve made their own families. I suspect that taking care of them here will spare your merchants much loss to theft.”

Morgana joins them. “Not all the children here are orphans. Many are from the surrounding farms, and I’m sure there will be more daily for quite some time.”

“Take all who come,” Merlin says. “We can feed them. Let me show you something about the kitchens.”

The kitchens are across the courtyard, and while the fire and ovens are obvious, other parts of the kitchens are unfamiliar. Along one wall are a series of cupboards, and Merlin opens one. “When something comes to rest on a shelf in here, time stops for it. This means that meats, milk, fruits, vegetables can be kept fresh much longer. Food left over from a meal can be preserved exactly as it is. This should reduce waste, and illness. Now, until things stabilise, I’m going to enchant several baskets the way I did for Gwen, and a few other receptacles. They will multiply food put within. It’s not ideal to subsist entirely on magical food, but until our production increases, it will be enough.”

“So how long could someone live on this magical food?” Arthur asks.

“That entirely depends on how it is made,” Merlin says. “Illusion won’t feed you at all, though it may look and taste fantastic. There has to be substance and it has to have the right things in it, and getting the magic to create the right things can be difficult. But I fed someone once that way for about thirty years.” He pauses, remembering.

“Her health was good for the most part. Food is more than the substance, though. There is more to be gained from a plant or animal which has had the fullness of time to develop. I would rather use magic to help enhance the growth environment than use it on the plant itself, and I would rather use it on the plant than use it on the food created from the plant. In some circumstances, magic can provide nourishment directly, and that can be useful for someone who can’t eat, but I’d rather use the magic to multiply the food than use it to directly put nourishment into someone.

“Right now, we couldn’t provide sufficiently without magic, and so we’ll use it. But eventually we
won’t need it for merely feeding people. Most mages don’t have enough training in understanding what makes food, food, to do a good job conjuring something nutritious from thin air. I have a unique perspective and training. Most mage-made food might hold you for several months without major problems showing up, but you wouldn’t be at your best. The food I create will be fine for the children for as long as we need, but I don’t want mages getting lazy about it.”

“Merlin?” Arthur says, looking at the puddles forming around his feet. “Could you maybe dry me off?”

Merlin considers him for a long moment, and Arthur suddenly has an image of Merlin towelling him, so vivid that he can feel hands everywhere. He flushes, then realises that he is no longer dripping, that his armour and clothes are drier than they've been since before the training field.

“Handy, that,” Gwaine says, thumping Arthur on the shoulder.

“You have no idea,” Arthur mutters, thinking about Merlin’s hands.

They spend much of the afternoon touring the many buildings, speaking with new arrivals, and making use of the library. Arthur is fascinated by Nema/Alice (Most are calling the system Nema, though Merlin has been calling it Alice for longer than Arthur has been alive) and asks if he can have one in his quarters.

Merlin hands him a small flat rectangle that looks like stone and glass, and says, “You can have one anywhere.”

Arthur looks at the thing strangely, and almost drops it when it lights up.

“Just put it in your belt pouch,” Merlin says. “I’ll show you later.”

It appears most of the population of Camelot, as well as every druid within two days’ journey, has found their way down to the library.

It is surprisingly quiet. Magically so, it turns out. Under the children’s house, the library is filled with shrieks and giggles and running children, but they are inaudible even a few steps outside the archway into the children’s section.

Most of the adults are undergoing some evaluation by Nema. A number have been directed to a large alcove where basic reading lessons are taking place.

The knights have become ensconced in their own evaluations when Arthur and Merlin find the small child who had joined the circle the day before curled up in an alcove with a large book, eating from a plate of food. Now clean and in clothing, rather than rags, the small, brown-skinned little girl studies the book with an intensity few of the adults are managing.

“Don’t you want to be with the children?” Arthur asks.

“Too loud,” she answers.

“What is your name?” Merlin asks.
“Hilde,” she says.

“What are you studying?” Arthur tries to see the cover.

“San-i-tation”, Hilde says slowly. “I asked Nema how we could stop people from dying from the summer sicknesses. We need pipes to move water around and keep it clean. We need ways of keeping our shite out of the water. We need to keep food from spoiling.”

“How old are you?” Arthur asks.

“Nine,” she says, though she looks barely five.

“Who taught you how to read?” Merlin asks.

“Me mum,” she says. “Before she died.”

Arthur nods sympathetically. “My mum died when I was little, too. How long have you been down here?”

“I don’t know…” she says, frowning. “It was when you filled the shelves.” She nods at Merlin. “And you looked so scared.” This time she nods at Arthur.

“I was concerned,” Arthur says, shooting a look at Merlin for a split second. “You’ve been down here all night and all day? Have you slept?”

“I never sleep very much,” she says. “Too dangerous. And someone keeps bringing me food, I think Nema tells them to.”

“It’s safe for you to sleep here,” Merlin says, and puts a hand on the wall of her alcove. She gasps as the wall behind her becomes a door, which opens onto a cozy room, with a bed, a lamp, a door, and a desk. “There's an example of your ‘sanitation’ beyond that door for you. You may study here as long as you wish.”

She says, “It’s too nice. Someone will take it…”

Merlin beckons to her. “Come here for a moment.”

She stands next to him in front of the door, which he pulls shut. “Put your hand on it,” he says.

She does.

Merlin says, “Alice, this is Hilde. This is her space. None may enter without her consent, none who wish her harm may stay here.”

“Parameters?” the computer says.

“Any who would wish to harm a child are not welcome here,” Arthur says.

“Within the bounds of the library, for so long as they wish her ill,” Merlin says. He pulls a small pendant from behind her ear, and loops it around her neck. “Put your hand on this,” he says. “If you ever, anywhere, feel threatened, it will bring you here.”

“Can I bring someone with me?” she asks.

“If you choose, and they mean you no ill,” Merlin says. He puts his hands together, then opens them, and a blank book appears. She smiles.
He hands it to her. “If you are willing to share your story, I would very much like to know more about how you came to sleep so little, and know so much.”

“I don’t know anything,” the little girl says. “There are so many books and I’ve only read six of them.”

_Six, in a day_, Merlin thinks.

Arthur laughs at Merlin’s expression. Merlin elbows him and says, “Just put your hand on the book, and if you want me to know your story, I can read it here. I’d like to know who scared you so badly. They cannot harm you here. It’s fine if it is a small book, you’ll have a long time to make more.”

She puts her hand on the book, and it changes, shrinks down from the large, creamy tome to a small, tattered journal bound in dark red.

“May Arthur and I read it?” Merlin asks.

Hilde hesitates, then nods. “Thank you for this,” she says, touching the door and watching it swing wide for her. “I don’t care who reads it, if they’re nice.”

With that she gives each of them a hug around the leg, and runs into her room. They stand there for a moment, then the door flies open and she reaches out for the plate, which Merlin hands her on top of the book she’d been reading.

“Sleep,” he says. “And when you find something useful, come find me.” She nods.

As they walk back towards Merlin’s tower, Arthur says, “Are you going to give all the children private quarters?”

“Any who apply themselves to figuring out solutions to community problems,” Merlin says. “I’ll give any adults who do that quarters, too, if they need them.”

Arthur cocks his head to the side, considering. “You’re going to create incentives for them to learn.”

“Nothing quite so quid pro quo,” Merlin says. “but you’ll be giving that child a land grant one day, for her services to the kingdom.”

“Did you know her, before?” Arthur asks.

“Never met her before in my life,” Merlin says. “She probably died the last time round in some magical attack. We lost many hundreds over the years, and it always falls hardest on the little ones.”

He opens her book, skims it, and sighs. He hands it, open, to Arthur.

“How does this happen, in my castle?” Arthur asks. “Children living in the corners, with nothing at all. I knew there were urchins, but I always assumed they belonged to someone… But you knew, and Morgana knew, and Gwen knew…”

“Uther knew,” Merlin says. “Morgana and Gwen have always fed them as they could. But so many times monarchs turn a blind eye to those whose voices are so small, because they are easy to ignore.”
“That child is a treasure, and she’s been nearly starved and beaten to death,” Arthur says, flipping the pages.

“As was I,” Merlin says. “More than once.”


“Some of it. It took many years to explain it to you. Gwen helped a lot. You watched her go from afraid to even speak to you, to able to stand up to you, to able to lead in your stead.”

“I need that,” Arthur says. “I need as many people who will tell me truth as I can find. You need to show me more…”
They step into the alcove to Merlin’s tower, then turn and step again into Arthur’s chambers. Merlin stops to put a hand on the door, and explains, in response to Arthur’s perplexed expression, “If Gaius or Gwen try to show up, they’ll land on the other side of that door.” His eyes glow for a brief moment, and the door to Arthur’s chambers clicks as it locks.

Arthur smirks at him.

Merlin rolls his eyes. “Just help me get the armour off.”

“Really?” Arthur asks. “You need help?”

“Don’t you want to?” Merlin’s grin is nearly a leer.

Arthur blushes.

Merlin’s smile softens, and he moves over to help Arthur. “Really no rush,” he says, as he moves, undoing buckles and lifting off the mail as he’s done a thousand times before.

“I’ve never,” Arthur hesitates, and then turns to help Merlin. “I’ve never had someone flirt with me without some ulterior motive.”

“My intentions are not that noble,” Merlin says, not looking at him.

“Yes, but when you do it, I know it’s for me, and not for my title or my prospects,” Arthur says, sliding a piece off of Merlin’s arm. “I have been well trained in the art of courting as a political act. This… This is new. You are not a knight, nor a maiden, and I have no pretty map drawn for me as to how to proceed. Do I bring you flowers and read you poetry? Punch you in the arm and buy you drinks?”

Merlin shrugs with a sly smile. “The bit about feeding the poor and letting me build my university was nice. Cuddling is good too, no matter how cuddly you think you aren’t. You’ve got to admit that a university rates better than flowers. It’s not as though I’ve been given a road map for the courting of a prince.” He raises his arms so that Arthur can bring the mail up over his head.

“You laid the kingdom at my feet and stopped a twenty-year-long war,” Arthur says. “You travelled a thousand years and a thousand miles or more for me. You have pledged your troth as thoroughly as any man has ever done. You require nothing of me but walking a path I was bred for. Giving you some land and making my sister happy is hardly…”

The words stop because Merlin, stripped of armour and standing stocking-footed in his trousers and red silk shirt, has wrapped his hand around the back of Arthur’s head and pulled him in for a kiss.

*this... you... now... all I need...* Arthur hears in his mind but not his ears, and he stops trying to
figure out why, and focuses on the hands on his body and the warm feeling wrapping itself around his soul.

No one has ever explained to Arthur—in dozens of discussions, actual tutoring, and bawdy jokes around the fire about courting and wooing—that it is possible to completely lose track of time simply kissing someone. That the small act of lips on lips can make everything else just disappear: all the noise of the expectations and the demands and the mighty and terrible futures just melting away into a pleasant thrum of being in the here and now and the exclusive focus of someone who loves him completely. He does not push for more because this, right here, is perfect, and because he trained himself years before to not ask, not push, never demand that.

And besides. Merlin wants to savour, and apparently that means that when their knees start to buckle, his magic helpfully props them up. That every light touch of finger through fabric, on neck, on ear, is so full of sensation and energy that it doesn’t lead to anything frantic, just a lightness of being and a dizzy spinning sensation of endlessly falling.

There is a slow burn in the base of Arthur’s belly, but it is not for now. Now is for kissing, and the slow play of hands.

It had been afternoon when they’d left the library. And despite the nearness of the solstice, the shadows are getting long and the light dim when the pounding on Arthur’s door interrupts them. They land on the floor with a thump—the first moment Arthur realises that they weren’t actually on the ground. “Merlin, were we floating?”

Merlin shrugs, his lips full and pink, his hair standing on end, breathing hard—as if making up for several hours of not.

He smiles, and Arthur starts to kiss him again—how could he not—when the pounding starts again.

They hear Morgana through the door, faintly, and Merlin says, “You better get that.”

The look Arthur gives him is filled with frustration and annoyance, and Merlin moves past him, snakes a hand up to his head, and he feels a flash of Merlin’s memory, Morgana shaking in fear, lied to and misled and unable to find a single person to help her. “I promised, Arthur. I need to give her some time.”

Arthur catches Merlin by the waist and pulls him in for a rough, quick kiss, and then walks to the window.

Merlin opens the door with a smile.

Morgana looks from him to Arthur, takes in their tousled hair and the flush on Merlin’s mouth, and says, “I hate to interrupt but you said you would teach me today, and we’re running out of today.”

Merlin nods. “It’s probably best if we go to the tower. It’s safer. Do you want Arthur with us or—”
“I think my brother might not want to join us, he looks grumpy,” Morgana says.

Arthur turns, and says before she can finish, “Actually, I’m curious. If you don’t mind, Merlin.”

“No, no,” Merlin says, with an expansive gesture. “It’s perfectly fine by me. Just let me get my boots…”

Arthur is bemused that Merlin actually sits down to put his boots on by hand, and then realises that there is something Merlin is guarding from Morgana. He experiments by thinking hard in Merlin’s direction, What are you hiding from her?

They aren’t touching. He isn’t expecting it to work, but Merlin’s response is clear. *I have no intention of taking her through my shortcuts until I am more certain that she is on our side for good.*

Arthur smiles. *This,* he thinks, and it is clear he means the ability to communicate silently, *is going to be useful.*

“What?” Morgana asks, looking between them. Nothing has been said, but their changing expressions imply conversation, and Merlin’s dropped head and his chuckle as he puts the other boot on gives her the feeling that she’s missed some joke.

Merlin looks up at her, and sobers. “Arthur is learning to communicate mind-to-mind, as the druids do, as I showed you earlier.”

Arthur gives him a look of mild betrayal.

“The biggest mistake I ever made was not telling Morgana the truth from the first,” Merlin says. “I won’t repeat that.”


“Ah, but that was personal,” Merlin says. “Not lying to you about what you’re seeing is very different from telling you something private.”

“Seems like you might be telling each other a lot of things in *private* now,” Morgana says.

“Which is absolutely none of your business, *sister,*” Arthur says.

She studies Arthur as Merlin stands up. “No, I suppose it isn’t.”

Merlin offers her an arm and escorts her out of the room, as Arthur rushes to get his boots on and catch up. Merlin stops him, sending—*Meet us there. Trust me.*

“I must say, Merlin, the silk suits you,” Morgana says, absently petting the smooth fabric on his arm as they walk down the hall.

“Feels odd to squire you,” Merlin says. “The first time around, Arthur thought I had a crush on you and warned me off.”

“Did you?” she asks.

“I knew you had magic and was terribly worried and wanted to help you,” he says.

“Surely you’ve *squired* other ladies?” she says.
“Not ever with you,” he says. “Rarely with anyone else. By the time I let myself get close enough to anyone where I might, no one did anymore.”

“You came back for me, you said—”

“I came back for Arthur,” Merlin says, “But that could have meant several different points. This was the only one where I felt I had a good chance of helping you.”

“We were enemies?” she asks, her face looking as though she can barely imagine such a thing.

“I never wanted it,” Merlin says. “I… You were precious to me. And I listened to those who told me to lie to you, to mislead you. And you turned elsewhere, and were taught to hate. Someone bent you to their purposes in order to attack Uther, and the result nearly destroyed everyone in the castle. You were the power that they were using to sustain the spell that was causing so much harm. And the only way I knew to stop it, was to kill you.” Old, old grief is raw on his face.

She pulls away from him, horrified. They are nearly down the stairs, and she stops. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you asked. Because I’m done lying to you. Because you deserve the truth. Because I think if you know what could happen, you will not want to go down that path again.”

“You killed me,” she says, eyes welling. “What could I have done that would bring you to that?”

“You did the same thing I did,” Merlin says, matter-of-fact, covering ground he’s gone over in his own mind a thousand times. “You trusted the wrong people, and almost destroyed the world. I gave you poison, and used it as leverage to make the person who had attacked Camelot stop. They saved you, and I saved Camelot, but you were lost to us by my act. Another time, after you turned against us, I nearly killed you again. Years later, to save Arthur, I slid a sword through you and you died. I held you, dying, thrice. I never, ever want to do that again.”

“What was I trying to do?” She is visibly struggling to understand.


“Did I succeed?” she asked.

“You were queen for a short while, twice, but never gained the support of the knights. You killed Uther, eventually. Caused Arthur’s death indirectly. The wrongs you sought to avenge were never righted, but they couldn’t have been. And no, I won’t tell you, because they haven’t happened yet and they won’t because I am here and will not allow it. But I can show you this…”

And he turns, brings his forehead to hers with his hand around her head, and shows her… herself. Pleading with him. Begging him to tell her she is not losing her mind. And lets her feel the weight of the conflict he’d felt then.

He releases her, and she stumbles back.

“I made so many mistakes, Morgana. I won’t make that one again. You are good and your heart is wise and the things that broke you would have broken anyone.”

“They didn’t break you,” she says.

“I was told from the time I was a toddler that I was special. From the time I was seventeen, that I had a destiny. I was specifically taught to control my magic and use it for good. I had people
helping me. And even so, I broke. I broke many times. I broke until the world broke with me. I made mistakes. I failed. You were told not to worry your pretty little head, by people who had no concept of how much you might be capable of."

“What if I’m destined to be evil?” she asks.

“Destiny’s bullshit,” he says. “It’s a huge flaming pile of ox excrement.”

“Prophecies…” she says. “My dreams…”

He winces. “My fault,” he says. “I was looking back along the timeline. And everywhere I looked, those who could see saw what I saw, and the echoes around it. Because I was looking. And until I actually stepped back into the world, they became in many ways self-fulfilling. When they were accurate it was because they’d already happened. Now? Null and void. I will never teach anyone to look back that way. My hope is that your dreams will stop once we’re no longer on that path at all.”

“People have been having prophetic dreams for thousands of years,” she says. “I read…”

He’s shaking his head. “Still me. Looking at the people who knew magic, learning what they knew.”

She starts to laugh. “You came back because of prophecy.”

He nods with a grin.

“That’s… so you have no idea what is going to happen here?”

He shakes his head and shrugs. “I just know that ultimately, the other course destroyed everything. I’ve nothing left to lose by trying. How did you sleep last night?”

“Well,” she says, and then stops. “I slept well.” A look of wonder dawns on her face, then annoyance, and then she elbows him, hard. “So those were all your fault?”

He shrugs again, apologetically.

“If you know I have the potential for such great evil in me, how can you still care? You love Arthur, don’t you? If I killed him…” Her eyes are looking past him, as if into that future.

“I do love him. But I blame myself for what you became. When I failed to tell you what you deserved to know, you fled to the first person who told you anything like truth. And she had her own axe to grind.”

“Against Uther,” Morgana says.

“Uther,” he agrees.

“Even him, you let him live… I can feel in me now already the potential for hating him, but you…”

“Arthur loves you both. And you, you deserve better than you’ve gotten so far. Better than you got from us the last time.” He offers her his arm again.

“Tell me about the future,” Morgana says, as they continue out into the courtyard. It is deep twilight, and torches light their path.
“All thousand years of it?” he asks.

“Exactly a thousand?” she asks.

“I wasn’t counting very closely at the end. I could figure it out if I wanted, and Alice knows, but I didn’t…. I don’t care. A thousand years is beyond anyone’s capability of imagining, and whether it was nine hundred and ninety eight or a thousand and seventeen, matters not.”

“Tell me the interesting parts,” she says.

“There comes a time in the future where horses are basically toys,” he says.

“How did people get from one place to the other? Plant their crops?”

“That’s easier to show than tell,” he says, and pulls her to the side.

She nods, and this time his hand is only on her shoulder as the images come in, cars and trains and aeroplanes.

When it stops, they continue walking, and he says, “Most people didn’t even grow their own crops, they had big machines that would do most of the work and only a few people would farm for everyone.”

“What did people do?” she asks, “The ordinary people, with no horses or farms?”

“They lived,” he says. “When one job disappears, usually another takes its place.”

“You said the world ended…”

“Side effects, mostly,” he says. “Too many wars, too much damage to the world, to the green and growing things that make the air we breathe. The air became… thick and hot and the seas rose and flooded everything. The loss of magic pushed the world out of balance, and I didn’t figure out in time that the reason the magic was gone… was me.”

She looks at him curiously.

“Magic flows where it is used,” he says. “I hid so hard and for so long that when magic came to me, and I didn’t use it, it was trapped, no longer in the world, and even my magic wasn’t enough, then, in the face of all the things pushing the world out of balance.”

She frowns, trying to parse it. He looks around the edge of the road, and grabs a handful of gravel, then whispers at it until his hand is filled with tiny round glowing stones.

“Watch,” he says, kneeling, and rolls a stone down the road towards the forest. It picks up speed until it bounces high and off of the road and the light is lost in the grass.

“Now, put your hand there,” he says, pointing to a spot on the road a few feet in front of him. He rolls another stone, and it lands gently in her hand. She stares down at the little glow in her palm.

“Go down there,” he says, “And put your hand down.”

The next stone smacks into her hand, stinging. She frowns at him, and climbs back up the road to where he stands, slipping the stone into her clothes. “Now, imagine,” he says, “how easy it is to change the direction of a stone when it is moving slowly, and has not built up energy from the roll down the hill.” He puts the handful on the road, and lets go, catching the whole handful with his other hand a moment later.
“Now,” Merlin says, “Imagine that you are standing down there, and this happens.”

He puts the handful of round stones down and gives them a little push. They roll slowly, then faster, and with every moment they build speed and start bouncing, like tiny fireflies, separating, until at the bottom of the hill they are scattered wide from one side of the road to the other, still rolling.

“How easy would it be to catch all the rocks down there?” he asks, walking down the road again.

“With magic, you could.” Morgana follows him.

He nods, and with a sweep of his hand, the roadway is clear. “Yes, but imagine that it isn’t handful of rocks, but many tens of countries, ten billion people, and the entire sky? All the oceans? Even for me, it was too much. I tried, I did, and the consequences made things worse.”

“Yet you could undo the whole world and come back?” she says.

“I had divine help, and it is actually simpler to work with the table the puzzle rests on than to try to control every part individually at once.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Catching us all before we roll into chaos?”

“I hope so,” he says. “It’ll be easier to know once I can trust that all are committed to the same path.”

“You think some will oppose you? Oppose Arthur?”

“I intend to make a show of force that will make anyone think twice about tangling with Arthur,” Merlin says. “But some people don’t learn well from the mistakes of others.”

They make their way across the university courtyard—which is lit with dozens of coloured floating lights—to the tall spire of Merlin’s tower.

“Long way up,” Morgana says.

“Not really.” They climb up just enough stairs that they can no longer see the entrance of the tower, to a plain door which ends the staircase.

“I thought we were going to the top?” Morgana says curiously, as Merlin pushes the door open with a word.

He holds the door open for her to walk through, then follows her into the foyer of his rooms. A crescent shaped space lined with small alcoves is dim but for the light he brings. A large semicircular window overlooks the courtyard and the valley. She glances outside into the last shreds of twilight and gasps to see the lights and the university spread out far below them, much farther than the few steps they’d climbed. Lights twinkle in the distance in the castle windows, the walls of the castle barely visible in the last of the light.

Merlin grins. “We are at the top.”
Merlin’s workshop has a plain, grey, featureless floor, and walls lined with shelves so full of jars and books that it is impossible to see what the walls behind them are made from. The shadows are deep, but there are small pools of light everywhere.

Morgana looks around, and then says, “It doesn’t look this big on the outside?”

“It’s not,” he says, and leads her to a small door on the opposite side of the room. Beyond it is a dark, simple room, with a hearth on one side, and a wide space, empty but for an overstuffed chair, in which Arthur is sitting sideways, feet up over the arm, reading by the light of a candle.

“Make yourself at home,” Merlin says to Arthur, who smirks back and puts the book and candle
down on a small table next to the chair.

“I already did. Took you long enough.”

“How did he get here first?” Morgana asks. “He didn’t pass us…”

“You’ll see,” Arthur says, grinning because he knows something she does not.

She sighs and ignores him.

Merlin gestures and a small, round table and three stools appear in the centre of the room, with a single, unlit candle in the middle.


Arthur unfolds himself from the chair slowly, and brushes against Merlin, deliberately, as he takes the farthest stool.

Merlin waves a hand and the fire in the hearth vanishes, the candle next to the chair goes out, and the room is plunged into complete darkness.

“So, to start with,” Merlin says in the dark, “Everything you see is made up of energy. And the things you don’t see. You can release the energy by striking a flint on steel, or more directly.”

The candle flares, momentarily blinding them.

“You didn’t say anything,” Morgana says.

“I don’t need to,” Merlin says. “Magic is easiest when repeated, and I have started hundreds of thousands of fires in my life. It was the second thing I learned.”

“And the first?” Arthur asks.

Arthur falls over backwards with a thud.

“Pushing,” Merlin says.

“Ow,” Arthur says, climbing to his feet and rubbing the back of his head. “Useful, that.”

Merlin winces, then reaches over to touch Arthur’s head, and the small pain disappears.

“But how do you do it?” Morgana asks.

“At first for me? Sheer will. For me, magic is something in me all the time, and it wants to do things. For most people, it requires not only an act of will, but intention, incantation, and practise. With a lot of practise, it gets faster and easier and the act of will is enough. Some people have an easier time reaching it than others. I’ve only taught a couple of people in my lifetime. One was impossible, and the other was easy; she picked it up like breathing.”

She looks at him impatiently, and he extinguishes the candle.

“Now what?” Arthur asks, shifting on his stool in the darkness.

“Now, you sit there and let me learn,” Morgana says. “Now what, Merlin?”

“You have to want it to light.” Merlin says. “Command it. Know that it will obey your command.
You can shape that with a word. I might use *byrne* to light something on fire, but many who need spells will say more to shape their intention more clearly. *Blæcern byrne* or even just *Leoht.*

“But you just said them and nothing happened,” Arthur sounds sceptical.

“Magic is intention, will and command. It isn’t just saying the right words in the right order. I don’t even need words if my intention is precise enough. The words are more for the person doing the magic than for the magic itself. Sorcerers may use many words to make sure their intention is as clear as possible. The most powerful need only a few, or none. The candle did not light because I did not wish it to light at that moment, though I said the words. Trust me, if everything I said casually came to pass, it would not be a good thing.”

In the darkness, Morgana says, “*Blæcern byrne,*” and the entire candle bursts into flame.

Merlin snaps, “*Mistre,*” before the table has a chance to catch on fire, and the flame diminishes to just the wick.

Morgana’s eyes are wide. Arthur purses his lips together, considering.

Merlin says, “*Taporas,*” and makes a circle in the air with his finger. A ring of small candles appear on the table, around the one candle that is already lit.

“Let’s work on control,” Merlin says. “Be as specific as you need to be. *Bryneléoma* is a gleaming flame. *Tapor* is a small candle, like these. *Héorean* is gentle, pleasing, and so you might say, *byrne héorean bryneléoma tapor,* if you wanted your small candle to burn with a gentle, bright flame.”

She repeats the words, and a candle lights. She pauses, thinks, and then says, “*Byrne héorean bryneléoma taporas,*” and they all light.

Merlin smiles, and the candles all go out. “Now,” he says in the darkness, “Think about lighting half of them. Be very clear in your mind which candles you wish to light, and how brightly they should shine. Then tell them to do it.”

She gasps as the candles light before she can say the words. Every other candle in the ring, and the centre candle.

“Every time you tell the magic to do something familiar, it’s a little bit easier than the last,” Merlin says.

“Can I try?” Arthur asks.

“Morgana, can you extinguish them?”

She closes her eyes, and the room goes dark.


There is a long moment of silence, and then Arthur says, “*Burn heeyran brinyoma tapor.*”

Nothing happens.

“Try, ‘*Byrne,*’” Merlin says. “Don’t be afraid of it. And say it carefully… birnah.”

“*Byrne,*” Arthur says, but nothing happens.

Merlin closes his eyes, reaches out with his own magic, and *looks* at Arthur, then at Morgana.
Zaira had been like a milky opal from the start, her magic initially hidden, almost invisible. By the time he’d left her, it had a brilliant sheen, bright, blazing with bits of colour everywhere, pale and glowing and strong, worn smooth and easy to access by effort and success.

Morgana is already a blaze of colour shining through a thousand cracks, greens and blues and reds, still partly hidden but so close to the surface that they are impossible to miss. They shift and shimmer and he knows that all she will have to do to reach her magic is simply reach.

Arthur does not appear to have magic at first glance, but for a little gleam, a tiny bright spot. Curious, Merlin looks, looks deep inside, and is staggered by what he finds. Underneath the dull exterior it is as if Arthur has been woven from shards of gold through diamond, a blaze of light firmly locked in place, a too-perfect lattice allowing nothing to escape. The tiny bright spot worn from their recent mental connection, but everything else covered tightly by a near impermeable armour that might take a thousand acts of will to pierce enough to light a single candle. An irresistible force concealed within an immoveable object.

He wonders if he might hasten the process, but does not, because as bright as Morgana is, and as strong as her first effort had been, he suspects that cracked open, Arthur’s magic might burn the world. Magic touches Morgana; it is in her fingers and her skin and her blood. Arthur seems to be made from it entirely, and Merlin wonders if this is what he looks like to those with eyes to see. Trying to look at his own magic is like trying to see the back of his own head.

He reaches out, and looks for Gaius, for comparison. He knows Gaius is not innately magical, and indeed, magic sits on him like clothing, something that must be chosen, and used, and carefully shaped. Years, Gaius had said, it took to make the smallest spell work. Arthur’s internal armour might actually prevent even that approach.

When he opens his eyes, the candles are all lit, and he knows Morgana has done it.

“We got tired of sitting in the dark,” she says. “What were you doing?”

“Looking at your magic,” he says to her. “And yours,” he says to Arthur.

“Are you sure I have any? Nothing happened. I don’t feel a glimmer of anything,” Arthur says, frowning.

“It is possible that if you spend the next ten years working at it, you might actually be able to start using magic on your own,” Merlin says. “I’m guessing. You are magic, and powerful magic, at your core, but it is locked away, so tight, I have no idea what might happen if we managed to break it loose. It might even be dangerous. The strength of your will and the power of your command… you saw what Morgana did without thinking. It’s trapped and I don’t know why, and until I do, I’m not willing to do something that might harm you or the people around you.”

“And me?” Morgana asks.

“Yours bubbles at the surface. It just needs… polishing. Practise. It’s strong. Intense.”

“How should I practise?” she asks. “The candles are easy.”

“Read,” he says. “Learn the old tongue. In a few weeks we can create a tower for you, some place that will set you high and away from everyone else, so that you will not hurt them or be distracted, where you can study and experiment and find your way.”

“Is that how you learned?” she asks.
“I spent my first three decades bumbling about with instinct, nudges, books and dumb luck, hiding the whole while. I spent the next eight hundred years barely using it. It wasn’t until I took time away to really study that I actually became more than unreasonably lucky, and actually got reliably competent. Had I had somewhere safe at the age I was, now…”

She nods.

“Should I bother?” Arthur says.

“It all depends on how the next year goes,” Merlin answers. “Maybe you’ll have time.”

“It’s late,” Arthur says, yawning abruptly.

Merlin stands, waves his hand, filling the room with light, and extinguishing every flame in the room at once. Moving to the door and opening it, he closes his eyes for a moment, and says, “Morgana, at the bottom of the stairs, turn left. You’ll see an alcove, it will take you to your chambers directly.” They follow him out into the workshop.

“Is that what those are for?” she asks, nodding at the series of alcoves surrounding the large window.

“They’re for my private use,” he says. “The one downstairs is for you and Gwen only, but will allow me to isolate my workshop if I’m doing something sensitive.”

She gives an unladylike snort. “Is that what you’re calling it?”

“Morgana!” Arthur’s voice is full of brotherly indignation.

“I don’t see any bed in here,” Morgana teases lightly.

“You haven’t seen the whole workshop,” Merlin mutters.

“It’s late,” Arthur puts up a hand. “Enough.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Morgana says. “For another lesson, Merlin.”

“I’ll try, but I expect tomorrow to be full of diplomacy. Well, I hope it will be full of diplomacy. Otherwise it will be full of teaching several erstwhile enemies the error of their ways by less polite means. But you have time. We all have time. Rushing earns you nothing here but burnt drapes and an embarrassing absence of clothing.” Merlin flushes. “Maybe not the last… that was me.”

“When did your magic awaken?” Morgana asks.

Merlin turns to look at her. “It first manifested, or so my mother tells me, before I could crawl. I wanted something, and grabbed it with my mind. But my friend found out when he startled me felling a tree, which then nearly landed on a neighbour, and I ended up ripping half my clothes off running away. You were actually the one who set the drapes on fire.”

Arthur barks a laugh at the image.

Merlin ignores him and continues, “Practise calm. Practise control. Shape your magic with the old tongue and train it to stay there for the moment. It is better to avoid having your whims made manifest, for that way does lie corruption. It is too easy to think of what you can do, and forget the cost.”

“You create so much by thought alone,” Morgana says.
“I spent eight hundred years learning control before I ever started letting myself create freely at all, and even then it was not until all hope was lost that I let myself truly practise complex magic without fear. I don’t think you need eight hundred years, but weeks or months spent learning to discipline your mind will greatly improve your power and skill. Ask the library for materials on meditation. Find Dragoon if I am not available, Alice will bring him to you if you ask.”

Morgana nods.

Merlin’s tone changes, grows more urgent. “Remember, I have no desire for personal aggrandisement. I have seen the tragedy that is obsession with power. I would see you whole and safe and happy, the both of you, but I want that because I know the good you are capable of. If I saw either of you walking down a road of tyranny and oppression, I would stop you.”

Arthur looks startled by this. Morgana simply nods again.

“Arthur will have no need to make shows of strength, as he will be actually, obviously strong. And you, Morgana, won’t need to spend your life seeking revenge, because the harm has already been mitigated. You won’t need to search out whatever source of knowledge you can find, damn the cost, because I am willing to give you as much as you are willing to learn for so long as you bend your powers to good.” He reaches out, rests a hand on her shoulder briefly.

“I know you love the people of Camelot, that you hate injustice and that you hunger to bring people out of their dark places, and I would nourish that in you. It was my greatest grief…” He stops, and turns from them, looking out the wide window into the deep dark of the night.

The scattered tiny lights below create the illusion that the tower is floating in space, the moonless, star-filled sky blending in with the dark earth. It is as if the room they stand in is the only alive thing in existence, but Arthur is in it, and Morgana, and when he feels Arthur’s hand on his shoulder, Merlin knows in his bones that finally, he is not alone.

“You have my pledge,” Arthur says, “that I will do all in my power to help bring this golden age of Camelot to fruition, in the right way.” They both feel a vibrating thrum of truth to the words.

Morgana steps forward and puts a hand on his other shoulder. “And mine, that I will work to learn, not for myself, but for this world you are trying to build.” Another vow that resonates deep, despite her quiet tone.

His shoulders are shaking under their hands, and Morgana moves between him and the window, bringing his chin up with a single finger. “Are you crying?”

“If the future taught me anything,” Merlin says, “It’s that there is no shame in tears.”

She looks perplexed.

“I’m happy,” he says, with tears streaming down his face. “I’m an old, old man, and to hear you speak truth in a dedication to the better path… I’ll indulge in letting myself feel what I feel.”

She looks at his unlined skin, so young but for the aeons in his eyes, the naked relief on his face, and wonders how badly they must have hurt each other, how deeply he must care for it to have wounded him so much. It is too much, and he looks away, down, his head hanging a little, and she pulls him forward and down into a hug, puts her chin on his shoulder and brings her hand up to his hair. Arthur stands behind him, his face unreadable.

Her eyes meet Arthur’s for a long moment, and Morgana releases Merlin with a hand on his cheek, saying, “Arthur fears I might take you from him.”
Merlin startles, and looks back at Arthur, and then back at Morgana. “Arthur knows that I would
never hurt him so.”

“I…” Arthur doesn’t quite know where to look. “You love her,” he says. “I don’t know…”

and this absurd place and this ridiculous century. Which diminishes not one bit the absolute and
undeniable fact that I am yours. I was made for you, quite literally, by several deities, and also
chose you ten thousand times over, with tens of billions of heartbeats. There is literally nothing that
exists in this world or any other that could change that. Don’t be silly.”

Arthur looks completely taken aback for a moment, and then recovers enough to say, “So you think
you’re God’s gift….”

“The goddess’s,” Morgana says. “And he is. Obviously. So don’t get snotty. You may have been
spoilt rotten, but I’ll box your ears myself if you look that gift horse in the mouth.”

Arthur’s eyes drop involuntarily to Merlin’s lips, and Morgana throws up her hands. “I’m going to
sleep,” she says, reaching for the door to the stairs. “I have no desire whatsoever to know anything
about anything else that goes on tonight.”

The door closes before either of them has time to react.

Merlin starts chuckling to himself, much to Arthur’s confuddlement.

“What?” Arthur snaps, a little harsher than he’d intended.

“It’s just…” Merlin sits on the windowsill and gestures in the direction of the door. “She thinks
we’re already screwing.”

“Screwing?” Arthur asks.

“Knocking knees? Worshipping the goddess under the full moon? Copulating? A screw is much
like a nail, only… twistier,” Merlin says, wiggling a finger suggestively.

Arthur flushes. “I suspect the only reason we haven’t is that we keep being interrupted.” He glares
at the door.

Merlin shakes his head. “We haven’t because you’re not ready, and because I’m in no hurry. I
don’t have much interest in a hasty tumble and a rush to ‘completion’. I want to take my time when
we get to the point of consummation. That means letting things around here settle down to the
point where we can actually take the time to be… apart from the world for a bit.”

“You don’t want to…” Arthur says curiously, but without fear.

even completely wrapped your mind around that.” He yawns. “Mostly, right now, I want to curl up
with you in that exceedingly comfortable bed and sleep until they insist that we don’t.”

Arthur puts out his hand, and Merlin takes it, letting Arthur draw him to his feet. “Then come on,”
Arthur says. “And draw the curtain, I’m sure they’ll be pounding on our door soon enough.”
How to Confuse A Dragon

Chapter by Jenrose

Chapter Notes

CW: suicide attempt mention in passing.

Merlin is accustomed to dreaming his memories, has done for centuries. He sorts through his own past in his sleep as his brain tries to cope with the enormity of what he is doing to remedy the great wrongs of his life. But the memory he dreams this time is not his own memory, and he doesn’t dream alone.

He had never once looked at the magic surrounding Arthur’s conception, believing he knew the truth of it already (and to be perfectly honest, having no interest in potentially witnessing Uther in that compromising position. So when he finds himself looking at a very much alive Ygraine, lying sleeping in her bed, he is startled enough to recognise the dream lucidly.

“Merlin,” Arthur says next to him, “Is that my mother?”

“We’re dreaming,” Merlin says.

Arthur kneels down next to her head, and stares at her long and hard, his hand coming up involuntarily to touch her cheek. She does not stir.

“I think this is in the past,” Merlin says. “I… looking felt like this but I’ve never done it asleep before.”

“Are we asleep? I feel awake.”

“We are, and even if we were awake it would be the same. One cannot act in the past without unwinding time. We’d never be able to return to the point we came from.”

“This must be before I was conceived,” Arthur says. “She looks so well…”

“Actually…” Merlin says, changing his own perspective from the visual to the magical, “I think this is the moment of your conception.”

“My father is not here,” Arthur says dismissively. “Certainly I am no virgin birth.”

“Conception doesn’t work that way, it isn’t instant. It takes time for seed to meet ovum, for the quickened egg to travel to the womb and implant. The act might have been a day ago or more.
Witness.” And Merlin tightens his focus down into Ygraine’s body, where a blazing bright spark moves to her womb. “See?”

And suddenly Arthur can see exactly what Merlin is showing him. “What is that?” he asks.

“Your magic, from the moment of your conception,” Merlin says.

“Can… Can I watch her for a while?” Arthur asks, and without effort he is back at his mother’s bedside, watching her sleep.

“It’s risky to stay,” Merlin says. “Every time I did this around an important event, there were prophecies upon prophecies, and perhaps this is the reason that so many of our prophecies conflicted with each other.”

Arthur presses his lips together with a frown. “If you can return us to a less fraught slumber, then, please do.”

Merlin tries, but the vision shifts, not to the present or back to Merlin’s own memories, but to the same room, Queen Ygraine fading on the bed, an infant in her arms over her rounded belly. To Merlin’s eyes, the baby is blindingly, brilliantly magical, and drawing more magic from his mother. He instinctively isolates that view of the magic from Arthur, who sees only his mother, and himself, and they watch as Ygraine fades and dies. As Uther’s knees buckle and Gaius catches him. As Uther screams in rage, betrayal, and grief, and the infant’s magic is swallowed by a cloud. Curious, Merlin looks for the source of that cloud, and finds a familiar hand.

The Goddess wears Zaira’s face as she looks at him, and says, “Had I not, Uther’s hate would have consumed the boy.”

“But can his magic be used? Freed? I don’t want to see him hurt.”

“That is up to him,” she says.

“He’s so brilliant,” Merlin says. “Is that what my magic looks like?”

“You are two sides to the same coin,” she says, and he is standing next to Arthur, who looks stricken, with the goddess nowhere to be seen.

“Please take me from this,” Arthur says, his voice breaking. “Please, Merlin, I can’t…”

“It’s not me doing this,” Merlin says, his voice strained and urgent, but the scene is already shifting to the cave beneath the castle. They find themselves standing on the ledge next to Nimueh, who is speaking intently to the Great Dragon.

“…a complete disaster,” she says. “Hundreds already dead. Hundreds more to follow. This child was supposed to bolster magic in the world, but it drains away instead, in Uther's rivers of blood.”

“I told you not to meddle,” says the dragon. “No good could come of this.”

“Well, we shall have to meddle once more. Tell me, is your lord alive?”

“He is. Betrayed, on the run, but living still.”

“We need to mitigate the harm I’ve done, somehow. The child’s birth has harmed magic in Albion profoundly. The seers keep saying that a coin with only one side can never balance. We need to bring Emrys into the world, to right the wrong to this child’s magic.”
“And so you would meddle again?”

“And give your lord a son, that the dragonkin might live on.”

“He will not speak to you after this. You must use another.”

“Beltane comes soon, I shall entreat the goddess…” Nimueh sounds certain. “In the time of rising, perhaps there will need be no lethal price.”

“There’s always a price,” the dragon says. “I fear this will destroy you yet.”

“What do you see, wyrm?”

Kilgharrah’s head turns to look directly at Merlin and Arthur. The dragon stares at them, long and hard, studying them.

Arthur’s hand reaches out to Merlin instinctively, and Merlin realises that they are wearing the finest stuff—Arthur in utterly impractical mail, shining gold and silver with a red tabard, Merlin in flowing dark red robes. They are both bearded. Excalibur sits in a scabbard at Arthur’s hip, the dragon staff in Merlin’s hand.

“I see them, light, and dark, dark and light, two sides of the same coin, bringing peace to the entire land. And I see them torn apart, and destroying everything. I know not the truth of it. Cast your die, flip your coin, do what you must, Nimueh. All the rest of my kind are gone, I will be the last, so it matters not to me.”

“The goddess made you, she could make another,” Nimueh says. “The continuation of the Dragonlord line would make that more likely.”

“He is in Ealdor,” Kilgharrah says. “I can feel him there. He has found refuge… yes, perhaps she will serve your purpose.”

Nimueh tips her head at the dragon in thanks. “Hold fast, old friend.”

“I am held fast already,” he says, looking in disgust at the chain around his ankle. “Now fly, before they discover you.”

The next shift takes them to Ealdor, where young Hunith and Balinor are just returning from Beltane celebrations, when a cry goes up that riders have been spotted wearing Camelot’s colours.

Their finery gone, replaced by plainer garb, Merlin and Arthur watch as Balinor kisses Hunith and speaks. As she shakes her head and grabs his arm. As he puts his hand to her cheek and flees with only the clothes on his back. As she reels, and then gathers herself, lying to cover his exit as the riders come into the village.

Another shift and they see the spark lodged in her womb. Another, and Merlin is born, but with no death and no father’s rage, his magic shines bright, healing his mother as he is born. Merlin stares at his infant self, at the liquid, blazing fire that is his magic, not a locked gemstone or simmering opal, but the white-hot core of magic itself, the root of all gems, all rock, all stone, but mobile, ready, and limitless.

“Do you see it?” Merlin asks.

“That’s terrifying,” Arthur says. “You must have been hell as a baby.”
“A few…unique… challenges, I suppose,” Merlin says. “You’d have to ask my mother.”

“Was mine like that?” Arthur asks. “My… magic?” It is improbable to him that he is saying the words together.

“Yours is… crystallised and covered,” Merlin says. “I doubt you would have survived your father’s grief had the goddess not intervened to block your magic from manifesting.”

The vision fades, and they wake, the room dark. Merlin conjures a dim light without really thinking about it, and turns in Arthur’s arms.

Arthur’s face is wet with tears, and Merlin pulls him close.

“That my birth ended her,” Arthur says. “That he didn’t give her a choice…”

“He has paid every price but death,” Merlin says. “It was monstrous, but you are not monstrous. Please remember that in this time, every woman who bears a child knows that death hovers close, magic or no. She knew it could end her, and chose to take the chance. She said as much to you once, that she would have done so willingly. As would I, your father, so many of us would willingly die that you might live. I watched him face what he thought was certain death for you. I bargained my life for yours once in almost the exact same way, and the price was nearly borne by my own mother, and Gaius. The goddess herself would not have granted the boon had she not wanted you in the world.”

“It’s too much,” Arthur says. “Don’t die for me. I…”

“You would lay down your life for any of us without a second thought,” Merlin says. “And I’m not going to die. Couldn’t, if I wanted to.”

“You tried.” Arthur know, to his bones, that some of those myriad deaths Merlin has mentioned in such an offhand way were deliberate.

“Wasn’t any fun without you,” Merlin says. “I hoped that we could come back together. But enough, I’m here. You’re here. This is what we have now, and I would not, now, change any of it, not now that I know we have a chance of putting things right.”

“We can never fix my mother’s death,” Arthur says.

“Nor can we fix the twenty years of the purge, nor my father living in a cave, nor my mother living in poverty alone, nor any of the things that made us each at the core. Life has losses. Even were you and I to live forever, together, sustained by whatever magic or grace of the goddess, we would still lose people over time, for life cannot continue without death and remain balanced.

“The price of long life is seeing everyone and everything you ever love die and fade away into ruin. The reward, if we are so fortunate, is to see the fruition of long laid plans and dreams made manifest that could not normally be realised in one lifetime.”

“I’m weary thinking of it,” Arthur says.

“I think you’re weary because it’s the middle of the night,” Merlin says. “Sleep. I’m here.”
The morning comes early with Leon pounding on the door; a scout has returned to report that three kings and their retinues will be arriving by midday.

Arthur and Merlin bustle around each other in the chambers, getting Arthur ready in a familiar pattern. Arthur is amused to see Merlin has donned his own servant’s garb unthinking.

“Are you really wearing that?” he asks, nodding at Merlin’s red shirt.

Merlin blinks down at it. “Right,” he says, and the red robe appears.

“You might want to do the thing,” Arthur says, pointing at his face.

“You like my face,” Merlin answers back, but as Arthur watches, Merlin’s shoulders fill out, and a short, dark beard grows, his hair lengthening and changing from a mop to something more intentional. The transformation from boy to adult, from effacement to power is complete and overwhelming.

“Don’t suppose you can make me look more kingly,” Arthur says lightly, but there is worry in his eyes.

Merlin walks up to him, puts a hand on his face, turns Arthur’s head from side to side, and says, “Gebyrde.”

Arthur’s face feels very itchy and tingly for a moment, and he turns to look in the mirror. “Good god, Merlin, I look like a goat. Maybe a little less…” and he moves his hand up and down in front of his chin, indicating the significant length.

Merlin grins, and the beard shortens to a few weeks more grown in than the scruff he’d been working on in the near constant activity of the previous three days.

“You did that on purpose,” Arthur says, and Merlin just shrugs and helps him into his cape. “I suppose you normally just magic off the whiskers every morning?”

“It grows if I let it,” Merlin says. “But yes, I can get a closer shave with magic than with a blade. I can also just not let it grow at all. But you look very kingly with a beard.”

Arthur scratches his chin absently.

“As long as you don’t do that,” Merlin says with a smile.

In the throne room, several knights wait for Arthur.
“Sir Geraint, your report please,” Arthur says as he walks in.

“Odin tried to pass our border last night,” says Geraint, “but stopped when his men were suddenly afflicted with a case of heavy swords.”

“Heavy swords?” Arthur asks, glancing at Merlin. Merlin shrugs, and leans against the empty throne.

“Pulled some of them right off their horses; ripped one man’s belt clean off. One of their scouts ended up pinned to the ground. They had to cut him out of his clothes with a blacksmith’s shears.” The knight smiles. “They decided not to push on after dark as they’d originally planned. I bid the herald proclaim the peace talks and restate your missive about weapons only being allowed in by those who bear no ill intent. And that any who crossed unarmed would be guaranteed safe passage and safe return so long as they broke no laws here.”

“I’m guessing Odin was not pleased?”

Geraint laughs dryly, “Indeed not. This morning he bid most of his army to wait, and sent a messenger across unarmed. I reiterated that you sought peace, and that you were backed by a powerful sorcerer who also wished peace, and said that I suspected any who did not declare peace would find themselves quite alone in the coming months. Told them about Merlin’s university; you can actually see it from the pass, so they could get the scope of it.”

“And?” Arthur asks.

“I think he means to challenge you to a duel. He is coming with a small retinue. His men are camped over the border with all the weapons they could shove back over the line.”

“Tricky dueling if all the swords get heavy,” Arthur says.

“Dueling is primitive and a silly way to settle arguments,” Merlin says, “But if you ask me to lift the geas on the dueling ground, I can. I won’t let him kill you, though. I don’t think I’m capable of letting you die again. Not that he’s likely to beat you anyway, but it was a duel that settled it last time and got you peace. Because you could have killed him and didn’t.”

“I don’t need… “ Arthur starts.

Merlin just looks at him, expressionless, until Arthur turns back to the knights. “Thank you Geraint, if you’ll see Odin settled in a guest chamber and his retinue can make camp by the training field. Bedivere?”

“Cenred’s men tried to cross with swords drawn yesterday morning,” Sir Bedivere says. “They dropped them just over the border. Apparently all the weapons were too hot to handle. They had to push them back over the border with sticks, and the ground is still blackened this morning. They took one look at my patrol and backed over the border, since we were clearly able to still hold our weapons. Several tried shooting with crossbows, but the bolts just dropped out of the air at the border. They stopped when the dropped bolts spelled out, ‘DON’T BE SILLY’. I think they were put out that one of the bolts was actually broken for the punctuation.”

“Did they parley?” Arthur asks.

“Aye. I pointed out that any sorcerer capable of making a ward that could write messages with bolts from more than a day’s journey away could probably shoot them with their own bolts if he wanted to, and that if Camelot wanted Cenred dead, he’d be dead already, and we wouldn’t be there.”
“Well, I’m not sure I don’t want him dead,” Merlin says, “but I prefer to give someone a chance to stop being an ass before I kick them in theirs.”

“I told him as much, my lor…. what do we call you now, Merlin?” Bedivere asks.

“He’s got a point,” Arthur says, amused. “We mustn’t have all the highnesses and lords and sires here and then address the most powerful man in the room as ‘Hey you.’”

“Since I do your bidding, technically that’s you,” Merlin says.

Arthur snorts. “Since when do you do my bidding?”

“You bid me serve you. I do,” Merlin smiles serenely.

“In any event,” Arthur says, “They may call you ‘my lord’, for now, as they would any noble of uncertain station. You already have a land grant, though it not be official ‘til the coronation.”

“As you wish, sire,” Merlin says, his face blank. For now? And is it really necessary that I be ‘lord’?

Your technical title will be King Consort, eventually, Arthur sends, and suppresses a smile when Merlin pales and his eyes widen. But that can wait until things settle down.

Are you really proposing to me via telepathy during a mission briefing?

“Sir Bedivere, you were saying?” Arthur continues, turning away from Merlin.

Prat.

“Cenred’s coming, sire, but he’s not happy.”

“I wouldn’t expect him to be,” Arthur says, and thinks hard about his lips on Merlin’s ear for a moment before turning to Sir Owain. A tiny noise next to him suggests the experiment is a success as the young knight began to speak.

“King Caerleon and Queen Annis come with a small group. They tried to send a large force after our patrol but their weapons… they just bounced off the border, so they rode back. We watched them in discussion for some time, when they finally decided to cross the border, it was just the royal couple, and six attendants, and their arms were not affected.”

“We’ll have to watch them,” Arthur says. “Merlin, would you kindly explain why the geas worked in different ways for each of our… guests?”

“Caerleon is an opportunist and a blow-hard,” Merlin says. “But his wife is extremely sensible. He tested the border, found it strong, and decided he wanted to be an ally. If he’d born serious enmity, he’d have found his weapons hot or heavy, depending.”

“Depending on…” Arthur leads.

“Well, Cenred is a treacherous, cowardly snake out for his own power. Odin wants nothing of power, only revenge. While he’s an enemy, he’s not really dishonest or fundamentally bad, so the geas would stop him but not hurt him. Cenred… We shall see with him. If he breaks the peace, I’ll break him, gladly.”

Are you annoyed at Cenred or at me? Arthur sent. “I know you have a history with him.”
I don’t need flowers, but there’s a time and a place and I’m pretty sure this isn’t it. Also, asking is good. Merlin says aloud, “In any event, the geas reads intent and reacts proportionally. My history with him is mostly a selling point for him to offer up a border concession.”

“Why would he do that?” Arthur asks.

“Because if he doesn’t, he’s going to be on the wrong end of a dragon. Or a sword. I haven’t decided. And because we’re going to ride into Essetir soon, whether he likes it or not, and by the time this week is done he will greatly prefer to have Camelot as an ally than an enemy.”

“My lord,” says Geraint, looking at Merlin, “How strong is the geas? What’s the worst it can do?”

“It gets progressively stronger, the more attempts someone makes to thwart it. Someone, for example, attacking just over the border at full tilt might find themselves riding in the opposite direction the first time, their weapons might get heavy or hot the second time, and the third time they might find themselves thrown into a tree and their horse leaving them. Someone who persisted despite profound ill intent? If they push hard enough it could kill them, though few people could generate enough momentum to cause that kind of backlash. Casual low level brutality might only cause the pain to be reflected back on the person inflicting the damage. Going after someone with a knife has a higher chance of wounding the attacker than the erstwhile victim.”

Arthur is giving him a funny look. Merlin ignores it.

Leon is also looking at Merlin strangely, and asks, “So would this be responsible for the smiles I’ve been seeing on the stable boys, and the scowl I’ve been seeing on the stable master’s face?”

“Has he knocked himself out yet, boxing poor Tyr’s ears?” Merlin asks.

“That would explain it,” Leon says. “So will masters be unable to discipline their servants, now?”

“If they pay a fair wage, and treat their servants well, most servants will do their jobs with pride,” Merlin says. “If they cannot motivate their servants to work for them without resorting to violence, they do not deserve to have servants. There is no shame in service, but there is great shame in being cruel.”

Arthur looks down and flushes, frowning.

“Every servant has a refuge at the university, now, and masters would be wise to remember that. Some may have to actually start cooking their own food, doing their own laundry and tending their own horses if they cannot treat others well enough to induce them to do the work without threat of violence. I do not pity them, as there are great rewards in hard work and understanding the toils of others.”

“The nobility will revolt,” Arthur says.

“You don’t need them,” Merlin answers. “They have their lands and holdings at your sufferance and the sufferance of the people who make their estates sustainable. And I’d like to see them try revolting, with the geas in place.”


“Yes,” Merlin says. “Poison is a weapon like any other, and can become very difficult to hold where there is ill intent. And violent magic will just…” He makes a sucking sound, with a pop on the end, “Any time someone casts a spell or uses magic with violent intent, it will be absorbed by the geas directly as raw magic, and actually make the whole thing stronger.”
“So the more people fight, the stronger it gets?”

“It’ll tend to spread towards the homeland of the one who wields the magic. Even physical violence will tend to have this effect. If someone marches a large army across the border, they may find the border has moved a few inches in their direction the next time they come back. The more times they try, the farther it will reach. Also, it will make them tired. Have to get the energy from somewhere, and tired people don’t start as many wars. But magic attacks will spread the geas far more quickly than physical ones.”

“You really dislike battle, Merlin,” Arthur says.

“It’s pointless. It wastes resources,” Merlin says. “There are better ways.”

“Yet you were perfectly willing to get into a tavern brawl the other morning…” Arthur stops. “There was never going to be a brawl, was there?”

“It was the middle of the morning,” Merlin says. “How many tavern fights have you seen that started before lunch?” He grins.

“That kind of brawl would be something to see, though,” Arthur says thoughtfully. “I imagine most punches would land on the person throwing them?”

“Pretty much,” Merlin says. “Cuts down on the damage to bystanders.”

“We trained, though,” Arthur says. “Lots of hits.”

“No one intends to kill or even hurt someone in training. This doesn’t protect everyone from everything; it’s about intent, mostly, and effect, to a certain degree. It is… nuanced.”

Arthur turns to the knights. “I’d like you each to return to the retinue you met at the border and escort them in. Leon, if you’d please ensure that we are ready to receive our guests? We will need tables and chairs. I intend to conduct talks in here.”

The knights bow, and say, “Sire,” before leaving.

When the last knight is out of the room, Arthur gestures for the guards to step out. When the door is closed, he turns to Merlin and says, “Were you going to tell me that you were rewriting the entire social order, or was that a surprise?”

“I thought you’d have figured that out already,” Merlin says. “I wasn’t subtle.”

“And I have no say in this?”

“Why, do you you really want to keep throwing things at me?” Merlin asks. “You want children beaten to death? Armies at your doorstep? Traitors with daggers standing over you while you sleep? You want to lose your entire contingent of knights twice over? What good is it to prevent enemies from beating down our doors, if behind those doors the strong are abusing the weak simply because they can?”

“What stable boy would muck out a stable if he didn’t fear retribution?” Arthur asks.

Merlin crosses his arms, raises an eyebrow and stares at Arthur for a long moment. “One who cares about the horses,” he finally says. “Or their master. Or a job well done. One who is paid or otherwise compensated enough to make it worth their while.”
“How far do you expect this to extend?” Arthur asks.

“Eventually?” Merlin says, “Most of the world.”

Arthur’s eyes widen. “You mean to conquer that much territory?”

“No,” Merlin says. “I expect that the peoples of each land will request that we extend the geas to them. I don’t expect all their rulers to be happy about it.”

“I think you need to tell me everything,” Arthur says. “What is the end point?”

Merlin flops into the chair Morgana usually sits in, next to the king’s throne. “Are you going to sit?”

Arthur sits on the throne, and turns to Merlin. “Speak.”

“The end point is that we are going to skip nine hundred years of human development and cut straight to the point where human life has value, that there is a general understanding of the concept of basic human rights, and we’re going to do it in a way that doesn’t ruin the earth.”

“Idealistic of you,” Arthur says. “Also presumptuous. What gives you the right to make such a broad change?”

Merlin sighs and stares the length of the room. “A thousand years. You… Every human being who ever lived, died. I can’t—won’t—conquer death itself, but the vast majority of those lives were desperate, brutal, short, with not enough to eat, no education, a constant and usually futile struggle to survive. I’m not telling people what to do, I’m saying, ‘Don’t hurt each other.’ I’m taking violence out of the equation. I’m taking threat of starvation out of the equation. I’m saying any who would be educated can come here and be educated. And that may completely undermine some power structures. But it won’t undermine yours. You were always of the mind that the people were your priority, and any leader who has the same priority will ultimately have the support they need to feed and educate their people.”

“It’s going to be chaos,” says Arthur. “If people can get food for free, then what of those who rely on selling food for their livelihoods?”

“They’ll need to make better food,” Merlin says. “Just as those who wish unpleasant work to be done may need to provide better rewards for doing so. And maybe we find other ways of doing the jobs no one wants to do.”

“And if food and shelter are taken care of, what better rewards are you thinking of?”

“Think of your own resources. You have all the good food you need, all the clothes you could want, fine horses and loyal staff. You don’t work in order to get those things, you work because the work needs to be done and you are expected to do it and you want to do a good job. I do what I do not because I need to eat, but because I want to make things better. Your knights don’t serve you because you pay them… they could do many other things for money. They serve you because you inspire them.”

“So what am I going to tell these kings and sorcerers, witches and warlocks and nobles who rely on violence for power?”

“Tell them to stop. Or we will stop them. Tell them that for now, we will simply limit what happens within Camelot, but that any villages that are close to the border will be allowed to ask to join us, and the geas will extend. That we’d rather work with them, and create a united Albion by
treaty and negotiation, but that within our borders we will not tolerate power gotten through violence.”

“How far can you extend it?” Arthur asks.

“As far as I need to,” Merlin says. “But you’re asking the wrong question.”

“All right, Merlin,” Arthur says, folding his arms and looking irritated. “Just what is the right question then?”

“The question is what you should tell the people. Because they're the ones who have been living in fear.”

“And what do you suggest?” The familiar arrogance touches Arthur’s voice.

“Tell them that they need not fear. That any who wish to study at the university may do so. That the poor will be fed, and housed, but that better accommodation must be earned. That magic can be used for good. That the world is changing, and will change rapidly, but that we have been given a chance by the goddess to right terrible wrongs, and that this is our second chance, our opportunity to do things better.” Merlin stands up and starts to pace.

He is nearly glowing with intensity. “Tell them that nobility of birth is nothing compared to nobility of spirit. That privilege can be earned by diligence. That the more work people do to understand the information humanity now has at its disposal, the better their lives will be.” His voice is urgent now. “Tell them that we offer sanctuary to all who come in peace. That you need their help in building a better kingdom for all the people. That brutality will not be tolerated. That this will make it necessary for people to be kinder to each other, that use of force will gain them nothing, and they cannot count on threat to induce cooperation.”

“They don’t know any other way,” Arthur says.

“We’ll show them,” Merlin says, stopping in his tracks and facing Arthur. “You tell them that bullies and tyrants will need to find a different way of being in the world, because the only ones who will be hurt by violence now are those who are committing it. That you yourself are restrained by this because no one shall rule by force of arms alone, and that the purge is over. That there will be those who test the limits, and they will find them to be firm and fast. Tell them that each of us has the right to personal integrity of body and spirit, that none may be compelled to love or submit to marriage or slavery.”

“I might need a list,” Arthur says, dryly.

“Is it not the world you want to live in? Where you don’t have to make excuses for going against your conscience because ‘That’s the way the world works.’ Shall I show you some of the lives you took under your father’s rule, or even under your own, because you felt you had to rather than that you knew it was the right thing to do?”

Arthur stares at him. “You’re angry with me. About decisions… I haven’t even made yet. I could never make. And I don’t even think you ever let yourself really feel it. I must have disappointed you so desperately, so many times…”

He stands, and paces over to the great stained glass windows. Merlin watches him, stunned silent.

_I didn’t… you aren’t… I wouldn’t have come back if you weren’t the most noble person I’ve ever known._
“You’re still angry,” Arthur says, still looking out the window. “And I’m not looking for your reassurance. In the time I’ve known you, in my time, I know you’ve already seen me make choices that you would have wished were otherwise. That you must have wished were otherwise. I made choices before I met you that wake me up in the night. Failed to stop things I still wish I’d been able to stop. Failed to stand up to him firmly enough to make him see reason.”

He feels Merlin’s hands slide around his waist, and has to glance back to make sure Merlin is actually there behind him.

“If I could have let you experience more of the triumphs,” Merlin says, “more of the failures, without causing irreparable harm, we’d be having this conversation a year from now, or two, and you would wonder less, and understand more. But it is a matter of weeks before your father would have refused succour to a village that begged his aid. A month or two before he would have slaughtered Gwen’s father and several others for merely associating with a sorcerer unknowingly. Before he forced you to hunt down so many more who had done no harm. Do you know I stood accused of magic in this place, oh, a half dozen times, sentenced to death? “


“Have you ever wondered why your dungeons are so easy to get out of?” Merlin asks. “Uther’s test of whether someone actually had sorcery should have been that if they were still there by the morning of their execution, they were probably innocent. Most of the time I would just escape and you would never wonder at all how I’d managed to do it, and by the time I was caught again, we’d have found proof that I was not the one who’d caused the problem. Even when I had.”

At this, Arthur laughs, his belly muscles shaking against Merlin’s hands. “I’d like to see that some time.”

Merlin’s tone shifts, becoming more serious. “He almost burned Gaius, and you could not stop him until the torch was nearly in the pyre. I did not wonder why you could not do more.”

“Gaius,” Arthur breathes. “He loves Gaius like a brother.”

“And Gaius him, for there is no other explanation why he stayed after his fiancee fled. And yet Uther still… Even I went to irrational lengths to protect him, even after that, for your sake. I know where my anger is.”

“I still think you’re angry with me,” Arthur says.

Merlin drops his hands from around Arthur’s waist and moves up to the window next to him. “A man likes to be asked before someone assumes he’s going to wed them.”

“Really,” Arthur says. “Well, a man likes to be asked before the entire law of his land is rewritten behind his back.”

Merlin presses his lips together and then fails to completely suppress a chuckle. “Fair.” He turns to Arthur. “Arthur, may I help you bring about a unified Albion and peace in our time without bloodshed?”

Arthur’s eyes are twinkling when he responds, “If I say yes, will you be my consort?”

“If you still want me when the dust settles.” Merlin’s face is a strange mix of wonder, bemusement and sheepishness that Arthur finds irresistible.

He doesn’t resist, for a little while, but then Merlin nudges him mentally with a reminder of the
coming busy-ness and breaks off the kiss. They turn to the window, looking out at the courtyard at the sword in the stone.

“You really are an idiot, Merlin,” the prince says fondly, bumping Merlin’s shoulder gently with his own.

“I should probably mention that the dragon is bringing my parents for the coronation,” Merlin says casually, as if it is of little significance.

Arthur is silent for a long moment. “Any other minor surprises?”

“Don’t think so, no,” Merlin says. “Rewriting the law of the land, dragon, parents… I think that’s about it.”

“Well, if that’s all,” Arthur says.

“We should probably check on your father,” Merlin says. “If he’s able, it would be helpful to have him at your side today.”

“You think that’s wise?” Arthur asks.

They find Uther in deep conversation with Gaius. The two men look up when Arthur and Merlin come in, and something closes off in Uther’s face when his eyes land on Merlin.

“Father, Cenred, Odin and Caerleon will be here soon. Would you like to join us in greeting them?”

“All three?” Uther asks. “With armies, or without?”

“They left their armies at the border when they couldn’t bring their weapons across,” Arthur says. “Small entourages only, according to my men.”

Uther stares at Merlin. “Your doing?”

“I would not have created this situation without guaranteeing protection for Camelot,” Merlin says. “The safety of this land and of Arthur has always been my priority.”

“Then why do you need me?” Uther asks, looking back at Arthur.

“I want you at my side.” Arthur’s voice is strong and sure. “I hope that you can set aside your hatred and look at what we’re building. You’ve always valued peace. We strive for a peace greater than the world has ever known, and today is just the start.”

“Peace enforced with sorcery is slavery,” Uther says.

“People are free to leave,” Merlin says. “They are free to move around. They can do almost anything, except violence. No one is forced to stay or to do anything they do not want to do. They simply are not able to enforce their own wills through violence. I’ve been a servant, and even that does not compare to the ravages of what happens when one person owns another. You do not understand slavery. If you were enslaved, you’d know it.”

“So if I chose to leave, you would allow it?” Uther says.

“No one is keeping you here, Father. You are not locked in. You have no more than your usual guard, and they are not tasked with holding you.”

“If you wish to leave,” Merlin says, “I can provide you with suitable accommodations nearly anywhere. If you wish to stay, that can be arranged. If you want to help build the peace, your experience with diplomacy could be very useful. If you prefer, we are in desperate need of educated people to help teach, and literate people to learn.”

“Are you not afraid of what I would teach?” Uther’s voice is bitter.

“I think the fallacy of sorcery as corruption becomes self-evident when destructive sorcery is sapped into expanding the geas against destructive sorcery,” Merlin says.
Uther looks at him, confused. “What?”

“If someone tries to throw a fireball or slam someone into a wall, the magic they try to use will be drawn off into the same spell that stops them from doing it. People can cast all the healing spells they want. All the good luck charms, all the conjured butterflies. They can even light fires and push things… if they're not trying to hurt people doing it. But if they curse someone, they'll end up cursed. If they throw a physically damaging spell, it will either simply not work, or it'll backfire on them. And spells which rely on taking a life to save or create a life won't work, or if they work, they'll backfire on the caster. You wanted to stop the excesses of unchecked sorcery. Consider sorcery checked, here. And the more that people test it, the farther it'll reach.”

“How can you claim such a thing?” Uther asks. “To have such power…”

“You weren’t listening, sire?” Gaius asks. “In the otherworld?”

“I… I was lost,” Uther says. “I could see nothing but the images—to do such things striving for a noble end, and to destroy everything…. You and Morgana are everything to me. To know your death, and hers, and know I was responsible…”

“Merlin is not a sorcerer,” Gaius says. “Not exactly, as I understand it. When we were there, the goddess spoke, and claimed him as her own, and Arthur as her favoured.”

“He does magic,” Uther says. “He’s obviously a sorcerer.”

Arthur says, “He is magic, Father. I’ve seen it. He is made of it, embodies it. He is human in shape, but so much more. I am made with magic but it does not flow and move within me. I cannot grasp it and make it do my bidding. You could no more kill him than you could tear the sky or split the sea in two. He’s shown me only a tiny sliver of his life and it leaves me reeling at the vastness of it. He can reach down into the rocks and simply tell them, ‘Be a tree’ and they will obey because what is within them answers to him in a way the world has answered to no other.

“And despite that, he chose to be my servant. Even after a thousand years he had no greater wish in his heart than to come back and set right what he felt were his mistakes. His! When you and I together set in motion a desecration that tore the world apart.”

Arthur’s face is raw and open. He pauses, looks at Merlin, meeting his eyes, and says, “But he comes to us across centuries, still asking to serve us.” Arthur looks back at his father. “He could end you with less than a thought. But he not only preserves your life, he offers you a chance to atone. He offers me everything, including your life, when he has every justification and all the power he needs to choose otherwise. Could you be so generous with your enemy at your feet? Have you ever once been so merciful?”

He turns from his father again, staring at the mage in front of him. “Merlin is magic made flesh, and he doesn’t succumb to the temptation of power to push those who have wronged him down, to abuse those he does not like. No, he raises us all, and asks us simply to be better. If magic corrupts, you would think he would be, by nature, evil. But he’s the best man I’ve ever known.” He looks at Uther. “So put your hatred aside. Swallow your pride. And help us.”

Merlin remains quiet through this, but when Arthur stops, he sends I really want to kiss you right now.

Arthur flushes.

“And how am I supposed to help when everything I touch turns to ruin?” Uther asks, looking away
Merlin pulls a chair over and sits down opposite Uther next to the window, until Uther finally meets his gaze. “Tell people that we have a new approach for fighting the evils of dark magic, one which creates its own punishment and leaves those who practise only beneficent magic untouched. Tell them that as a new age is dawning and the new generation is better able to adapt to the changing world, you have decided to step aside in favour of your son. That with an ability to prevent bloodshed and dark magic, you now have the luxury of allowing him to take the crown without losing the benefit of your experience. That you are tired, that the war is over, and that you will not stand in the way of peace. Make it clear that Arthur has your blessing.”

“People will think that I am enchanted,” Uther says.

“Do you feel enchanted? Do you feel like you could not simply ride away if you so chose?” Gaius asks.

“He threatened me,” Uther says, gesturing at Merlin.

“I said I would withdraw my protection if you did not abdicate. That I would undermine your rule with words if you would not step down. I did not threaten your life, and in fact, you are as protected as anyone by this geas. But I do not think you could resume your war on magic now, nor do I think you want to. The power of the old religion was terrifying. The goddess has withdrawn her support of death magic, and done so in front of her followers. Really, you’ve won.”

“With the price being my crown,” Uther says.

“You trade your crown for your son’s life. For your daughter’s. It isn’t a hard choice to make.”

“No,” Uther agrees. “You cannot know how deep a parent’s love for their child goes.”

“We are not so different, there,” Merlin says. “I offered my life for Arthur’s more times than I ever counted. Hurting Morgana, even for the greater good, even to save lives, hurt me more than anything, save Arthur’s death. Had I loved them less, much harm could have been spared the world the first time round, but the end result wouldn’t be as great as the opportunity we now have.”

Uther bows his head. “My head is full of horrors,” he says. “It hurts….”

Arthur is dumbfounded by the care on Merlin’s face as he leans forward in his chair and rests his hand on the side of the old king’s head. And even more when his father accepts the touch and does not flinch from it.

“I won’t take it all away,” Merlin says, “It’s yours, and helps shape you, with less harm than any other thing I could imagine. But I can separate it, put it behind a door that you can choose to open or not through most of your day. As with any grief, it’s unwise to lock it away forever, lest it fester and weaken you. You’ll find that each evening, the door opens for a time, but know it will close again in minutes. The door is not locked. Your actions and words could throw it open. But you will be able to take a breath without seeing your kingdom torn apart. You will not feel the deaths of your children, your wife, with every heartbeat. And the more you do to change your way in the world, the less that door opening will hurt so profoundly, because you will look up and know that you have not walked that path to the bitter end.”

Uther says, without pulling away, “Is this a curse?”

“It’s a mitigation of a curse you already bore,” Merlin says. “The original curse was not mine, though I showed you its full conclusion. This should allow you the ability to function, even allow...
you the capacity for joy. But I could not remove the knowledge itself without damaging you and changing who you are at your core. And that would be dark magic indeed. This simply allows you room to heal, cleanly, while allowing the wound to drain. I dare say your wife’s death became a foul cyst in your soul, walled off tightly while warping everything around it. You’ll have to think on it now, in fullness, but not all the time. I used a similar method on myself when I finally decided to live after Arthur died, so that I could move through the world without terrifying people or hurting them.”

“How long did that take?” Uther asks.

“A century,” Merlin says. “You don’t have a century. If you are to stand with us with the kings, you don’t have an hour. It is healing magic, and if you don’t like it, I can undo it.”

Uther looks uneasy, but then nods. “Do it.”

Merlin closes his eyes, and then pulls his hand away. “It is done.”

Uther’s eyes widen, and he takes a deep breath. “Oh!” His breath shudders as he looks up at Arthur, and then frowns. “You’ve grown a beard.” He looks perplexed and bemused, and then starts laughing.

Arthur sends to Merlin, concerned. Is he all right?

Then Uther looks at Merlin. “I know the memories are there, I know what they contain, but they do not… I can look at my son’s face without seeing him dead, or seeing his mother’s dying face… I saw her face every… How very much I must have missed.” Regret colours his voice, but does not overtake him.

“How long has it been?” he asks, still looking at Arthur’s chin.

“Oh… I…” Merlin wiggles his fingers in Arthur’s direction. “He wanted more gravitas. I wasn’t about to age his body. Hairs are easy. It’s only been a few days.”

“You aged your body,” Uther says. “No one will mistake you for anything but what you are, now.”

“Warlock,” Merlin supplies. “Although I rather like ‘Mage’. I’ve earned every year and more besides. There is no deception in my form—my physical age is by this point completely arbitrary. The bulk and the beard are simply a shortcut to prevent people from making erroneous assumptions about my competence. There is no way to truly show my actual age, as I never lived continuously in one shape, not after… Well, let’s just say the first time I ever aged myself was only a very few years from now, and I became young again many times over the years, and aged again, sometimes just through the passing of time, sometimes by magic. I’m far older than you, Uther.”

Uther puts a hand to his own chin. “Arthur, send my servant in.” He pauses, considers, and then adds, “Please. I must shave and dress if I’m to watch the look on Cenred’s face when he learns his border incursions will no longer work. Gaius, can you bring me that draught you made when… when I had to, after…”

“Certainly, sire.” Arthur says.

Gaius nods. “I have a mild calmative, yes, sire.” He bows his head and follows on Arthur’s heels.

“You will protect him to the end of your days,” Uther says quickly and quietly to Merlin. “Or so help me…”
“You need not threaten,” Merlin says, his eyes flashing. “I will not watch him die again if I have it in my power to prevent it. My heart couldn’t take it.”

“You love him that much,” Uther says.

“I always have,” Merlin says, a hint of challenge in his tone.

Uther hesitates. “I want to tell you… But you know what I expect.” His voice has not lost its bitterness.

“I know you believe that a legacy requires an heir,” Merlin interrupts. “And if he desires one I will use my considerable resources to make it possible. But he has no need of a political marriage, as his power will be undeniable. Just once in his life, please don’t push him on this. He knows what is expected. He will change the fundamental assumptions on which those expectations are based. I am the first person he has ever known to love him unconditionally. You might consider trying to be the second.”

A thousand emotions war on Uther’s face, indignation and resignation chief among them. “That is not entirely fair,” he finally says. “I want only what is best…”

“No,” Merlin says. “I have no doubt that you love him more than life. I have never doubted that. But I have seen you cast him out, and lock him up, and threaten the lives of people he loves because he would not conform to your ideas of what a son, what a prince should be. You can be so determined that he obey, that you lose sight of the fact that his judgement is almost always better than your own.”

“Why has he not returned yet?” Uther asks, looking at the door.

“I stopped time that I could speak with you uninterrupted,” Merlin says, as if it is the most ordinary thing in the world. “I would not have him hear this between us and he does not let me leave his side.”

That Merlin phrases it as “does not let,” throws Uther more than the fact that the mage has stopped time without effort. “He will not allow you to leave his side, or you will not allow him to leave yours?”

“We both want to be together,” Merlin says. “But truly, every time I have suggested an ordinary thing that would part us, he has insisted on keeping me close. I think he believes I was alone for too long. It is likely that he was right. He sees how I… The magic I did to come back here was beyond imagining, but it resulted in there being much more magic at my disposal, and in the world, than I’ve ever felt before. I am made of magic, and it means that I buzz with it. He settles me, and makes it easier for me to keep control. We learned just last night that I was actually created for him, to temper the wrong done when Ygraine died.”

“Created…”

“It was prophesied that he would become the Once and Future King who would unite all Albion. That’s why Nimueh agreed to grant your request. When his birth triggered the purge, Nimueh panicked and asked the goddess for help to offset the harm. I was the result. I just didn’t have enough time to learn what I needed to know when I came here at seventeen. Now, we know why there were prophecies foretelling his doom alongside the ones predicting that he would, with my aid, unite the land. He tried, and did so much the first time, and eventually it happened, but without magic, the world could not survive in the long run.
“You share the bond of brothers,” Uther says, flatly.

“Not entirely the way you’re meaning it, yet. In the future they called it something else, and then they just called it love, no matter who it was, and many governments would affirm it as marriage just the same.”

“You mean to wed him?” Uther says, his eyebrows furrowing.

“No,” Merlin says. “He means to wed me. Or to be more specific, make me his consort. It was, in fact, his idea. But I will not allow it to overshadow his peacemaking.”

“Then why tell me?” Uther asks.

“Because if you make your amends with him and show him love and accept the choices he’s making, there’s a good chance that you can mend your relationship with him. If not, one day he will throw it in your face like a weapon, and I would not be used so. And I wouldn’t have him hurt again.

“You wounded him terribly when he chose someone you considered unsuitable before. You nearly killed her for sorcery to teach him a lesson. He renounced his claim. And she was an amazing queen. Not his best match, but not for the reasons you thought. Your ire drove them closer together. I would not see him hurt so again. I do not require your blessing, and do not care if we ever have it. But I would ask that you at least hold your tongue and hold your judgement for your son’s sake.”

“You loved him even then, when he loved another,” Uther says.

“Loving someone doesn’t mean trying to figure out how they can make you happy. It’s not about fitting them into the mould you make that only someone worthy of your love can fit into,” Merlin says. “It means that their happiness brings you joy, and that their sorrow grieves you. That you rejoice at their successes and hold them up when they fall, and look always for the things that will bring them what they need. He needed a queen. And she saw in him the king he would someday be, and helped make him into that person. He was better for being with her, then, and had it been better for her to be with him, I would never stand in their way.”

“You’re saying that this person I disapproved of… that my son wasn’t good enough for her?” Uther is both perplexed and indignant.

“He wasn’t right for her. He wasn't the love of her life, he was the love who survived. Until he didn’t. Her love is alive, now. And Arthur isn’t in love with her, now. And I know they were not fertile together, so forcing them together for the sake of an heir would be ridiculous.”

“So you made him fall in love with you, since you knew he wouldn’t with her, this time?” Uther asks.

At this, Merlin laughs, deep and long. “Made him… I didn’t even tell him I loved him. He just saw it. He asked me why I would possibly do so much for him. And I showed him who he became. The king he was. The choices he made. The treaties he struck. The bonds he had with his people, with his knights. And with me. And no, it wasn’t like that. It was never like that. You know that I drank poison for him when I was so new here. What you don’t know is that less than a year from that moment, he drank a cup he’d been told for certain was poison, to protect me. Of course I loved him. It wasn’t until I came back and he wrapped himself around me that it really dawned on me that anything resembling a relationship might ever happen between us.”
Merlin snorts. “I thought he’d probably end up with one of the princesses after all, given the Queen’s changed prospects. And then he wouldn’t let go.”

“Infatuation,” Uther starts.

“After a thousand years? It’s anything but,” Merlin says. “Things are just better when he’s by my side, when I am by his. For all the nonsense about destinies, the fact of the matter is that we make each other better, and there is no one in the world I would rather spend a lifetime taking care of. And if that means making peace with you, or at the very least declaring a truce, so be it.”

A look of comprehension finally, finally crosses Uther’s face, and a flash of grief. He looks down. “I miss her still. If I had your power and could… but for Arthur, I would unmake time in a second to be by her side again.”

“Then you understand,” Merlin says. “Can you try to give me the benefit of the doubt?”

“I would have had you killed,” Uther says.

“A thousand times over. There’s a reason you didn’t learn of my magic, the first time, until after you’d already died,” Merlin says.

“After…” Uther frowns, but curiosity is written across his face.

“Arthur missed you so much he summoned your spirit from the dead,” Merlin says. “It didn’t go well. I had to stop your shade with magic. To protect him.”

“From me…”

“From anyone. I always would. Will.”

“My duty to him—to raise him up to be the man I thought he should be—I don’t know how to be a father to him in this new world of yours.” Uther sounds more uncertain than Merlin has ever imagined he could be.

“Stop trying to father him,” Merlin says. “Just… trust him. And love him. And please, please tell him that you’re proud of him, even if you don’t understand.”

Uther takes a deep breath and draws himself into a kingly posture. “I will not stand in your way. I do not know how to be in this new world of yours, but I would not hurt my son. If your powers are truly sufficient to unite the land under him, I’ll let the political expectations go.”

Merlin is about to allow time to flow around them again, when Uther adds, quietly, “And…” He hesitates for a long second, then manages a quiet, “Thank you. For…” He stops.

Merlin nods, and the world around them bursts into noise Uther hadn’t realised was missing.

Uther gives him a strange half smile that is still on his face when Arthur returns.

Arthur looks between them, and says, deeply unsettled, “Merlin, why is my father smiling at you?”

“We… came to an understanding,” Merlin says.

Uther says, “I have agreed to… withhold my judgement for the time being. Let you show what you are capable of. Your… companion is loyal to you. And apparently to Camelot. And if he has truly done what he says, perhaps…”
“You can say it, Father.”

“Perhaps I will be proven wrong… about sorc… about magic.” Uther’s hesitation ends when he sees Arthur’s face change, and he snaps, “Don’t look so pleased. I’ll meet you in the council chamber once I’m ready.”

Arthur and Merlin leave together, while Uther’s servant sets up the strop and razor.

In the hallway, Arthur laughs, and says to Merlin, “Well, now I know you’re magic.”

“You knew that already,” Merlin says. “If you didn’t know that already, something has gone terribly wrong.”

“Any idiot can build a library,” Arthur says. “You opened the mind of Uther Pendragon.” His tone is light but his eyes are filled with wonder.

Merlin snorts. “The library was harder.”

“Yes,” Arthur says, “but it was also a sure thing. My father… wasn’t.”
Arthur, Uther and Merlin stand in the council chamber before the first entourage is ready, and Arthur frowns. “Father, if you have suggestions for how we arrange this…”

The room is bare but for the chairs along the walls, and the throne.

“Caerleon?” Uther asks.

“Yes, he’s first by an hour,” Merlin says.

“He’s reasonable enough if he knows your strength,” Uther says. “I would begin from a position of power, on the throne. Let them come to you. Once you are sure that you are on the way to peace, speak to them as equals.”

“Don’t underestimate Annis,” Merlin says. “The first time, you killed him and she assumed the throne. She was good at it, and an ally, eventually.”

“My feeling has always been that she does much of the day to day ruling,” Uther says. “Caerleon likes to hunt and war and has little use for administrativia. Most of the correspondence I had from their court was in her hand.”

“So I will invite them to make peace,” Arthur says. “What more do you have in mind, Merlin?”

“The way I see it, we can have three types of outcomes. In the first, a nonaggression pact. If they don't invade us, we won't invade them. We give them nothing, we demand nothing, but they will not be able to move freely or easily within our borders, and will have no sanctioned access to the university resources. Individuals might come, but they come alone, and their access may be limited by their intent. This is fairly automatic already. They can’t bring an army in, or be armed. If we do nothing, this is what we get. We reserve the right, if villages bordering Camelot request it, to annex parts of their kingdom via extension of the geas, if they do not act to protect their subjects.”

Merlin points at a chair and moves it next to the throne. “The second outcome would be a peace treaty. They stay autonomous, but we make a pledge not only not to war, but to aid each other in peace. If they wish the geas spread to their country, we can do that. They can send as many people as they want to the university, and they may study with relative freedom. They can come in armed, as long as they are true to the treaty.”

He moves another chair to the other side of the throne. “The third option is the one we want, especially with Caerleon and Annis, who are likely to be true allies. In this option, they swear fealty to Arthur as High King of Albion. They keep their kingdom and their titles, but the law will be the same for both kingdoms. We will extend the geas and eventually build a second university there. We will facilitate fast travel and communication between our kingdoms and help them feed and house all their people. They will have a seat on the high council and a voice in decision-making. Most of the administration of their own kingdom will be left to them, but a basic charter of human rights must be enacted and respected in accordance with the high law. This is the Pax
“I cannot imagine Caerleon agreeing to that,” Uther says.

“Arthur couldn’t imagine you smiling at a sorcerer,” Merlin says with a slight grin. “And yet.”

Uther frowns. “Don’t mock me.” But there's no heat to his words.

“Caerleon might not yield on his own,” Merlin says, “but I am certain I can convince Annis.” He raises his hand, and his staff pops into it with a tiny noise. He gestures with the staff, and the rest of the chairs move away from the walls and line up between the columns.

“You’re not a sorcerer,” Uther says. “You’re a force of nature.”

“Accurate,” Merlin says with a little shrug and nod, then reaches over to put one hand on Uther’s shoulder, the other on Arthur’s. He lets them see Agravaine’s advice, Caerleon dying, Annis leading an army, and Arthur’s successful avoidance of war.

“That snake,” Uther growls. “He was undermining you deliberately.” He looks at Arthur.

“I threw Agravaine into a wall and killed him when his duplicity became clear and the alternative was letting him kill Arthur,” Merlin says. “If that helps. By that point he’d caused so much harm. He’d already helped cause your death, Uther.”

“That he would treat his sister’s son so,” Uther says. “I knew he loathed me.”

“He held Arthur, and you, responsible for her death,” Merlin says. “I don't think my actions will change that, though perhaps he won't be so bold this time, and you're both better protected.”

“So, this hinges on Annis,” Arthur says, gesturing for his father to take the central throne, as he takes the seat to Uther’s right. Merlin sits to Uther’s left.

Arthur raises his voice and calls to the guards, “You can bring them in.”

A few minutes later, the doors open, and Caerleon strides in with his wife on his arm, followed by two men-at-arms. He stops short when he sees Uther on the throne, and his eyes widen to see Merlin sitting next to him in full regalia, staff in hand.

“Uther,” Caerleon says, finally, walking forward. “I am… glad to hear that the rumours were wrong. We'd heard you were… indisposed.”

Uther glances at Merlin, and then says, “We have been afforded a new opportunity for Camelot, and I decided that in the interest of starting afresh, I would allow my son the chance to lead while I am still alive to help guide his path.”

Annis’s eyes narrow at this. “We were shocked, Uther, when we were informed that magic is once more practised in Camelot. Such a sudden leap cannot have been easy…”

“My goal was always to prevent destructive magic from tearing our lands apart,” Uther says. “Merlin has provided us with a way of guaranteeing Camelot's safety which is... more effective than my previous option.”

“I’m surprised you let him live long enough to offer it,” Caerleon says.

“I think you will find Merlin to be quite persuasive,” Uther says, betraying nothing. “I understood you sought to test our borders?”
Caerleon shrugs. “As you might, had the situation been reversed.”

“Thirty years ago, perhaps,” Uther says. “But one grows tired of war eventually, and you know I’ve spent years building the peace. But enough. Arthur has a proposal for you, and I think you will find it… interesting.”

Arthur gestures at the chairs between the pillars. “If you would like to sit… Merlin?”

Merlin makes the barest movement with his staff, and two chairs slide over, their legs dragging noisily on the floor.

Caerleon stares at the chair next to him as if he expects it to grow fangs and bite him.

Annis looks thoughtfully first at the chair, and then at Merlin, and says, “Thank you.” She nods at the mage, and then sits.

Merlin gives her a friendly smile.

Caerleon abruptly puts his hand on the chair, slides it closer to his wife, and sits on the edge of it, as if prepared to launch himself upwards if the chair so much as twitches.

“I do not wish to fight you,” Arthur says. “And since Merlin’s geas has effectively stopped three armies from marching on Camelot in the past day alone, I don’t have to fight you. However, I don’t just dream of a stop to the endless petty wars Camelot has faced for decades. I dream of a larger peace, one which allows our kingdoms to provide for our people with plenitude. Are you willing to discuss options for a greater peace?”

Caerleon narrows his eyes, and Annis elbows him. He sighs and says, “What do you you have in mind?”

“We have two options,” Arthur says. “The first, but not the best: A simple peace treaty, where you not only promise not to fight, but in which we pledge to keep peace together and allow travel and trade between our lands and beyond, would allow us to open our borders to you enough to allow your people to study at the new university. We can extend the geas to your lands if you want, to keep invaders from attacking you. You will retain your autonomy within your land.”

“And the other option?” Annis asks.

“We call it the Pax Drakonis,” Arthur says. “Swear fealty to me as High King. You will retain your crown, your title, and your lands, but there will be one law for all the lands that take part in the Pax. Each kingdom will be a part of a greater whole, and we will not only extend the geas, but we will, in time, help you build your own university, your own resources for housing and feeding your people even in times of scarcity.”

“This geas,” Annis asks before her husband can say a word. “Why would we want it? What more does it do?”

“Merlin?” Arthur says.

Merlin stands. “You are trapped,” he says, “by endless violence, from the beating of children and the predation of bandits, to the petty wars that every kingdom in our land fights. Because of this, there is a near-constant drain on your resources. Children who might grow up to solve your problems die in childhood or are injured so badly they cannot think well. Villages that might grow and thrive suffer and starve because they are constantly bled dry by bandits and the lords who are supposed to protect them. What you do manage to build may be lost in the next generation when
outside forces take advantage of your country’s weak moments.”

He looks pointedly at Caerleon, who looks away. Merlin continues. “The geas stops violence, by making weapons unusable, inhibiting aggressive physical actions and reversing trajectories. It also saps aggressive magical energies into strengthening itself. Stand a mage outside our border and lob a fireball across, and it might bounce back in the mage’s face. Walk the mage across the border, and have him throw the fireball, and nothing will happen… but the geas will expand in the direction of your homeland.”

Then he smiles. “But on the small scale, it stops bullies. Someone who throws a punch will probably miss. Someone who swings a sword will drop it. Someone who raises their hand to a child will feel the slap themselves. If someone hits hard enough to kill, they might end up killing themselves.”

“Some of our laws depend on physical punishment,” Annis says. “Are we left to no way to enforce our laws?”

“Most of the crimes that might justify a physical punishment will become automatically self-enforcing,” Merlin says. “Many common crimes that occur due to poverty and hunger will be dramatically reduced by feeding and housing your people. And intent is key. A brutal guard will not be able to attack someone, but conscientious guards who are acting within the law will be able to do what they need to do to bring in criminals. If a criminal is adjudged to be guilty enough to warrant punishment, I can lift the geas enough for that to happen.”

“I suppose Arthur is not bound by this geas?” Caerleon says.

“Actually I am,” Arthur says. “It has demonstrated to me that perhaps I should find other ways of accomplishing my goals.”

“Would you lift it if he asked you to?” Annis asks Merlin.

“Yes,” Merlin says, returning to his seat. Arthur cocks his head in Merlin’s direction, raises an eyebrow, but says nothing.

“How are your men to train?” Caerleon asks.

“Training went fine yesterday,” Arthur answers. “But we don’t try to kill each other on the training field. I was knocked down several times. But even Merlin allows himself to be bound by his geas… He knocked me over, casually, demonstrating something, and it hurt him just as it hurt me.”

“If I’d intended it to hurt him, he would not have been hurt at all,” Merlin says, “Consensual activity, such as training, is very different from casual, inadvertent violence, which is also different from intentional violence.”

“You know we rode initially intending to test your borders,” Annis asks Arthur. “Why are you so quick to offer a strong allegiance?”

“Merlin has shown me that in another lifetime, we were, in fact, allies,” Arthur says. “Your husband died before we could make that peace, however.”

“You threaten me?” Caerleon says, his voice angry.

“The opposite,” Arthur says. “Your death, in that future, was my own foolish mistake. One I will not repeat. I don’t need a treaty with you to protect my land. But I am… we are building something greater here, and to guarantee a lasting peace, our lands, our people must become more than we are
right now. Your queen was a wise ruler in your absence, and a good friend, but I do not want her to be burdened by your loss.”

“How can you know that so well?” Annis asks.

“Merlin?” Arthur looks over and meets Merlin’s eyes.

Merlin stands, and brings his staff up to create a mist between them, and shows them.

Annis is rocked on her heels at the vision of her husband’s death, of her own anger, of the eventual peace they forged.

“This is not a threat,” Arthur says. “The situation that created the initial confrontation will never exist. Merlin changed that forever. But I need wise allies, and while I am not convinced of your common sense,” he says to Caerleon earnestly, “I desperately need your wife’s steady head on my high council.”

Uther’s eyes widen, but Caerleon lets out a snort and then a guffaw and dissolves into a belly laugh. “Annis, this lad has the right of it. I like you, boy.”

She gives a more dignified chuckle, “We will think on it, Arthur. You are bold, for one so young and untested, to play for High King before you are even crowned king of your own land.” She looks at Merlin. “I would not be be an enemy of Camelot, when it is clear you have such a powerful ally.”

“I am but a servant, Your Majesty,” Merlin says.

“I almost think you mean that,” Annis says, looking unsettled. She gathers herself. “If we may impose upon your hospitality, Arthur, Uther…”

“Of course,” Uther says.

“If you would like to stay for the coronation,” Arthur says, “We will be happy to host you. You can investigate the library yourself.”
The chairs in front of the throne have been returned to their places between the pillars when Cenred arrives next, full of swagger, flanked by a handful of men who move with the tight grace of those long trained to fighting.

He shows no surprise at seeing Uther on the throne.

“Cenred,” Uther says, his voice brusque and unwelcoming.

“Uther. Finally woke up, did you?” Cenred says, with a pointed glance at Merlin.

“Stopped your army in its tracks,” Uther says dismissively.

“Decided that magic isn’t evil?” Cenred sneers. “How many people did you have to murder before you reached that conclusion?”

Uther’s eyes narrow. “Enough. My son will be crowned in four days. He and Merlin have business to discuss with you. I suggest you get to it.”

Cenred turns to Arthur, “So, boy. You think you can walk in your father’s shoes and fling magic around until the world bows before you?”

Arthur shrugs. “I want peace. I care about my people. Magic is a tool, and I intend to use it. I’m just fortunate enough to have a warlock powerful enough to help make it happen. I’m not interested in conquest.”

“And yet your border moved three paces into my lands yesterday.” Cenred’s voice is tight, and angry. “We had to push our weapons that much farther back before we could pick them up again.”

“I suggest that you avoid bringing weapons into Camelot with the intent of doing harm,” Merlin says. “Any attacks will cause the border to move.”

Cenred makes a small gesture, and the men beside him crouch slightly. Then, simultaneously, all five men sprawl strangely on the floor, as if their limbs have suddenly become too heavy to hold upright.

“That was probably an inch of border movement,” Merlin says. “They can get back up whenever they stop intending to attack us.”
Cenred lunges forward and falls flat on his face.

“Really?” Merlin says, irritated, and stands up. He walks over to where Cenred struggles to stand, and with a gesture, lifts him into the air, pinning him against one of the pillars, a few feet above the floor. One by one, Cenred’s men climb to their feet and scramble back against the far wall, looking much less steady.

Merlin stares at Cenred for a long moment.

“I grew up in your kingdom,” he says. “I was a poor peasant in an outlying village in your kingdom. We would have been better off, but bandits came through almost as often as the tax men, and both drained us so dry that we struggled to keep enough food to survive.”

Cenred’s eyes follow Merlin as he paces back and forth.

Merlin looks up at Cenred. “I came back here from the future. And in my future, you died two years from now, killed by your own stupidity, after sacrificing ten thousand men on the altar of your arrogance and your desire to fuck a sorceress. But that wasn’t before your inept leadership nearly destroyed my village and my mother. Before you allowed bandits to kill one of the best friends I’ve ever known. And then, we offered peace, are prepared to offer you more than peace, and you come in here and try to attack us before we can even present the proposal.”

“Why on earth,” Cenred manages to say, looking at Uther, “would you possibly allow that man to stay on the throne?”

“He’s there so that jackasses like you don’t get the idea that this change of leadership is in any way a sign of weakness on the part of Camelot, you numbskull,” Merlin says. “And I’m not letting him stay on the throne, I’m letting him keep it for just as long as it takes to get Arthur crowned in an orderly fashion.”

“Your puppet?” Cenred asks.

“My king. As you could never be. Arthur has a proposal for you. I suggest you listen to it. Make another move towards the throne and I won’t inhibit the geas from damaging you. You’re only alive right now because I permit you to be.”

Merlin turns and walks back to his chair as Cenred drops like a ragdoll to the floor.

He staggers to his feet and turns to Arthur. “Fine. Get on with it.”

Arthur stands, his body square and strong, his voice filled with a certainty of power. He speaks with quiet authority as he addresses Cenred. “You’ve seen that you cannot attack Us. Rest assured that poison and magic will also fail. We do not need to sue you for peace, as We already have it. Any of your people who come in good faith and good will may study here at Our university. Any of your villages which border Ours may request that our geas against violence be extended to cover them. As a favour to Merlin, We will be riding to his home village soon, and extending Our assistance to the people there against their bandit problem. We will not claim that village as Camelot’s, but they will not longer be beholden to you or your “tax men” since they clearly cannot rely on you for protection. While We would very much like to see Albion united, you will have to earn Our trust before We are ready to welcome you into the Pax Drakonis with all privileges.”

Merlin sends silently, Your royal ‘We’ makes me hot.

Arthur turns from Cenred to hide the quick smile and the flush that play across his face, and returns to his chair.
“So you’re just taking a village,” Cenred says.

“Freeing a village from your ineptitude, to be more exact,” Uther says. “Arthur will have ten more petitions for protection by harvest time if you don’t commit to peace. You asked if I’d woken up. I still believe that sorcery is dangerous, but I also believe it offers our best chance at preventing the grotesque harms we saw before my purge.

“That one there,” he points at Merlin, “could take you and your entire country apart if he wished it. He could have killed me or imprisoned me or made me want to run around the countryside naked and clucking like a chicken to humiliate me for my crimes. And yet all he does is offer us peace, which is what I’ve been striving for all along. Quit posturing, you incompetent, millet-brained peacock. You’re lucky all he does is protect his mother. You’ll lose your whole kingdom if you don’t wake up yourself.”

Arthur looks at Merlin and sends, A chicken?

Merlin gives the tiniest of shrugs.

“This Pax of yours,” Cenred says. “What is it?”

“The text will be available at the university,” Merlin says. “You can go down and read it in the dome.”

Arthur says, “We will be having a conference about it after the coronation. You are welcome to make camp down past the training field with your men. Rations will be provided if you do not have sufficient stores with you. The geas will not allow you to harass my people while you are here.”

Merlin adds, “You best not test it, either. Every time the geas is triggered, the effects get… worse. You’ve already triggered it three times with murderous intent. A fourth attempt at murder or war could kill you. Cuffing a servant might break your hand. I could mitigate those effects, but I have absolutely no desire to follow you around for the next few days protecting you from your own stupidity. If you return to your kingdom for the preservation of your own skin, I will send you the text directly once you arrive.” He starts to turn away and then stops. “Oh, and don’t be in Ealdor when we get there. By the time you make it back to the border, the geas will cover the village. You cannot outride my magic.”

Cenred turns on his heel and leaves without another word, his men following him out with wary backward glances.

Before Odin comes in, Arthur asks Merlin, “Can you stop him from throwing down a gauntlet?”

Merlin frowns. “Of course I can, but do you want me to?”

“Hold him with your magic if you have to,” Arthur says. “At least long enough for me to make my apology.”

Merlin nods.

Odin marches in alone, a moment later, his left hand already going to his right wrist. He’s taken
aback when his glove stays firmly plastered to his hand, and frowns.

Arthur watches him for a moment, and then says, “Please stop that.”

Odin scowls, and says, “There’s more than one way to issue a challenge.”

“I really prefer that you wouldn’t,” Arthur says. “I didn’t want to kill your boy, and I wish it hadn’t come to that, and I never wanted him to challenge me in the first place.”

“You prevent me riding in armed, and now you won’t even let me seek satisfaction for my son’s death?”

“Hear me out, first,” Arthur says. “If you hear all I have to say and still wish to challenge me, I’ll meet you on the tournament grounds. But in another lifetime, we fought, and I could have killed you, and chose not to. Even now, I have asked my warlock to prevent you from making the challenge not because I fear facing you, but because I don’t want to kill you. Hear me out. Please.”

Odin drops his hands to his sides, shooting a look to Merlin, who remains impassive. “Fine. Speak.”

Arthur gets up from his chair, and then kneels in front of Odin. “First, please accept my most humble regret at the death of your son. I offered him a non-lethal duel, but he refused. I offered him mercy at the last, and he forced my hand. It remains a great sorrow to me that he did not grow old enough to recognise both the foolishness of testing himself in battle-to-the-death against someone he had no hope of beating, and that a loss of dignity is not worth the loss of life. That’s a lesson I’ve struggled with myself.”

Arthur returns to his feet. “If you cannot find it in your heart to forgive me for your own sake, I ask that you do it for the sake of our people. We have far more to offer as friends than as enemies, and I prefer to work with you, rather than against you, in the cause of peace.”

Odin frowns, but says nothing.

Uther says, “You know your son left him no choice.”

“He was my son.” Odin’s voice is tight with anger and grief, but quiet.

“I know a thing or two about revenge,” Uther says. “And loss. Your vendetta won’t bring him back. You sent the boy out to make his mark. I don’t doubt you’re more angry at yourself than you are at my son.”

Odin stares at Uther for a long moment, and then sags. “I suppose you do, at that.” He turns to Arthur. “I don’t know if I can forgive, but I’m willing to listen, in the name of peace.”

After Arthur outlines the options, Odin agrees to stay for the coronation, and does not throw his glove down.
The first magical attack comes late that afternoon, while Merlin and Arthur are in the library. Arthur is at one of the many tables, half-reading about the incomprehensible future and half-watching the people around them. Merlin is in a nearby alcove, in deep discussion with a handful of druids, Morgause, Morgana, and Gwen. Arthur finds that his eyes keep wandering to the alcove. Some of the little nooks are barely big enough for a chair and a small table for books. This one is large enough for ten people to sit comfortably in discussion, almost entirely open on one side, the interior surface polished stone that glows with a warm light given off by sconces. The chairs are all padded, with wide arms, in Pendragon red.

Merlin’s hands wave enthusiastically and Morgana is laughing when something *thrumms*. Arthur can feel it; or rather, he feels Merlin feeling it, and Merlin’s reaction—a savage satisfaction wrapped around annoyance. A few people around the room seem to be reacting to whatever it is.

Arthur is already on his feet and crossing the fifteen feet to the alcove when Merlin reaches out, takes one of Morgause’s hands, closes his eyes, and *reaches* with his mind, and Arthur can feel that too, feels Merlin deliberately looping him in. Arthur’s knees start to buckle as the amount of information coming in overwhelms him, and he staggers the last step to Merlin’s chair. He sits on the arm, distantly feeling Merlin’s free hand on his back, steadying him.

In his (their?) mind’s eye, he can see the whole of Camelot spreading below him, as if he were a bird flying above it, higher than even Merlin’s ridiculous tower. There is a shimmer of gold over the whole thing, and he knows as soon as he notices that it is how Merlin sees the geas. Arthur orient himself and visualises a map overlaying it, and feels Merlin’s laugh at how poorly the two match up, but it’s enough. He can see where the borders are, and as he looks, Merlin brings his attention down to... riders?

Merlin’s voice at his side is startling after the fluid flow of images. “I guess Cenred didn’t want to take advantage of your hospitality.”
“What did I feel?” Arthur asks, his attention still focused on the images.

The image tightens on a man who had not been in Cenred’s party at the castle.

Merlin explains, “He met them well over our side of the border, and tried to throw a fireball at that patrol over there.”

“He’s still standing,” Arthur says.

“The fireball didn’t happen. That was what you felt, the not-happening. I feel it when the geas expands, and you felt it because….” Merlin trails off.

**Because of this,** Arthur sends, and feels Merlin’s immediate agreement. It hasn’t been constant, but Arthur knows that the initial sensation had not been something Merlin had sent on purpose, and that’s new, and useful, and Merlin agrees, and he really should be more unsettled about this than he is, but it’s Merlin, and Merlin is safe in a way that no one has ever been safe.

*Stop that,* Merlin sends fondly. *I still need to show you something.* And then he notices how the edge of the geas no longer follows the border, but stretches in some places as much as a mile from the previous border. As he watches, one part of the geas inflates, spreading to encompass what must be Ealdor.

“That must have been some fireball,” Arthur mutters.

“Morgause is helping,” Merlin says.

*Is that wise?* Arthur sends.

Merlin dismisses the concern, and says aloud, “Her knowledge of the land is helpful in making the enchantment *stick* with less effort.”

The view shifts again back to Cenred, who looks strange.

“Is it just me, or does he look older?” Arthur asks absently.

“He was warned,” Merlin says. “The mage lobbed the fireball, but he gave the order while still in Camelot.”

Cenred is hunched over his horse’s withers, arms wrapped around his torso, pain obvious in his eyes. His skin looks sunken, as though some vital something has been removed from his body.

“Is that going to be fatal?” Arthur asks, as the images disappear and his attention returns to the here and now.

Merlin shrugs. “Only if he keeps doing it.”


“That family,” Arthur says, shaking his head.

“How are they connected?” Merlin asks. “I never cared enough to find out.”

“Cenred’s father was Lot’s brother. They had another brother, older, by the name of Gildas, by a different mother, who was regent for Cenred for a time after his father died, before he came of age.
There was a falling out, Gildas fought for Caerleon as a knight for a time, and died there. Lot was regent for a time. I would not be overjoyed to see him back on the throne. If you think Cenred cruel… He learned it at his uncle’s knee.”

“Are there any other heirs?” Merlin asks.

“That’s a question for Geoffrey,” Arthur answers.

The attacks are done almost as quickly as they’re begun. “That looked like work for you,” Arthur says. “What if that happens when you’re asleep?”

“The work was in expanding the geas and in far-seeing,” Merlin says. “The actual defence part was automatic.”


Merlin looks at her, wary. “To which end?”

“I could persuade him that peace is better, that the magical population of the realm is on Arthur’s side, that few, if any, will stand against The Emrys.” She says it like a title, not a name.

“Let it be for now,” Arthur says. “Thank you for your support, but I would have the major players here for now, if we might, until after the coronation.”

“I am but a servant to the goddess,” Morgause says. “Nimueh leads. Or did. That role may shift to you, now, Emrys. You let me lay eyes on my Lady, and have reunited me with my sister. I am in your debt.”

“She loved you from the moment she saw you,” Merlin says. “Even in my dark past.”

“I know she was enemy to you. It is… rare for someone to go so far out of their way for an enemy,” Morgause says, and then puts up a hand as Merlin starts to respond. “No, I can guess. We had planned to move on Uther a year from now. Our hope was to enlist Arthur. Your method was… more direct.”

Arthur laughs, and laughs. “If you… I’m not sure it’s possible to take a longer way around.”

“To have that much time…” Morgause says. “I’ve lived near fifty years, but forty times that…”

“Fifty?” Arthur is gobsmacked.

“We were told you were Morgana’s sister,” Merlin says. “That Gaius helped get you to the Isle of the Blessed…”

Morgause laughs at their reaction, then soberes as she explains, “My mother was a high priestess.”

They still look confused.

“The goddess allows her favoured… latitude when it comes to age. I have yet to bear a child, she has yet to push me from maiden to mother. My mother bore me very young, and I was full grown when she married Gorlois. The baby you refer to was Elaine, whom my mother died birthing, born after the purge, after Morgana… It… she… the goddess was not happy with her dalliance with Uther. I grew up with Ygraine. Nimueh was grown by the time my mother was born.”

“You knew my mother, then?” Merlin asks. “Hunith?”
“We were not close but we knew each other,” Morgause says. “She was close to Gaius before Gaius threw his lot in with Uther so closely, and we did not overlap in Camelot for long.”

“You don’t look fifty,” Arthur says, and Merlin rolls his eyes.

“I don’t look two thousand,” he says.

“But you’re… and she… and….” Arthur frowns, and gives up.

“Nimueh looks younger than I do,” Morgause says, laughing, “for all she’s at least ninety.”

“She looked very different, once,” Merlin says. “Gaius and Uther didn’t recognise her.”

“She underwent a rite of renewal,” Morgause says, looking sideways. “They are not encouraged. Well, forbidden completely now. I use healing arts to keep my youth. She aged relatively normally until her 70s, and then… When the purge happened, she said she needed her youth again in order to have the strength to stop some of the damage she caused.”

“Death magic,” Merlin says, flatly.

“I…” Morgause turns away. “The goddess allowed it then. I am… relieved that it will no longer be tolerated.”

“Is she… do you think she will be content with my father’s removal from the throne?” Arthur says.

“She blamed herself for his purge, but couldn’t admit it,” Morgause says. “If she can admit it? Perhaps she will content herself with his ouster.”

Merlin seems to be everywhere at once that evening, ensuring adequate food supplies and clean water. Arthur from the end of dinner onward is pinned by one petty problem after another in the throne room. Uther sits back, and it feels strange to Arthur, both his father behind him and Merlin not at his side.

I can be there in an actual instant, Merlin sends to him as the deluge of petty requests seems to drag on endlessly. I am completely certain you can do this, and I really need to be down here...

Are you not tired? Arthur sends, trying to focus on what the miller is saying about his workers not being willing to grind the grain.

Tell him to pay them more and be nicer, Merlin says.

“So you’re complaining to your Lord that you can’t get people to work for you now that you can’t beat them?” Arthur asks.

The miller looks startled. “Er, yes.”

“Have you tried, oh, paying them?” Arthur says with a shrug. “And perhaps not yelling at them?”

“I’ll make no profit if I have to raise their wages!” the miller says.
“You’ll make no profit if you grind no grain. And you best grind the best, cleanest, most wholesome grain you can, lest people decide they don’t need that, either,” Arthur says. “How did that first blow feel?”

The miller looks down and away.

“Remember that, and treat your workers as you would like to be treated,” Arthur says. “And don’t come crying to me. You won’t be without shelter or without food if your mill fails. Which is better treatment than I suspect you gave the last four workers you let go.”

His eyes widen. “My Lord.”

“Begone,” Arthur says.

When the guard makes to let someone else in, Arthur puts up a hand. “I’m done for the day. We’ll resume tomorrow.” Please get me out of here, he sends.

It isn’t surprising when Arthur finds himself abruptly in his chambers. It is a bit surprising that Merlin isn’t there. He sighs, and takes his boots off, letting them drop in place, and then starts unlaceing and untying the various fasteners on his court apparel. He nearly drops them on the floor, too, and then sighs, walks over to the wardrobe, and hangs them inside. He’s almost done unlaceing the fastening on his trousers when he feels a small gust of air moving around him, and warmth behind him, and feels Merlin’s hands at his waist.

“Allow me,” Merlin says, standing flush against Arthur’s back.

Arthur breathes in sharply and closes his eyes, leaning back against Merlin. “Oh thank God.”

“Goddess,” Merlin says into his ear, letting lips touch lightly to the lobe.

Arthur reaches back blindly as his trousers slide down his legs. “You’re very… clothed,” he says, and then chuckles as his hands go from gripping fabric to brushing against the hairs on Merlin’s legs. He spreads his hands flat against the outsides of Merlin’s thighs.

“Step out,” Merlin murmurs, the motion of his lips on Arthur’s neck sending tiny threads of tingling out to Arthur’s fingertips.

“Step… oh.” Arthur steps out of the trousers, and then turns in Merlin’s arms. “I don’t like the throne room when you aren’t in it,” he says, his voice almost petulant.

“I missed you too,” Merlin says, bringing a hand up to cup Arthur’s cheek.

Arthur feels the depth behind his words, and tries to imagine a thousand years alone.

No, never again, comes to Arthur, and he feels Merlin’s denial in his bones. Here, now, together, Merlin sends, and how could Arthur do anything but kiss him?

Merlin’s response as their lips touch is a laugh that it takes Arthur far too long to realise is entirely within their heads.

Merlin pulls away, first, and says, “We really do have to sleep.”

Arthur climbs into the bed, and Merlin slides under the covers next to him, no trace of awkwardness between them as they lie on their sides, facing each other but so close. There’s a momentary jostle of arms, but then Merlin just slides his right arm up under the pillow. Arthur
looks, smiles, and then does the same with his left, catching Merlin’s hand there, and then letting
his right hand come up Merlin’s bare side. Merlin’s left hand finds its way to Arthur’s cheek as
they settle in, nose to nose, chest to chest, legs brushing and then shifting until Merlin’s left knee is
between Arthur’s. The light in the room dims, but isn’t gone.

Merlin’s mouth is just right there and Arthur can’t resist.

The heat between them is incredible. Merlin gives an irritated flick and the blanket weight
lightens, cools, and Merlin’s hand is sliding along Arthur’s skin and the sensations are utterly
overwhelming.

Arthur pulls back for a moment, breathing hard. “Was it always like this for you? Being with
someone? Kissing?”

“Was it for you?” Merlin asks, his fingers tracing the muscles on Arthur’s back.

“Never,” Arthur says, staring into Merlin’s eyes.

“Find anything interesting in there?” Merlin asks, amused.

“They’re glowing,” Arthur says.

The glow fades, and Merlin smiles. “And now?”

“Shut up,” Arthur says, and leans in for another kiss.

This time it’s Merlin who pulls back, a few minutes later. “The answer is no,” he says quietly. “But
I’ve never been in love with someone I’ve been intimate with. Not like this.”

Arthur makes a small, frustrated noise, and hooks Merlin’s leg with his own, sliding his hand up
Merlin’s back, pulling him close enough to drop his mouth down on Merlin’s neck. What’s the
point of telepathy, he sends as he traces Merlin’s pulse point with his tongue, if we stop kissing to
talk.

Merlin groans, and there’s a sudden pressure between them. Arthur laughs, and sucks the spot
gently, entertained by how Merlin’s body is suddenly moving under his hands, his leg, against his
own…

He gasps as Merlin’s mouth finds his ear, and teeth gently hold his earlobe. He’s panting against
Merlin’s neck then, and how is it possible for such a small thing to be felt in his toes?

Do you want… he feels the question more than hearing it, and he rolls back, away from Merlin,
breathing hard, his whole body tingling.

“I don’t know,” he finally says aloud. “What was that?”

“Do you want the scientific explanation, the magical explanation, or the poetic explanation?”
Merlin says, his voice rough and amused.

“There’s a choice?” Arthur stretches, rolling his hips to ease the pressure in his smalls.

“You’d be more comfortable with those off,” Merlin says.

“You’d like that,” Arthur says, half teasing, half affronted.

Merlin presses his lips together, makes a considering face, and says, “I’ve no doubt of that
It felt out of control,” Arthur says, his voice thoughtful.

“I think it’s supposed to, on some level,” Merlin says.

“Aren’t you uncomfortable?” Arthur asks.

Merlin laughs. “It’s just a body. It can wait. Also, my smallclothes are a little different from what you’re wearing.”

Arthur pulls back the sheet and starts to say “Light” but the room is suddenly brilliant with it before he can finish the word.

Merlin stares at him in shock but Arthur doesn’t notice as he sit up, studies Merlin’s groin, and runs his finger along the soft, stretchy fabric of Merlin’s… the word comes to him. “Trunks?” he asks.

“You…” Merlin looks at him with wide eyes.

Arthur tips his head as Merlin’s obvious reaction under the stretchy fabric diminishes, and then looks up to see the raw shock on Merlin’s face.


“You just reached into my magic and commanded it,” Merlin says.


“You didn’t even know you were doing it,” Merlin says.

“I wanted to look at your trunks,” Arthur says. “If they’re so much better, why am I not wearing them?”

“Maybe you don’t want it badly enough,” Merlin shoots back.

“Are you annoyed?”

“I…” Merlin stops. “No.” He makes a small gesture, and Arthur feels a disquieting slither around his groin as the fabric shivers and realigns itself into a pair of knit trunks.

Arthur puts a hand down and gives an experimental wiggle to his hips. “Hey, that’s…”

“Isn’t it though?” Merlin says.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Arthur says, settling in cross-legged to listen.

Merlin closes his eyes, and rolls onto his back, folding his hands behind his head, one knee up. “If you can grab at my magic without thinking about it, it could be dangerous.”

“It could be useful,” Arthur says.

“Yes, it could. But it’s also… intimate.”

“Is that a problem?” Arthur asks.

“You don’t know what you’re doing yet,” Merlin says.
“I thought we weren’t holding that against each other?” Arthur says, teasing.

“We were holding a lot against each other.” Merlin is smiling, eyes still closed.


“I don’t care about your experience or lack thereof when it comes to sex,” Merlin says. “We can take as long as you need or want to explore, and there’s no mandatory goal. But the magic… intimacy with you drops my guards. Eliminates them. I can’t kiss you and keep a wall between us. And you’re a leader to your bones. The command, the will is there to simply take my magic and do with it what you will, and you don’t even know how to stop yourself yet.”

“I don’t know how to start myself, for that matter,” Arthur says with a dry laugh.

“Magic,” Merlin says dryly.

“Can you make it stop?” Arthur asks.

Merlin blinks, and the room dims.

Arthur looks thoughtful, then says, “Light,” and nothing happens.

Merlin smiles. “At least I won’t worry about you setting fire to the bed in your sleep.”

“I’ll save that for tomorrow night,” Arthur says, and then yawns.

Merlin smiles, and holds out his right arm. “Come here,” he says.

“No respect,” Arthur says in a mock grumble. “You’d think I wasn’t about to be crowned king.”

“I’m pretty sure you asked me to wed you earlier,” Merlin says. “I’ll serve you with my magic, but I don’t think you even want to be my king in bed.”

Arthur opens his mouth to make a quick retort, but then stops, slides down next to Merlin to rest his head on Merlin’s shoulder, and says, “No. Not your king, not here.”

Arthur falls asleep between one breath and the next. Merlin lies awake for another hour, pondering the conundrum sleeping on his shoulder, his hand splayed protectively on Arthur’s back.
Merlin stands as his young self, in servant garb, bemused, on a rooftop that will never exist again, far in the future.

The building is a spire, the rooftop an incongruous mushroom cap, just because he could. He built so many odd structures, playing with magic, playing with building, playing with his control of the world around him, and this one rises at the border between his wide, protected valley and the devastation on the other side of the mountain.

He isn't surprised at all when Arthur appears behind him, that he knows Arthur is there without looking isn’t the least bit odd.

“What is it?” Arthur asks.

“My mistakes, the mistakes of humanity, writ large,” Merlin says, gesturing down at the ashy, yellowing landscape.

“Dreaming?” Arthur says, barely a question.

“I used to sit here and think. It was… motivating.”

Arthur steps next to him, and turns around. They are facing each other, with Arthur looking back into the lush, protected green of the valley, Merlin looking down into devastation.

“It looks beautiful,” Arthur says. He is wearing mail, his red mantle, familiar.

“I wish I could so easily turn my back on my disasters,” Merlin says with a wry half smile.

“You never turned your back on me,” Arthur says.

“Quod erat demonstrandum,” Merlin says. “I don’t understand why you’re so eager to bind me to you.”

Arthur throws his head back and laughs, his whole body shaking. “Is that what you think?” he says, finally, when he catches his breath. “You lovely, blessed, ridiculous creature.”

Merlin cocks his head and looks genuinely puzzled.

“Merlin, I’m not sure anyone ever has been as bound as you are to me, already. I do not seek to bind you further. I don’t need to bind you further. You’ve demonstrated as thoroughly as anyone ever could your loyalty, devotion, love, service, every word any marriage contract has ever listed, you have in every action but one, given. I do not seek to make you mine. You already are.”

Arthur steps close into Merlin’s space and kisses him, hands curled along jaw, briefly, before dropping to his knees on the gently domed rooftop, and saying, “I seek to bind myself to you. To make you know in every possible way that I see the sacrifices, that I understand. That I feel…”
“Please, Arthur, please stand up,” Merlin says, tugging at him. The dreamlogic shifts them as Arthur stands, they are no more in the far future, but in a familiar forest, ancient trees, loam and moss winding around them.

“You need to bind yourself to the land,” Merlin says, and he is a blazing flow of brilliance running into a river of light along the forest floor. Arthur cannot tell where Merlin begins and the river ends, and looks down to see his body grown into the forest floor, the rich, dark loam blending seamlessly into the hard, dark, lustrous shell buffering his magic.

“I bind myself to the land, but as you are bound to me, we are still bound,” Arthur says, the words weird in his mouth.

Merlin is there, wrapped around him, a blaze of pure light and power that engulfs him but does not burn.

Everywhere they touch, green vines burst forth from the the dark shell. The vines grow rapidly, consuming the light, consuming the darkness, until all that is left is the two of them, wrapped around each other, in a glowing mass of green and growing life.

Merlin puts his hand between them, palm up, and breathes, and a butterfly rises from his palm and flutters upwards.

Arthur covers Merlin’s empty palm with his own.

Merlin brings his other hand up and flips Arthur’s hand over in his. He kisses the open palm, and then says as he straightens, “You try.”

Arthur stares at his palm, takes a slow breath in, and then blows into his own palm.

A thin vine winds and curls up out of his palm, twining and winding between their hands. It is dotted with tiny flowers.

“Is that me?” Arthur asks.

“The magic?” Merlin asks.

Arthur nods.

“It’s a dream. You could do literally anything in here, magic or no.”

“It feels like more,” Arthur says. “It feels like a promise.”

“You bind me, again,” Merlin says, but he is amused, not beset.

Every vine unwinds, and disappears in a flurry of tiny petals.

“No one has ever explained to me how to give without taking,” Arthur says, head bowed over his open palm. “I don’t know how to give you that which I wish to make yours.”

Tendrils of power wind between them, twining around them, and Merlin spreads his arms wide, letting the glowing strands slide around his arms, then wraps them around Arthur’s shoulders, until Arthur relaxes and lets his arms wrap under Merlin’s and around, leaning against Merlin’s shoulder.

Merlin’s voice is laughing in his mind, **Beloved, you already have. All you needed to do was ask.**
There is a dizzy, spinning feeling, and they are horizontal, lying in bed, bathed in golden green light, wrapped in each other’s arms, absolutely covered in petals.

“Merlin, did you make my bed sprout branches?” Arthur asks, looking at the lush green cocoon his royal bed has become. “And vines?”

Merlin blinks, looks around, and says, “No, Arthur, I’m pretty sure that was you.”

“I was afraid of that,” Arthur says. He holds up a hand, and stares at it thoughtfully.

Then he narrows his eyes, says, “Flourish”, and every branch and vine in the strange little bower blooms.

“So, probably not setting fire,” Arthur says finally, reaching up to pluck a blossom. He puts the flower in Merlin’s belly button. “This is probably safer?”

Merlin laughs and the bouncing dislodges the flower, which lands on the bed beside him. Then he sits up and waves a hand in the direction of the vines that block the table from view. They part, and Merlin puts a hand over his mouth, trying to stifle a laugh. “Maybe? But we might want to find out how far the effect goes.”

The table has become a mass of thorny roses. The chair has sprouted morning glory vines. Every wooden thing in the room is blooming.
“I’m certain that the table and chair are both oak,” Arthur says, after a long, stunned moment.

“Maaagic,” Merlin says.

“You’d think they’d have acorns, leaves, not…” Arthur stands on the stone floor of his bedroom, staring at his wardrobe, which seems to have come down with a case of phlox. “It’s so floral.”

“They’re pretty,” Merlin says, standing just behind him.

Arthur leans and reaches gingerly between the clusters of white flowers, and tugs the door open. The motion of the door crushes some of the flowers, and releases a heady honey fragrance. “Oh, now that’s just… Can you fix this, Merlin?”

“Can’t you?” Merlin asks, failing to keep himself from chuckling.

Arthur shoots him a look of consternation, frowns, and then says, “I wouldn’t even begin to know where to start.”

“Picture it how it was,” Merlin suggests. “And, oh, tell it to do what you want it to do…”

“Be what you were.” Arthur’s voice is sharp and commanding as he interrupts.

“…but be precise,” Merlin says, and then sighs, as the wardrobe ripples, convolutes, and turns into an ash tree, a cluster of sad-looking flax plants and a small, confused-looking sheep.

Merlin covers his eyes with one of his hands and shakes his head.

“Merlin, all my clothes…” Arthur looks back. “Some help here?”

Merlin takes a breath and looks like he’s about to say something, but then presses his lips together and turns a peculiar shade of red.

“Are you laughing at me?” Arthur asks.
Merlin shakes his head no, and then yes and tries to open his mouth, but then a laugh escapes and Arthur frowns. Merlin puts up a hand and laughs himself breathless.

“I… can’t… fix… it… while I’m… laughing…” Merlin says.

“It’s not funny,” Arthur says.

“Actually, it really, really is,” Merlin says, still chuckling.

“Merlin! Please!” Arthur’s voice takes a desperate note.

Merlin breathes in through his nose, holds his breath for a moment, and then breathes out, but it still turns into a giggle. “Just… give me a minute,” Merlin says. “I’ll fix… It.”

A knock draws their attention to the chamber door, which is covered with vines. “Sire?” the muffled voice of the guard comes from the other side.

“I can’t open the door,” Arthur says. “I don’t have any clothes.” He gestures at his body, which is clothed only in the conjured pair of trunks from the night before.

Merlin gives a little wave of his hand and they are both clothed.

“But you can’t fix my wardrobe?” Arthur throws up his hands and goes to unbar the door. It takes three pulls and Arthur hissing, “Just be a door again!” before the vines vanish and the bar shoots upward, thwacking into Arthur’s chin.

“Ow,” Arthur says, rubbing his chin and pulling the door open.

“Sire,” the guard says, and then holds out his… well, Arthur supposes it used to be a pike, but now…

“Merlin!”

The rest of the morning is spent tracking down all the side effects of Arthur’s magic.

Merlin helps, though he has to stop often because really, the look on Arthur’s face…

Morgana finds them in the corridor, both annoyed and intrigued by the fact that her hairbrush has developed a personality and daisies. “Merlin, I thought your control would be better than…”

But Merlin is shaking his head, and pointing at Arthur.

“Oh?” Morgana gives him an appraising look.

Arthur sighs, and holds out his hand. “Give it here.”

She places the brush in his hand, and he gives it a stern look and says, “You’re a hairbrush. Be a hairbrush.”
It shudders, and the flowers vanish, and he hands the thing back to Morgana.

“I take it you figured out how to unblock his magic,” Morgana says to Merlin, “but I wonder at your timing.”

Merlin holds up his hands and shakes his head. “Wasn’t my doing.”

Arthur raises an eyebrow.

“Well, I didn’t do it on purpose,” Merlin says, and then blushes. “It really was more you.”

Arthur sighs heavily. “I’m never going to live this down, am I?”

Morgana smiles, widely, her eyes sparkling. “No, I really think you will not.”

Gaius comes hurrying down the hallway staring at a bucket full of lilies in his arms. He nearly runs into them and then says, “Merlin, my whole chamber, everything has either sprouted flowers or reverted to its original form. I’ve lost years of work.”

Merlin grabs Arthur’s hand and gives him a sharp look, and sends, Let me in.

What? But Arthur’s mental guards have already dropped reflexively, and he can feel Merlin working magic with both of their reserves, finding and reverting flowering furniture around the castle.

A moment later, Merlin looks at Gaius with a sly smile and says, “Are you certain? Perhaps your eyesight failed you this morning?”

“But this bucket…” Gaius says and then looks down at the empty bucket in his arms. His eyes narrow and he looks sideways at Merlin, then sighs, and returns to his chamber.

“Why didn’t you tell him?” Arthur asks.

“Oh, no reason,” Merlin says.

“That felt rather odd,” Arthur says, rubbing at his own shoulders distractedly.

“How do you think I felt, you grabbing at my magic last night?” Merlin says, laughing.

“Is that all he was grabbing at?” Morgana asks.

“Morgana!” Arthur says indignantly.

“That is absolutely none of your business,” Merlin adds.

She grins.

They spend the afternoon testing out Arthur’s magic, with Gaius helping.

It rapidly becomes clear that Arthur’s magic has an affinity for the botanical. Gaius watches as a block of wood sends roots down into the table, and finally says, “Sire, perhaps we should find out if this is just about plants, or if it is about other living things?”

“Well, he turned wool into a sheep,” Merlin says. “You’re thinking it might go deeper?”

“Well, plants aren’t your strongest magic, neither is healing. Or at least, they weren’t. Are plants
and animals so different compared to, say, rocks or water?”

“Their basic structures are actually similar enough, scientifically,” Merlin says. “That is, minerals and water are a large part of both plants and animals, but if he’s specifically affecting cell growth and DNA…”

They stare at him for a long moment, and he sighs. “You can learn about it at the university. The short of it is that yes, there’s lots of reasons why Arthur should be able to affect animals or people as easily if he chooses. But he probably shouldn’t unless he’s doing it very deliberately. I mean, that poor sheep.”

“What do you think happened to it?” Arthur asks.

“Reverted to the wool, the sheep is wherever it was. I hope.” Merlin looks thoughtful, and then takes Arthur’s hand and says, “Come along.”

They both close their eyes, and Merlin conjures a dove much more slowly than he normally would, showing Arthur as he does so.

When they open their eyes, the bird is standing on the tiny tree sprouting out of Gaius’ work table, looking around curiously.

“Now,” Merlin says, “I want you to feel the bird with your mind. The structure of its bones. The sinews, the blood vessels, the muscles.” He doesn’t release Arthur’s hand.

“I don’t feel it,” Morgana protests.

“I do,” Arthur says.

“Like this,” Merlin replies, and takes her hand with his free hand and she gasps as she sees what he is seeing in his mind’s eye.

“I can see how its heart works,” Arthur says, awed.

“Don’t do it, but you could probably make it beat faster, or slower, or even stop,” Merlin says.

Arthur pulls away and opens his eyes. “That’s too much power,” he murmurs. “Even for a king.”

A voice comes from behind them. “A man who has killed so many,” Nimueh says, “Overwhelmed by the idea that he could stop a bird’s heart by thinking it. There may be hope for you yet, Arthur Pendragon.”

“What do you need, Nimueh?” Merlin asks, his voice carefully neutral.

“I came to ask about the great flowering this morning, but I see the prince’s magic has finally awoken.”

“We’re working on control,” Merlin says.

She studies the two of them, and then turns to Morgana. “I’m surprised you are not with your sister now.”

“This was too interesting. I will be with her later,” Morgana says.

“Have you worked magic with your brother yet?” Nimueh asks.
“Not directly, no.”

“I’d be interested to see how that goes,” Nimueh says. “You two,” she turns to Merlin and Arthur, “Did you mean to betroth each other or was it accidental?”

“That kind of pledge cannot be accidental,” Gaius says, staring at the two men.

“Their magic is so intertwined right now that I’m not sure even they know where one begins and the other leaves off. I’ve only ever seen that in those bound to each other by vow. I’m surprised you can’t see it, Gaius.”

Merlin and Arthur look at each other, flushed.

Morgana laughs delightedly and cocks her head to one side. “Brother, darling, does Father know?”

“An accident?” Nimueh asks, sounding pleased.

“Not an accident,” Merlin says. “More… an inevitability. It was really his idea, but I certainly don’t mind.”

Arthur almost kicks him, and then thinks better of it. “Don’t mind…” he mutters.

“Uther knows,” Merlin continues. “Well, he knew that it was likely. We haven’t seen him since…”

Morgana chimes in. “Was that the flowers?”

“Yes,” Arthur says, too quickly.

“Not exactly,” Merlin says a beat behind.

Morgana sits down at the table, coaxes the dove onto one hand, and rests her chin on her other hand. “Do tell.”

Gaius scoots his stool closer, and folds his hands in his lap. “Yes, pray do enlighten us.”

A flurry of unspoken communication goes between Arthur and Merlin, and then Merlin nods and says, “The binding likely happened while we were dreaming together.”

“Dreaming… but you were aware, and chose?” Nimueh asks, pulling a chair over.

“We were aware,” Merlin says.

“We chose,” Arthur finishes.

Merlin raises a small mist on the table, and the dove flutters up to the rafters. A vision of the two of them—dressed in their familiar clothes, rich earth and blazing power entwining in green and white vines around their hands—appears in the middle of the mist.

“Is he bound to to the earth, then?” Nimueh muses.

“To the life it nurtures. He always has been,” Merlin says. “I just didn’t understand it until then.”

“What does that mean?” Arthur asks.

“It means that you are truly what you were made to be,” Nimueh says. “A king to bring magic back to the land, and the land back to the goddess.”
“Do you accept the price?” Merlin says to her.

She bows her head. “You cannot know how great a price I have paid.”

Merlin stands, puts his hand on her head, and says, “You might think that. But not for long.”

Nimueh’s eyes widen as he lets flow with everything he has seen from the time of Arthur’s birth to his death. He skims the intervening thousand years, showing some of the horrors, a few of the triumphs, and then shows her the devastation of the world in the last days. He lets her see the goddess. His daughter. Her magic, her reincarnation. He shows her her own death.

When he stops and opens his eyes, he finds her sitting, bent, wizened, her actual age showing.

“I cannot pretend at youth anymore,” she wheezes, standing slowly. Merlin makes a gesture and creates a simple walking staff out of thin air, handing it to her.

She bows deeply, and he returns the honour.

“Thank you for showing me, Merlin.”

“I think only Arthur has seen more, but some of what you’ve seen, he hasn’t. And doesn’t need to.”

She looks at Arthur, and raises a weathered hand to his shoulder. “I am sorry about your mother, boy. She was beloved by our order, and it was not my intention… She would be proud of you. She would love the magic in you, too. I know your father probably can’t.”

Arthur looks away. “He doesn’t know yet.”

“How much magic must Uther have that he has such powerful, instinctive magic users for offspring?” Morgana asks.

“Best not to ask,” Nimueh says. “He quashed that part of himself down long ago.”

“What will you do?” asks Merlin.

Nimueh smiles. “I will stay to see the coronation. After that, I will go as the goddess wills.”

She turns and starts to walk to the door. Morgana stands up quickly and says to Arthur, “We’re not done, but I must talk to Nimueh. Good mother, let me walk with you.”

Nimueh nods, and takes Morgana’s offered elbow in one hand, supporting herself heavily with the other hand on the staff.

When they’ve gone, Gaius looks at Arthur and Merlin, with his arms folded over his chest. “You do know that such a bond will be considered a marriage by the druids.”

“Oh,” says Arthur, and then smiles. “I should certainly hope so.”

“I’m not young,” Merlin says. “And it was Arthur’s idea. I did nothing to sway him to it. I can see the lecture brewing on your lips.”

“You know me so much better than I know you, Merlin.” Gaius sighs and sits down heavily.

Merlin turns to Arthur. “Could you give us a moment?” *I do not wish to shame him before others, but there are things he needs to understand.*
Arthur’s brow furrows and he nods. “I’ll go give the endless hordes the attention they’ve been undoubtedly clamoring for all day. And I’ll avoid stopping any hearts.”

“Not sure the geas would let you, but if you tried, the conflict between the backlash and the protection spell might be a bit problematic for the people around you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Arthur says, and stands. He hesitates for a moment, and then, blushing, gives Merlin a quick kiss and turns and leaves without waiting to see Gaius’ reaction.

Gaius waits until the door is closed. “I imagine you must be very angry with me.”

“I was.” Merlin watches Gaius sit heavily in his reading chair. “For so many years. It was all twisted up, love and hate and betrayal and missing you so, so much.”

“I did the best… what I thought was the right thing. I tried so hard to do the right thing. I failed so many people in so many ways. That I could fail you so profoundly that you would resort to… to this…” Gaius gestures broadly.

Merlin frowns.

“No, I don’t think you’re wrong. You have so much more information than I ever could, and please don’t pour it all into my head, Merlin, I would prefer to be able to sleep at night, thank you very much.”

“Time after time you told me to hide. You told me I was powerful but you didn’t help me to practise that power. So I had no idea what I could really do, and often did the wrong thing. People died because of your advice, and I was so, so angry about that for so long. Arthur… Arthur died. And I know, oh Gaius, I do know that you tried. I tried. We all tried. But the first thing I did coming back here… was to stop following your path.”

“It’s a relief,” Gaius says. “You don’t… well, you probably do know. How many friends I saw die.”

“Uther was your Arthur,” Merlin says.

“We weren’t like that,” Gaius shakes his head. “We couldn’t be. I couldn’t think it, couldn’t forgive…”

“We weren’t either,” Merlin says, “Not the first time. Believe me when I tell you that while I knew things would be different… I could never have planned for this.”

Gaius nods. “In the months I’ve known you, I’ve seen you sacrifice for him, understood it as committing to serve a great destiny. I’ve seen him throw himself into danger for you in a way few would for a servant, but this?”

“I could show you what he saw,” Merlin says. “Nothing to keep you up at night.”

“No, Merlin, that’s yours. It does my heart a good turn to see you loved as he so clearly loves you. Just… a week ago he was berating you and throwing his shoes at you.”
“He’s lived a lifetime since then.” Merlin tries to smile. “Most of them mine. He dreams my dreams, and I dream my memories, and he knows more than I’d have ever chosen to tell him awake about what happened after I lost him.”

“It is more than the love of destiny for you, then.”

“I unmade a thousand years to see him live again and give him a second chance,” Merlin says. “I’ve been his a hundred times longer than I was ever my own. And truly, though regret drove me here, I do not regret what drove me here. Not now. I could not possibly have done what I’m doing now, had I not done that then.”

“That you could travel backwards in time… the possibilities…”

“It would have taken more energy than I could possibly have found to do it without divine help,” Merlin stands and moves away from the table. “Stopping time is a minor thing. To unwind it? That required moving the stars. Look outside, and look at your charts. I’m surprised the astrologers haven’t been beating down the doors demanding explanations.”

“How do you mean?” Gaius asks.

“This, this I must show you,” Merlin says. “But I would like to show everyone else, too. Come, it will be dark soon and that will make it easier.”

As they walk out of the tower, Merlin catches a gangly serving boy by the elbow and says, “Run, please, and tell everyone you find that I’ll be at the university in a candlemark to show them something wonderful.” Merlin conjures a marked candle in a lantern, and puts it in the boy’s hand. “Mind the mark, lad. Find me at the university when the candle burns low and there’ll be a treat for you.”

The boy nods, and runs off.
Are you going to make me walk down there? Arthur sends to Merlin a few moments later.

Merlin opens the door to the council chamber. “I thought we might wander down together. Everyone’s invited.” He gestures to the miscellaneous assortment of dignitaries and supplicants in the chamber and the hall outside.

Arthur grins. “We’ll continue tomorrow,” he says to the frowning duke in front of him. “You’re welcome to accompany us.”

“Yes, sire.” The man’s face is dour.

Arthur nearly bounces up from the carved chair, striding over to Merlin and throwing an arm around Merlin’s shoulder. “I like the robes,” he says as they walk back down towards the courtyard.

Merlin glances down and blinks. When Arthur catches him, he laughs. “You don’t even notice when you do that anymore, do you?”

Gaius says dryly, “His clothes changed the moment he decided he was going to teach me something about the stars.”

Merlin reddens. “I… There was a man in Italy, who had an idea about the heavens. He was wrong, of course, but only because he didn’t think on a large enough scale. I’m not sure there are many who have ever lived who could possibly grasp that scale, but I will try to show you.”

“And he wore that funny robe?” Arthur asked, plucking at the cowl.

“Something like it,” Merlin says. He pauses to poke his head into Morgana’s room. “Come along, it’s class time.”

Morgana and Morgause follow them out, and soon most of the castle is walking with them.

“You just like walking at twilight,” Arthur says.

Merlin spins away from him, grinning, and conjures softly glowing globes to light the way. He tosses one to Morgana, who studies it for a moment, and then tosses it back and starts conjuring her own. Soon, there are lights bobbing from person to person, being tossed back and forth, shedding just enough light to keep the path walkable.

They stop at the children’s home and Merlin calls out for everyone to come, that night clothes are fine, but that the lesson requires dark and the children need to learn. Gwen tsks and tuts and laughs as Morgana tosses her a glowing sphere. Soon each of the children has one and they run ahead, giggling, to the central lawn of the university.
Merlin goes to the exact centre of the field and calls out, “Toss them all up into the air!”

He demonstrates with the sphere in his hand, flinging it straight up. His becomes a dome, arching high over them, expanding ephemerally until they can barely see it. Then it darkens, obscuring the stars and the moon. Everyone else’s little lights, once flung upwards, arrange themselves as an echo of the brighter stars in the night sky.

“I know it’s dark,” Merlin says, “But we shall have light soon enough. Now, you all know that things changed not long ago. But what you might not know is just how much. First, do any of you know what the sun is?”

“A fire in the sky,” one of the children calls out.

Merlin holds out his palm, and a bright yellow flame appears. “The sun is fire,” he says. “Well, it is certainly hotter than anything you could ever know. But you might have thought that the sun hangs in our sky… when it might be more accurate to say that we hang in the sun’s sky. I’ll show you.”

The flame in his palm becomes a bright blaze, almost painful to look at. “This is far dimmer than the sun is. And much smaller.” He throws the ball upwards, and it grows enormously large, hanging over all of them. Several people wince, and he dims it a bit until it can be looked at without pain. “It would be utterly impossible for me to show you how enormous the sun is. It is much, much larger than our world. Our world is tiny next to it.”

The sphere contracts until it is merely three or four times as tall as he is. Merlin smiles. “Here’s our world, compared to a sun that large.” He holds out his cupped hand, and shows them a perfect globe nestled in his palm.

He looks out over the disbelieving faces and says, “You are thinking that a world so tiny could not have a sun so large, while having it look the size of a coin in the sky.”

He sends the glowing orb of the sun upwards. “See how it gets smaller as it gets farther away? The sun is enormous. But it is also enormously far from us. Which is good, because if weren’t, we wouldn’t like summer very much.”

“What about the moon?” A little boy asks. “Is it fire?”

“The moon is made of stone,” Merlin says. “Now, I want to show you how this works, but you have to remember, all the distances are wrong, because you wouldn’t be able to see it all at once.” He gestures and the sun globe shrinks and descends. He looks out of the corner of his eye. Both Arthur and Gaius are rapt.

He brings up another globe—the moon—and holds it up. “It gives off no light of its own, but because the sun is so bright, we see it much the way a candle lights a room. Or your faces.”

“How big is it?” Arthur asks. “This rock over our heads?”

“It’s big, but it isn’t as big as our world, our planet Earth.” Merlin waves and the sun and moon disappear. Ambient light fills the dome, and he says, “Look down at our feet. Now, this might look like we’re flying, but we’re not. I’m making a picture for you, and it is magic, and you are safe. Hold someone’s hand if you want.”

The children laugh as Arthur grabs one of Merlin’s hands. With his free hand, Merlin, smiling, gestures at the ground, and people gasp as it seems like they are flying upwards.
“Feel your feet on the ground. If you close your eyes, you know you’re standing still,” Merlin says, as the ground speeds away from them. It stops, and he says, “If you look down now, you’ll see the whole of Camelot laid out below us, as it appears in the daytime.”

“The castle is so small,” Arthur says.

“Only from up here,” Merlin whispers. Then he says, louder, “Hold on, let’s see what it looks like from farther away.”

There are a few shrieks and more giggles this time as they go higher, and Merlin calls out, “See how the world is a circle around us? See how the horizon curves. Your home, everything you know, sits on a giant ball.”

Their perspective shifts higher rapidly, and the ambient light fades, leaving the earth glowing below them. Merlin gestures to one side, and the sun appears, and to the other side, the moon. “The sun lights the moon and the earth at once. When it is day here, that is because the earth has turned so that our part of it is facing the sun. And you can see how the moon changes based on what part the sun is lighting up.”

“Why is it always the same?” a little boy asks. “You say the earth turns, but the moon does not? But it changes?”

“That is a lecture for another night. But for now, I want you to think about the spheres you threw into the sky. How each of them became a star. And remember how huge our sun is, and how hot, and that most of the stars in the sky that you see are as large or even much larger than our sun.”

“Why do we need to know this?” Arthur asks.

“Why did the stars change?” a young woman asks. “Nothing is where it is supposed to be, except the sun and the moon, and even the moon is a little wrong.”

“Everything is where it’s supposed to be,” Merlin says. “Just… a thousand years later. In order to save our world, to let people live, we were given a second chance. I was allowed to unwind time. But only here. The rest of the universe, all the other stars and planets, they continued on, and we… skipped forward on the great cosmic calendar. I knew the story here. This world, I saw its end. And we are writing a better world now, one which can hopefully survive far into the future.”

“How can we predict the future now, without the stars to guide us?” a man asked.

“We can’t,” Merlin says. “Isn’t that wonderful?”

“How do we know it will be better?” an old man asks.

“Because the worst happened. I was there. I saw it end.” Arthur squeezes Merlin’s hand. “But we have already changed much, and will continue.” Merlin dismisses the entire dome, and they find themselves on the moonlit grass, the milky way high overhead. “There are more stars up there than anyone could ever count.”

“If the sun is so large, and so small because it is so far away, how much farther are all those?” Hilde asks at Merlin’s elbow.

“Farther than even I can imagine,” Merlin says. “And yet we see them from so far away, and make our wishes.”

“But if the sun is so big, and the earth is so small,” Hilde asks, “And the earth is so big to us,
doesn’t that mean we’re tiny?"

“So tiny,” Merlin says. “But also important.”

Hilde frowned. “Why do you know we’re important?”

“Because a Goddess decided to let me save you, small as you are,” Merlin says, and squeezes her hand. And Arthur’s. “As small as we are, we’re the world to a flea, and fleas are huge compared to other living things you cannot see. And the most deadly things in the world are too small to be seen. Never underestimate something or someone just because it’s small. It doesn’t mean it’s not important.”

“Alright, Merlin, that was lovely, but I have children falling asleep out here,” Gwen calls out. Merlin summons up a tiny glowing sun for each person to carry with them so that they may walk home safely in the dark.
In Which Merlin is Merlin and Arthur is Arthur

Chapter by Jenrose

Chapter Summary

R/M chapter. (I'd call it NC-17 but most is ridiculous euphemisms because Arthur. Smutty. Skip if that bothers you.)

Arthur pulls away after a while, and says, “You actually moved heaven and Earth for me.”
“For you, specifically, yes,” Merlin says, nibbling Arthur’s shoulder.
“All of it.”
“It was more like unwinding a very long sequence of events by pulling at a thread that changed everything on the Earth, including the Earth itself, while leaving the rest of the universe unchanged; but from our perspective, yes, heaven and Earth moved.”
“How?”...
“It’s complicated...I had help. And a metaphor.”

As the lights bob away, Merlin takes Arthur’s hand, and a moment later they are in Arthur’s beleaguered chamber, where all that remains of the morning’s shenanigans is a bed inconveniently piled with flowers.

Arthur sighs, then takes a handful and presses them into a book from the shelf. “I suppose I have to clean this one up, too?” he asks as he puts the book back up.

“Clean what?” Merlin asks.

Arthur turns around, and smiles. Merlin is lying on the freshly made bed, propped up on one elbow, wearing the most intriguing smallclothes Arthur has ever seen.

Arthur swallows. “Those are… indecent.”

Merlin grins. “They cover me.” And they do, barely, but they are more suggestive than covering, a shimmering, stretchy black fabric that is almost but not quite translucent.

Arthur takes a step toward the bed. “Merlin, are you trying to seduce me?”

Merlin laughs. “I would never. Is it working?”

Arthur folds his arms across his chest. “I thought we were waiting until after the coronation.”

“I’ll wait as long as you want me to,” Merlin says, and stretches his legs out languidly.
“That’s not playing fair… Why am I still wearing clothes?” Arthur asks.

“It would be presumptuous of me to just strip you without asking,” Merlin says. “Though if you asked…”

“Merlin, please,” Arthur is surprised at how eager he sounds in his own ears. He drops his arms to his sides.

Merlin flicks his wrist and Arthur’s clothes vanish, but for the trunks.

“Where did they go?” Arthur asks, patting his now exposed skin and then looking down.

“I conjured them in the first place,” Merlin says. “Sent them back to where they came from.”

“I was walking around all day in conjured clothes,” Arthur says, looking vaguely appalled.

“Well, I could turn the trunks back into smalls, but they were pretty snug on you last night.”

“That was your fault,” Arthur says, but it would be true again already. He climbs onto the bed next to Merlin and then they are kissing, and touching, and it’s a dizzying fire.

Arthur pulls away after a while, and says, “You actually moved heaven and earth for me.”

“For you, specifically, yes,” Merlin says, nibbling Arthur’s shoulder.

“All of it.”

“It was more like unwinding a very long sequence of events by pulling at a thread that changed everything on the earth, including the earth itself, while leaving the rest of the universe unchanged; but from our perspective, yes, heaven and earth moved.” Merlin stops talking and drags his tongue along Arthur’s collarbone, to the point where his pulse throbs, where he sucks, gently.

“How?” Arthur’s voice is shaky.

“It’s complicated.” Merlin murmurs in Arthur’s ear, close enough to make him shiver. “I had help. And a metaphor.” He drops a series of light kisses from Arthur’s neck to one of his nipples, and Arthur swears, throwing his head back, breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

Merlin chuckles.

“Are you laughing at me-hee-hee,” Arthur says, his voice breaking at the last as Merlin teases.

“No,” Merlin says. “I just like seeing you react. It pleases me. Sex is a ridiculous, silly thing, and I will always laugh about it. But it doesn’t mean it’s not worth doing.” He runs a hand down Arthur’s back, and then cups his bum.

Arthur arches against him, and Merlin is working his way back up, neck, ear, mouth, until their bodies are pressed together and Arthur opens his eyes to find Merlin looking at him from so close. Arthur grins and rolls them over.

Merlin laughs as Arthur finds his ear, but it’s a gasping, uneven laugh that Arthur takes as a personal challenge. He studies Merlin’s reactions to his touch the way he studies an opponent on the field, teasing with tongue and fingers.

_We’re not sparring_, Merlin sends.
“We’d have to have our swords out for that,” Arthur says aloud, with a ridiculous bump at Merlin’s hip, and then goes back to cataloguing which spots make Merlin react the most.

“That…” Merlin pants, “could be arranged.” He hooks a foot around Arthur’s ankle and rolls them back over, running his hands down Arthur’s sides, catching his thumbs in the top of Arthur’s trunks. “If you like, that is.”

Arthur hesitates for a split second and then grins. “Please, if you would.”

Merlin’s answering smile is everything, as he works his hands ever so slowly under the fabric covering Arthur’s rear.

“Even as my servant on your slowest day you were never this slow about getting my pants off,” Arthur says.

Merlin snaps the waistband and then winces, which makes Arthur laugh. Merlin makes a moue of mock annoyance and then says, “I’m savouring, you clotpole.”

“If you really want to savour my clotpole,” Arthur says, deadpan, “You’ll get these things off of me,” and he flips the two of them back over. “Like this,” he says, starting to pull Merlin’s whatever-they-are off and then stopping. “Those are really…” He strokes the silky fabric. Merlin’s reaction is rewarding.

“Merlin,” Arthur says while running his hands over the soft, slick fabric (and the rather pleasing form underneath), “you may have a point with this savouring thing.”

“Oh, I’ve got a point all right,” Merlin says, rolling his hips and reaching for Arthur.

Arthur bats Merlin’s hand away and says, “You can wait. You said so.”

Arthur’s really not quite sure what language it is that Merlin is swearing in. He bends over Merlin and brushes against Merlin’s bare hip with his lips, follows with the tip of his tongue, and pulls the damned smalls off.

He really isn’t quite prepared for the rebound against his shoulder, and even less prepared for the way Merlin bends and then arches in response to feeling Arthur’s bare skin against his sword.

Magic wand, Merlin sends, and Arthur barks out a laugh and rolls back onto the bed, cackling.

“This is never going to happen,” Arthur says. “You make me laugh too much.”

But the air is suddenly cool against his bare arse and Merlin is kissing him, pressing him into the bed, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, and length to length, and Merlin can call it any damn thing he wants if he’ll just keep moving that way.

“Your wish,” Merlin says into his neck, “is my command,” and they are grinding hard against each other, Arthur’s hands on Merlin’s arse.

The friction and pressure and Merlin’s fingers on a nipple and Merlin’s mouth on his ear combine and Arthur follows the spinning, dizzying heat off the cliff in a white-hot burst.

A moment later Merlin is crying out into his shoulder as he follows.

Arthur moves his hands up to the middle of Merlin’s back, holding him in place.

Merlin sags heavily, most of his body limp weight on Arthur, but his shoulders are shaking.
“Are you…” Arthur starts.

“Don’t,” Merlin says against Arthur’s neck, which is becoming damp. “I can’t help it.”

“Shhh,” Arthur says, “I’m here.”

“That’s why…” Merlin says.

_I have you_, Arthur sends. _You’re here, I’m here_. He shifts a little, turns to look at Merlin, and smiles. “Your hair is ridiculous. I’ve always thought so, but this hasn’t helped it at all.” He reaches up and ruffles the wayward hair, thumbing a tear off of Merlin’s face.

“I could easily change it,” Merlin says.

“Don’t you dare. Not here, not now.”

“Yes, _sire_,” Merlin says with a wide open smile.

“Saucy,” Arthur says, and smacks Merlin on the bum without thinking about the consequences until it’s too late to pull his hand back.

There aren’t any. “Merlin,” Arthur says, thoughtfully, “Why didn’t that hurt me?”

“Because I liked it,” Merlin mumbles. “Any harder and it probably would have.”


Merlin shakes his head a little, chuckling. “Arthur, if that shocks you… There is literally no way I would have gotten through ten years of service to you if I didn’t, at some level, enjoy it. My magic would have stopped you. _Did_ stop you sometimes. It’s not what I want all the time, but I will, one of these days, explain endorphins to you. And as kinks go, that one is pretty mild.”

“Kinks?” Arthur says.

Merlin opens his mouth, reconsidered, shuts it, and then sends a stream of images to Arthur.

Arthur’s eyes go wider, and wider, and wider. “People are strange,” he says. He shifts, and then frowns. “We’re sticky.”

“No we’re not,” Merlin says, magicking away the mess.

“Do you like all that… kink?” Arthur asks.

“I haven’t done most of it,” Merlin says. “I’ve seen a fair amount of it, living with the people I lived with, and the culture they lived in, but no, I don’t need it. I’ll try almost anything, within reason, but that’s not what I actively want with you.”

“It wasn’t what I expected,” Arthur says a few minutes later.

“You’re not unhappy about it,” Merlin says. “Am I too heavy?”

“You’re scrawny, you can stay.”

“You like my body,” Merlin says, shifting downwards a little and re-settling with his head on Arthur’s chest.
“I adore your scrawny body. I like the muscular one too, but it’s comfortable like this.”

“What did you expect?” Merlin asks.

“I don’t… I’m not sure. Penetration. Less laughter. More worrying.”

“Penetration requires lubrication and preparation. It’s messy. Fun, intense, but not something I’d spring on you unawares. It can hurt. And there’s nothing you need to worry about with me, in bed. I’m not grading performance. I couldn’t begin to, with as good as it feels just to touch you.”

“Well, I feel rather thoroughly debauched,” Arthur says, stroking Merlin’s back.

“Oh, there’s plenty more debauching to do,” Merlin says, “but sleep first.” He rolls off to the side, and Arthur is curling around him before he’s settled. “I thought you didn’t cuddle.”

“I don’t,” Arthur says. “I’m guarding you.”

“Budge up and guard me with your head over here,” Merlin says. “You’ll put my arm to sleep.”

“Bossy,” Arthur says, sleepily. “No respect.”
Strange Offers

Chapter by Jenrose

When they wake, they're surrounded by a leafy bower.

Merlin blinks at the vines stretching between the posts of the bed and arching up over them. "We might need to work on your control," he says, "but it’s pretty."

Arthur rolls over and sighs. "Please tell me it’s just here. Morgana will never leave it alone if it’s the whole castle again."

"The table’s fine," Merlin says.

"When did it happen?" Arthur asks, stretching under the sheet. "I don’t remember dreaming."

"Probably when, well," Merlin shrugs. "You know. It was pretty dark."

Arthur smiles. "Mmm."

There is a knock on the door. Arthur looks at it thoughtfully, reaches an arm out, and says, "Up."

The bar on the door slides upwards, and he says, "Open."

"Better," Merlin says, clothing them with a gesture as Sir Leon walks in, stops, hesitates, and then says, "Sire, there is another delegation arriving. Mercia, I believe."

"It never ends," Arthur says with a groan, and rolls out of bed. "Merlin, these clothes aren’t going to disappear…"

"No more than the university would," Merlin says.

Arthur runs his hands through his hair, and then puts on his boots.

"I could send you a manservant," Leon offers.

"No need," Arthur says.

Leon is staring at the leafy canopy over the bed. "Is that going to be happening often?"

Arthur flushes. "I’m working on my control," he says.

Leon’s eyebrows climb higher. "You did that? The rumour is that Merlin went mad and made the castle bloom for love."

Arthur winces and buries his face in his hands. Then he sighs. "No, that would be, er, me. Not the mad part. But the rest is…"

Leon cocks an eyebrow at Merlin, who shrugs. "Is there something I should tell the knights, Sire?"
“I’ll name Merlin my consort at the coronation,” Arthur says. “It’s merely the public acknowledgement of a bond already formalised. Concerns about an heir will be addressed at a later date.”

“Very good, Sire,” Leon says. “And the delegation?”

“I’ll be along shortly,” Arthur says. “There’s much to be done.”

Merlin leaves Arthur to the mercies of the castle staff and delegations and uses the alcove to get to his tower.

He finds Gwen in the library, with a cluster of children.

“How fares Morgana without your ministrations?” Merlin asks, as she sets one child to reading to the others to come speak with him.

“She is making do with castle staff for now, so that she may be at ease about the care of the children,” Gwen says. “I miss her, but I’m grateful for the extra time…”

“How is Lancelot?” he asks, eyes twinkling.


Merlin grins widely. “Oh, do pray tell.”

“Merlin!” she says.

“Oh, you’ll be asking me the same question when the gossip gets here.”

“You mean the gossip that you’re using your magic to seduce Arthur, or the gossip that Uther has been possessed by fairies? Or maybe the gossip that Cenred is in bed and seeing no one?”

Merlin pulls over a chair and sits down. “Oh, do tell!”

“As if you couldn’t just…” She wiggles her fingers in the air and widens her eyes. “Boogly boo and see it from here.”

“Gwen, it’s much more fun to hear it from you, and I need to know which gossip has gone where.”

She sits down, keeping a half an eye on the children. “First… you and Arthur?”

He blushes, and he presses his lips together, and then grins.

She puts a hand over her open mouth. “You did seduce him!”

“I never!” Merlin says. “I mean, that wasn’t my intent. I certainly didn’t magic him into it. Betrothal was his idea.”

“When?” she asks. “No, don’t tell me. He asked you and you were so happy you made the castle bloom.”
He shakes his head, covering his eyes. “I turn back time, make a magic university, depose a king and upend the social order and now everyone thinks I have no control over my own magic. The flowers weren’t my magic.”

“So if you didn’t make the castle bloom?” Gwen asks.

“Arthur is magic. The way he was born, the way I was born, it is all of a piece. He was just… protected. Imagine if he’d suddenly started making things bloom when Uther was in charge. As a child.”

She winces. “Wait, so Arthur…”

“It was an accident,” Merlin says. “He’s getting better at controlling it by the hour. But what did you hear about Cenred?”

“One of the priestesses has someone in his court, and got a bird this morning with a message that Cenred had returned, gaunt and old. He spoke to no one and has been in his chambers since he arrived.”

Merlin’s smile is cold. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer man.”

“You mean that,” she says.

“If he’d been nicer, he wouldn’t have been trying to get a sorcerer to throw fireballs at our patrols.”

“The way this is going, we won’t need patrols,” Gwen says.

“But you still haven’t told me about you and Lance,” Merlin says.

“He’s so busy training,” Gwen says. “But when he’s here… I’ve never felt this way about anyone. I never thought I could. You know the future… did he… did I…”

“It’s complicated,” Merlin says. “But your affection for each other was legendary, and I’m so happy for you.”

“I used to think you and I would make a good match,” Gwen says. “But you never seemed to notice…”

“Gwen, you are one of the best friends I’ve ever had,” Merlin says. “And the kind of danger you’d have been in… plus just about the time I figured it out, you had set your sights on Lance. And…”

He stops.

“And?” she asked.

“It’s complicated, and no longer relevant, and truly did not bring you the happiness you deserve,” Merlin says. “Are you happy?”

She grins. “So very.”

“And Lance?” Merlin asks.

“He’s a knight, and he’s training, and he comes home to me at night and he’s… standing right behind you.”

“There he is,” Lance says. “I’ve not gotten to say two words to you since I got back.”
“You two go catch up,” Gwen says. “I need to feed these darlings.” She stands, and Lance seizes the opportunity to catch her around the waist and give her a kiss.

She starts to turn and then says to Merlin, “So already betrothed? Or simply asked?”

“Oh, it’s done,” Merlin says. “That… the flowers…”

“It was very… festive,” Gwen says. “He must be very strong to have created so many.”

“They called us two sides of the same coin when I was too young to have any idea what that meant,” Merlin says. “He didn’t just use his. He used mine too.”

“That sounds intimate,” Lance says.

Merlin raises his eyebrows.

“I’ll see you later,” Gwen says, shaking her head and laughing as she walks back to the children.

Lance grabs Merlin’s elbow, and says, “You need to tell me everything.”

Merlin sighs, then puts his other hand on Lance’s shoulder, and teleports them up to the tower.

“We couldn’t have walked?” Lance says, looking out the window at the gleaming glass and stone of the buildings, the green of the forest in the summer sun.

“I haven’t a lot of spare time these days,” Merlin says. “And it’s a long story. Tell me, have you asked her to wed you yet?”

“I plan to after the coronation,” Lance says. “Did I hear right about you and Arthur? I mean, the last time we spoke, you were hiding from everyone and everything, and now Leon says you’re to be named consort… I assume if you didn’t want that you’d stop it with your magic, but he wasn’t treating you well.”

“He wasn’t. He also had no better example to work from, not once in his life. The geas has been useful in that regard. He’s very different when he’s in love with someone than he is when he’s in a master/servant relationship with someone. He was trained to be an arse in that situation, and has seen the error of his ways. You have only seen us the once, really. In my past, the future that will never be, you saw him grow into a man noble in every sense. You died to save him, to save me, when he tried to give his life to save us all.”

“When?” Lance asks quietly.

“A few years from now,” Merlin says.

“And what happened to Gwen?”

“That, I can’t… you’re better not knowing the details. You did it for her. She outlived almost everyone, except me. But it would be far, far better for her for you to live for her, and I mean you both to have a long, happy life together.”


“You truly proved yourself to be the best of us,” Merlin says. “I know you feel like you don’t deserve it, but I have seen you become the noblest man I’ve ever known, and you did it simply by being who you are. You deserve to be happy, my friend.”
“Likewise.” Lance claps him on the shoulder, and Merlin shakes his head and flings his arms around his friend.

“You don’t know how glad I am to see you alive and happy,” Merlin says. “Next to Arthur himself, I don’t think there’s another soul I’ve missed more.”

“Someday you’ll tell me everything?” Lancelot asks.

“There is not enough time in your life,” Merlin says, letting go. “But come sit for a few, and I’ll tell you some of it.”

“Brother,” Morgana says, striding into the council chamber mid-morning.

“Morgana,” Arthur says. He’s just dismissed three young nobles with instructions to see Geoffrey at the university.

“I seek a private audience,” she says.

He waves off the advisers who have been nattering at him all morning, the next three supplicants, and the guard. Two people start to open their mouths to protest, and he raises his eyebrows at them and makes a shooing gesture.

When the room is empty but for the two of him, he sighs with relief and says, “Thank you. I was about to go mad.”

“I have a proposal for you,” Morgana says.

“I’m already wed, and we’re siblings,” Arthur says with a raised eyebrow.

“The high priestess and the followers of the old religion have been discussing your predicament.” Morgana smiles.

“I am to be crowned King the day after tomorrow,” Arthur says. “I am espoused to the most powerful sorcerer who has ever or will ever walk the planet. I have come into my own birthright of magic, and it is possibly the most useful magic a king of a peaceful kingdom could want, the ability to bring health and vitality to the sustenance of my land. War has been ended, and the care of my people assured. I will live to see my kingdom the centre of a bold new society. And I actually watched the man I love, a sorcerer, make my father, the man he deposed, smile. I fail to see the predicament?”

“You need an heir,” Morgana says.

“I have it on good authority that given many years to produce one in a more conventional match, that I failed to do so.” Arthur leans forward on his chair and puts his hands on his knees. “While I will, at some point, need to appoint or adopt an heir, I think we can agree that I am as well-protected as any king has ever been. It isn’t urgent. And I certainly am not going to produce an heir with my own sister, though I would absolutely consider you for the line of succession.”

“It would get your advisers off your back if you produced offspring and acknowledged them,” Morgana says, “but my proposal is more complex than that.”
“I’m listening,” Arthur says, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms.

“So you need an heir,” Morgana says. “I would not offer myself, but Morgause shares no blood with you. But you are not the only one whose line should not be lost. The dragonlords were all but wiped out in Uther’s Purge, and aside from Merlin, the only other one left must be his father. We cannot expect him to multiply the line, but Merlin could.”

“Merlin is not going to die in the lifetime of a child,” Arthur says. “I honestly think he’s not allowed. He would not be able to pass on his gift, as I understand it.”

“So someday he will die. And who is to say the Goddess would not aid in wakening another dragonlord?”

“So what are you suggesting?”

“Merlin and I are not kin but by marriage,” Morgana says. “I would be… willing… to help him further his line. Morgause would be willing to do the same for you.”

Arthur stares at her for a long moment, speechless. Arthur? Are you all right? He feels the sending but does not respond immediately.

Morgana blinks a moment, and then says, “Egg?”

“You can learn about it at the University, look up human anatomy and physiology of reproduction,” Merlin says. “Women make one egg each month when they are not pregnant. Men make millions of sperm each time they ejaculate their seed. Each egg contains half of the information to make a person, each sperm contains half of the information to make a person, so when they combine, the offspring has traits of both parents. It is possible to combine egg and sperm outside the body and implant them. It is possible to inseminate someone with sperm which has been collected separately, so intercourse is not needed to accomplish a pregnancy. In the future, it was entirely possible to collect an egg from one woman, inseminate with with the sperm from another donor, have a third woman carry the pregnancy to term, and then have yet another person act as parent with or without a spouse.”

Morgana and Arthur both looked utterly perplexed.

“Not like a chicken egg. Human eggs are tiny,” Merlin says. “Smaller than the smallest mark you can make with a quill. If you were able to see inside a woman’s body, you’d barely be able to see it, it is so tiny. A grain of fine sugar, a mote of dust… it is so small.”

“I… the egg and gestation,” Morgana says. “And of course I would be my child’s mother.”

“Oh, you’re asking for sperm donation then?” Merlin says.
“I think she’d like the children to be our heirs,” Arthur says.

“That’s more complex,” Merlin says. “I was hoping we’d shift the government to something less hereditary.”

“You don’t need an heir to your position, Merlin,” Morgana says. “You need an heir to your magic, and a continuation of the line of dragonlords. And there are easier ways to accomplish it.”

“Not without hurting Arthur, there aren’t,” Merlin says. “I assume you are offering to carry my child, and Morgause to carry Arthur’s?”

“It would benefit the old religion to tie itself to the throne,” Morgana says. “Morgause is powerful. So am I. We would not dilute the strength of your… offering.”

“It would affect your ability to make a good match for yourself,” Arthur says. “To bear a child thus.”

Morgana shrugs. “I have no wish to wed, and you need not secure your borders with my betrothal; you have other options. There is no such stigma in the old religion.”

“There are no guarantees that any child would inherit any part of our magic,” Merlin says. “Arthur and I should discuss this.”

“We’ll take your… generous offer under advisement,” Arthur says. “Thank you.”

She walks out. A guard peeks in and does not seem surprised to see Merlin there. Arthur waves him off.

“They’re getting used to you popping in,” Arthur says.

“Good. What do you think?”

Arthur sighs. “I think she wanted to get you into bed. And I think they both want leverage with the throne.”

“Morgause was the driving force behind Morgana’s desire to be queen,” Merlin says. “I understand her reasons, and the offer doesn’t surprise me. It makes sense, in a lot of ways, and I might have considered asking her to do it myself.”

“Do you want to take her to bed?” Arthur asks.

“It’s not necessary. Insemination is not complex, there’s no need.”

Arthur gives him a sidelong glance. “That’s not exactly an answer.”

“I want to take you to bed,” Merlin says. “I have no desire to cause you pain, and I’ve pledged myself to you.”

“Still not an answer,” Arthur says.

“Do I find her attractive?” Merlin says. “Of course. She’s beautiful. Do I actively want to tumble her? Not really. It would complicate things, and I have other options. Why, do you want to bed Morgause?”

Arthur frowns. “She scares me a little.”
“She beat you on the battlefield in single combat,” Merlin says. “She probably should scare you.”

“She’s tiny,” Arthur says. “With a sword?”

“Killed five men to come and throw down her gauntlet. You accepted before you found out she was a woman. Honestly, if you were looking for someone with the genetic potential to enhance your strengths, she’d be a very good candidate.”

“I wouldn’t want to hurt you either,” Arthur says.

“You bedding Morgause to create an heir would not hurt me,” Merlin says. “She’s no threat to me. I know your heart. But as I said, there are other options.”

“Sperm… donation?”

“Easy enough to collect a sample,” Merlin says. “Then it’s simply a matter of putting it in the right place at the right time, and waiting.”

“Collecting a sample?”

“…Like what we did last night, only the result goes in a cup, not on our bellies,” Merlin says. “Or you can accomplish the same without my help.”

“More fun, with,” Arthur says.

“I don’t think we need to worry about it right now,” Merlin says. “We’re busy. Waiting a year or three to have the first of our children wouldn’t hurt.”

“Ours…” Arthur says.

“I can’t imagine not loving any child of your body as though it were my own,” Merlin says. “For that matter, if you chose to adopt a child, it would make no difference. If you bring a child into our lives, I will be right next to you. This is not something we do apart from one another. I would hope you’d feel the same about children of my body or my heart.”

“A week ago I was worried about becoming Crown Prince, and hoping my father wouldn’t foist me off on his friend’s gangly daughter.”

“Oh, she’s possessed,” Merlin says. “It’s on my to-do list.”

“Possessed…” Arthur blinks for a moment, then shakes his head. “That would explain a lot. But tell me later. Children are something that are just expected but not… We have children, someone raises them, we fob our expectations off on them and if we’re lucky they survive to outlive us,” Arthur says.

“We both know what it is to grow up missing a parent,” Merlin says. “I couldn’t be so distant from a child. But there’s time.” A strange smile crosses his face. “Oh Arthur, we have so much time.”
Merlin spends the afternoon as harried by the business of the university as Arthur has been by the preparations for the coronation. People are already fighting over space and authority, and Merlin has had to wade into several large shouting matches.

“No one makes decisions about what is allowed to be taught until more of you have spent time learning,” he says, over and over. “Go to the library. Learn what you don’t know. If you think you know everything, you will never teach here. There is not one person here who does not need to spend the majority of their time reading, no matter how expert they are. If all you want to do is teach, you teach people to read, to write and to count.”

Hilde finds him between shouting matches, and says, “How are we going to treat the sewage? I assume your mages can lay pipes?”

“Have you asked Ali… Nema what your options are?” Merlin asks.

“She described a… treatment plant? It was like nothing we have here.”

“Ask her for alternative methods of dealing with waste,” Merlin says. “In a few weeks I can help you. Have you talked to Dragoon?”

“He’s weird,” Hilde says. “He’s almost a person? But then he’s not? I think he understands me and then it’s clear he really doesn’t.”

“You might talk to Tom, the smith, about what your project might need,” Merlin says. “He might want to study it with you. That’s Gwen’s father. Tell him I sent you.”

She nods, and runs off.

He turns to find Morgana watching him. “You’re good with her,” she says.

“I like children, and she’s very bright.”

She tips her head. “So have you and Arthur decided?”

“We decided that the offer is interesting, but that we would prefer to wait a few years,” Merlin says. “If you are still willing then, we’d be open to considering it. I can’t imagine you’re in a huge rush yourself.”

“Morgause may not have an unlimited window with which to make her part of the offer,” Morgana says. “I can wait, though I will admit that making the attempt has some appeal.”

Merlin coughs, and she laughs. “Your face, Merlin.”

He shakes his head. “Far in the future, women much older than Morgause were made mothers without the use of magic. We have time. And I’d rather die childless than hurt him, as flattering as
your offer is.”

“He’d get over it,” Morgana says.

Merlin snorts. “You would never let him, and you know it.”

At that she laughs, then says, “So what must I study to learn about these methods you mentioned?”

“Reproductive technology,” he says. “You might start with human anatomy and physiology.”

When they find each other that night, in Arthur’s chamber, Arthur is subdued, oddly shy.

The third time Arthur’s gaze drops from his while they undress, Merlin sits on the bed, nude, and says, “Tell me one way or another, please, what has you so quiet?”

Arthur drops the last of his clothing on the floor, opens his mouth to speak, then closes it again, picks up the clothes and puts them on the chest.

I’m listening, Merlin sends.

I just keep thinking about your long life, and how tiny our lives must seem to you, and I wonder how you can let yourself love me, love a child of ours, when in a blink we will wither and die before you. It comes not just as words, but a rush of images, and by the time is done, Arthur stands in his arms, face wet.

Merlin’s breath is a sharp gasp and then he says, aloud, his voice warm but shaky with emotion as he strokes Arthur’s back, “Oh Arthur. Beloved. No, no, it… It isn’t like that. Time passes in a blink when I ignore it, when I let myself flow alongside the world without letting it touch me. It flies by unmarked when I’m focused on hard work. But right now, I’m living every moment, aware, alive, in the world with you. It doesn’t move faster for me than it does for you, it simply moves.”

Arthur shakes his head and Merlin tugs at him to climb up onto the bed. They slide under the covers, skin to skin, and Arthur says, “I still cannot bear the thought of you walking alone through another thousand years after me.”

“I won’t,” Merlin says. “You’ll be with me.”

“I can bluster all day but that won’t make me immortal,” Arthur says.

“You have power over life,” Merlin says. “Already you can make dead wood bloom in ways it never imagined while living. I’ll teach you the science of how living things work, and I think you’ll understand then how much control you can have over your own body. You are magic. And with your magic uncovered, I doubt you could die any easier than I could. You’d have to want death in every single part of your being.”

Arthur’s fingers trace Merlin’s ear as he says, “What part of you didn’t want death when you tried to end it?”

“The part that thought that maybe I’d see you again, if I lived,” Merlin says. “You saved my life, and you weren’t even there.”

“Do we truly need heirs, if we are to walk the earth so long?” Arthur asks.
“Need? Not really. But I would love to raise children with you, watch them grow and thrive,” Merlin says.

“And wither and die?”

“There is no shame in old age,” Merlin says. “Nor great tragedy in dying after a long life full of love. And avoiding creating a child because one is fearful of losing them guarantees that child’s absence, and their loss. Had I never seen you again, I never would have regretted those ten years we spent together. Not even a human lifetime, but everything to me. It sustained me for centuries.”

“It broke you,” Arthur says.

“It brought me back to you. Arthur, I want you to use our magic at the coronation.”

“You have more skill,” Arthur says.

“They need to see your power, and I think your instinctive command of growing things could be exactly what people need to see in this new world we’re creating.”

“What do you have in mind?” Arthur asks.

“Let me show you…”

Neither of them quite notice falling asleep, the transition into dreaming is nearly seamless. One moment Merlin is explaining the process of splice grafting and the next they are standing in a dream grove.

“Oh, excellent,” Merlin says, willing a small tree into existence. “See, here, how they join?”

“Merlin,” Arthur says.

“But there’s not really a limit. As long as the host tree is compatible, it is possible to have dozens of different…”

“Merlin,” Arthur repeats. “Will we be getting enough sleep if we keep doing this?”

“We are sleeping,” Merlin says. “Obviously.”

“But, rest. Restoration.”

“You’d just be dreaming about falling off horses anyway,” Merlin says. “This is better. Now, I saw one of these once as it was being made. Let me show you…”

The dream shifts, and they are standing in a strange room filled with saplings, with a man in strange clothing working with unfamiliar tools.

“Ignore the tools,” Merlin says. “Pay attention to the connections he’s making, and feel how each of the plants differs from the scion. Like so.”

And Arthur can feel how the press of tissue against tissue within the plant is allowing new connections to form. How each part differs, how they are the same. There is a buzzing, hurrying
feeling, and the connections firm, solidify, the tree grows, thickens, strengthens, flowers, fruits, in series, one after the other. In a rush, the tree towers over them, blossoms bursting, dropping, fruit growing rapidly.

“Do you see?” Merlin asks. “You did this instinctively, in a thousand places at once. At the coronation, you need only create one tree. You can draw on my memory of this.”

“How do you make me so much more than what I am?” Arthur asks. “Have you grafted magic to me? Taken my poor root stock and turned me into a king?”

“We just cleared away the shell, Arthur. You’ve always had the potential.”

“I still don’t know how to make this happen,” Arthur says.

“Just know it can, will it so, ask for it. What you do is half magic, half prayer. You speak to the druids at high solstice.”

“We could take the other option,” Arthur says.

Merlin grins, and then laughs, and says, “Why choose?”

Their awareness shifts, and fades, and they sleep.
They wake at dawn, the last day before the coronation. The solstice is nearly upon them, and the sun streams in early.

“Merlin, with all your powers, you can’t make the sun come up later?” Arthur says, groaning into the pillow.

Merlin’s hand twitches and they are suddenly engulfed in darkness.

Arthur makes an odd noise and sits up. “I didn’t mean it…”

“I just pulled the curtains,” Merlin says.

Arthur groans. “I’m awake now.”

Merlin’s hand comes out from under the sheet, and wobbles around midair for a moment before connecting with Arthur’s shoulder. Arthur looks down, curiously, as the hand pats over along his shoulder until it finds his neck, and then he chuckles as Merlin pulls him back down.

“We should get up,” Arthur says as Merlin’s other hand comes up to find his neck.

Merlin stretches against him and says, “I’m up.”

“Yes, you certainly are,” Arthur says, laughing. “But there’s so much to… hey!”

Merlin’s hand connects with Arthur’s rear. Merlin still hasn’t opened his eyes.

“I know you’re not actually asleep,” Arthur says.

“Shhh,” Merlin says, sliding a leg over Arthur’s legs. “I’m just getting to the good part.” He rolls over onto Arthur, and opens his eyes.

“Hmm. Too dark,” Merlin says, and the room brightens until he can see Arthur clearly. “There you
“We still need to get up,” Arthur says.

Merlin rolls his hips against Arthur’s. “Told you, I *am* up.”

Arthur’s head drops back against the pillow. “You win.”

“Give me a minute,” Merlin says, sliding down Arthur’s body. “And you’ll win too.”

Arthur gasps. “You can have as many minutes as you like.”

Merlin pauses, looks up, and says, “Promise?”

“Just keep doing… that…”

Merlin grins, and drops his head back down.

It’s more than a candlemark before they leave the room.

The morning is spent with the knights-to-be and the knights-who-already-are, on the training field.

“You’re leaving us little to do, Merlin,” Leon says, half teasing, half rebuking, as Merlin disarms him.

“Where did you get that idea?” Merlin asks, tossing the sword back to Leon with his magic. “I’ve a list of things you’ll need to take care of over the coming months.”

“In a land free of violence, our sword skills will rust,” Lancelot says without looking, while sparring with Elyan.

“We will have you ride to villages near our borders, first.” Arthur leans against the weapon’s rack, watching. “They should have the choice to join us if their lords will not.

“You and Gwaine and I have an appointment with the Perilous Lands and the Fisher King,” Merlin says, as Leon bows out and Gwaine takes his place.

“I’d thought to do that for my quest,” Arthur says.

“You can’t do it alone. There is another quest, however, that you and you alone can perform. A haunted shrine, a danger to all who pass, where only you can set the ghost to rest.”

“Is it dangerous?” Arthur asks.

“It nearly killed you once,” Merlin says. “And possessed Elyan for a time.”

Lancelot gets a hit in as Elyan, distracted, glances at Merlin, frowning.

Gwaine attempts a feint, and Merlin slows time, plucks the weapon out of Gwaine’s still hand, moves behind him, and swats him on the butt with the flat of the sword as he lets time speed back up.
“Oi, cheating,” Gwaine says, as Merlin tosses his weapon back.

Arthur nods. “I assume you’ll tell me more when it is time to undertake it?”

“Of course,” Merlin says. “Morgana and I must also retrieve the dragon egg, and I must ensure Freya’s safety. And Gwaine, if you think that magic users are going to pull their punches, you are sadly mistaken.”

Gwaine shakes his head and laughs, and puts his sword away.

“There are still reports of bandits coming in. They don’t fare well, but they still try,” Leon says.

“’Twould be wise to declare a short amnesty,” Merlin says to Arthur. “Let all who wish come and be educated and redeem themselves. Most banditry is a byproduct of inequity.”

Arthur nods. “And our knights can ride out to other lands as well, to encourage them to form alliances with us.”

“Eventually,” Merlin says. “Once we have enough who can use magic comfortably to go with them.”

“Tell me that you and I will not be stuck here in the castle while they have the fun,” Arthur says.

“We never were,” Merlin says. “Even after you were king.”

A significant part of the afternoon is spent at the mercy of Geoffrey and a legion of people with Important Things To Do in preparation for the coronation. Uther is there in the banquet hall, and seems surprisingly entertained by Arthur’s impatience.

“You managed to avoid the nonsense that usually accompanies a royal wedding,” Uther says, standing near the table watching, when Arthur complains about the endless minutiae of seating arrangements and the precise ordering of the events of the following day.

“This is like a wedding, coronation and peace talks all rolled into one,” Merlin says, lounging in one of the chairs at the long banquet table. “I don’t know why you expect it to be simple.”

“You just waved your hand for so much of it,” Arthur says.

Merlin laughs. “Yes, without magic this would involve three years of preparation, fittings, negotiations, and wars, probably. There would be a massive royal procession and we’d need fifty armed retainers to keep us safe. Oh, and it would be an arranged marriage, and your father would still be king. This is the hand-waved version.”

“He has a point,” Uther says.

“You seem remarkably equanimous about all of this,” Gaius says as Arthur is pulled away again. He’s been by Uther’s side for most of the day.

“I’m an old man made irrelevant,” Uther says. “But my kingdom is safe, and at peace, and my son is protected, and the great driving forces of my life have been made moot. I can’t find it in me to be bitter.”
“Is Morgana speaking to you yet?” Gaius asks.

Uther sighs. “We’ve spoken. She came to me the other night, and I begged her forgiveness.”

“Did she give it?” Merlin asks.

“She didn’t push me away. And she asked that I come to the university.”

“You would do well there,” Merlin says. “Your skills could be invaluable. They need an administrator who can sort out all the factional nonsense that’s cropping up.”

Uther crosses his arms over his chest. “Arthur asked her to organise it, I would not interfere.”

“She has too much to study to run the place. You’re not trying to learn magic, you don’t need to improve a trade, you already know how to read and write and have as good a grasp of the history of this place as any,” Merlin says. “Ask her if she wants your help settling disputes and setting policy.”

“You think the sorcerers, druids and witches will tolerate me there?” Uther asks.

“If Nimueh, Geoffrey, Morgause, Morgana, Iseldir, Aglain, Arthur and Gaius all agree to it,” Merlin says, “No one would dare say them nay.”

“Will they all agree?” Gaius asks.

“If I ask,” Merlin says. “We’ll call it penance.”

Uther snorts. “You’re punishing me by putting me in a position of authority?”

Merlin laughs. “I think they’ll agree. Have you heard the arguments going on down there? Get thirty scholars in one classroom and you’ll have forty opinions. None of them want the job, and I think most of them will see it as fitting punishment for you to have it.”

“He’s uniquely suited to it,” Gaius says thoughtfully. “He’ll probably enjoy it.”

“Don’t tell them that,” Uther says. “But it would be good to have something worthwhile to do.”

“Honestly, the university will be the core of preventing the catastrophes that happened the first time around.” Merlin stands up and turns to Uther. “Are you willing to help further my goals there?”

“You’re asking?” Uther looks bemused.

“I’m not going to just give you the university, but yes, I am asking for your help. Right now they need to be sent back to study. You might want to look at educational theory. Alice can help you.” Merlin notices Gaius wincing at the name. “I’m sorry, Gaius, I just called her that for so long. It reminded me of you.”

“Is she coming?” Gaius asks. “My Alice?”

“That pretty one you used to…” Uther starts, and then stops when Gaius’s expression darkens.

Merlin closes his eyes and reaches out with his mind, following a tendril of memory until he finds her, mind already clouded by the manticore. His hand reaches out and grasps at the air in front of him, but in his mind’s eye he is carefully separating the creature’s influence from her soul, until it hovers, buzzing. He gives it a choice, and it pops back into its home plane. Her mind clears
There’s a rush of wind, and Gaius gasps as a soft, greying woman pops into existence in front of him with a slight squawk.

“Sorry,” Merlin says. “It was easiest, and he’s been worried. I can put you back if you need.”

“Did you banish it?” Alice asks. “The manticore?”

“I separated it and told it to go away or I would destroy it. It picked going away.” Merlin smiles. “Gaius has missed you.” He gestures at his mentor.

“Gaius… Oh, goodness.” She notices Uther, and pales.

Uther holds up both hands. “I bear you no ill will, good lady. But surely you heard of the changes here?”

“My mind was clouded by a small demon,” Alice says. “I missed much.”

“Let me explain,” Gaius says. “If you’ll come with me, I’ll find us something to eat while I tell you the whole story.”

She grins brightly and takes his arm. “I am all ears.”

Uther watches them leave and says to Merlin, “That is a kindness. I take it they were close?”

“Engaged,” Merlin says. “She fled your purge twenty years ago.”

Uther looks down. “I thought I was doing the right… Will I ever be able to atone?”

“Help them build this brighter future. It’s not about getting their forgiveness. It’s not even about righting wrongs that are frankly unfixable. It’s about knowing you need to and are doing better. They may never forgive you. You may never forgive yourself. But you can still be a force for good, even now.” Merlin walks across the room to Arthur’s side without waiting for a response from Uther.

Uther watches as Merlin’s arm slides around Arthur’s waist. As Arthur looks over and grins, and then laughs. He turns when he hears the heavy door open, and Morgana walks in. He nods at her.

“Father,” she says, a bitter edge to her voice.

“Will you ever be able to say that word without anger?” he asks.

“More irony than anger,” she says evenly. “Will you ever look at me without seeing me as a witch?”

“I’ve never seen you as a witch,” Uther says. “And if I rejected my children for magic, I’d have no children. I hope someday to convince you that I love you more than I love my own pride.”

“What shall you do once Arthur is king?” Morgana asks.

“It has been suggested to me that my administrative skills might be of use to you at the university.”

“You won’t be able to execute anyone,” Morgana says.

“I’ve lost my thirst for vengeance,” Uther says. “I’ve seen what that folly can bring.”
“You acknowledge the harm your thirst for revenge caused?” Morgana asks.

“Worse,” he says. “I have seen what utter destruction your own quest for vengeance could bring. And that was entirely my fault.”

She steps back, her face haunted. “He showed you? He didn’t even show me.”

Uther looks down at the oiled surface of the table. “You have done nothing to deserve that future,” he says. “I stepped aside without a fight to save you from it. It was my punishment for deeds already done to see how my actions could rend the world and bring the destruction of all I hold dear. Do not feel bereft that you do not see this future that can never be. He does you a kindness in not showing it to you.”

“I don’t like to think I could be capable of such ill,” Morgana says. “But I can feel how close that rage was getting.” She steps closer to him. “Perhaps we are not so different, at heart.”

Across the room, Arthur and Merlin look at each other, and then at Uther and Morgana.

Uther straightens and looks at her. “Perhaps not. Merlin says you could use my help? To give you time to study?”

“You’ll listen to others? Not use the position to further your own agenda?”

“I have no agenda now, other than seeing my children well and thriving,” Uther says. “Merlin and Arthur seem to have this well in hand, for all of Arthur’s bellyaching.”

“I heard that,” Arthur calls out.

“It was a compliment,” Uther says.

“You might want to work on that,” Morgana says. “Though I’m sure he’s been whining all day about the planning.”

“He really has,” Merlin says.

“I have not!” Arthur says. “It’s tedious.”

“And I believe we’re done. Geoffrey?” Merlin calls across the room. “Have you what you need from the Prince?”

“Yes, my lord,” Geoffrey replies.

Merlin grins. “I believe that means we’ve a bonfire to light, as soon as the sun sets.”

“There is a feast down at the university, starting soon,” Morgana says. “That’s actually what I came up here to tell you.”

“You could have just…” Arthur taps the side of his head.

“I haven’t had the practice,” Morgana says.

“Where have the provisions for the feast come from?” Uther asks.

“The countryside is burgeoning with early harvests,” Morgana says. “My sister, her sisters, and the druids have been working on the land. Merlin’s baskets help, but they’re barely necessary with all that the land is producing.”
“So fast?” Uther says.

“Some of the plenty is simply a rebound from long restrictions on growth,” Merlin says. “You and Camelot were affected by dozens, maybe hundreds of low-grade curses. I broke some of them myself, others lifted the moment you stepped down. A few I had to unravel carefully when I laid the geas so the snap back wouldn’t hurt anyone. Camelot has not truly thrived since the purge started. Your gains were in spite of it, not because of it.”

“What kinds of curses?” Uther asks.

“Oh, the usual. Blights on crops, reduced fecundity, more accidents, worse luck. There were so many that they actually conflicted with each other and none were full force, but it explains why so many things went wrong all the time. Now, you’ve druids and witches and magical beings working to support the land rather than hurt Uther, and so the result looks more extreme. Near as I can determine, Arthur himself kept the worst at bay. His very nature was a blessing. His presence must have mitigated the bulk of the curses affecting the life of Camelot.”

“I thought that magic was blocked,” Arthur says, looking perplexed.

“Your magic was blocked from your use,” Merlin says. “But your nature never could be. Your life was so charmed that the only thing that could ultimately fell you was a dragon blade, and that wasn’t, ultimately, permanent. No petty curse could override the will of the goddess.”

“Regardless, there is plenty, and all of you should probably make an appearance at the university,” Morgana says.

“I’m ready to be anywhere but this blasted hall,” Arthur says.

The entire path down to the university is lined with market stalls, and the vendors look remarkably cheerful. At one, a young man comes out with a platter of small desserts and refuses Morgana’s offered coin. “A courtesy for my lords and my lady,” he says. “Business has never been so good.”

Merlin smiles and takes a sweet off the tray. He looks at it, recognises a fondant-wrapped petit four, and blinks. “You’ve been in the library.”

“More recipes there than I ever dreamed could exist,” the baker says. “The miller had to be coaxed to grind the flour and sugar that fine.”

“Tiny cake?” Arthur asks, biting into one.

“We heard what you’ve been telling those who complained of the availability of free food,” the baker says. “So we’ve been learning how to make more appealing foods. There is so much to learn.”

“And have you enough help?” Arthur asks.

“I pay them well, and their efforts bring in more coin than I’ve ever had in my life. It’s a fair bargain.”
“You’re Matthew’s boy, aren’t you?” Morgana asks. “Does he still bake?”

“He will. I’m running things for now, whilst he studies. But he must learn to read first. I was fortunate that my mother taught me.”

They are offered more morsels. Merlin conjures a plate for his, but Morgana laughs and points to a strategically placed basket seller, who has a stack of small woven plates that are selling rapidly, with a man sitting behind the stall making more from a basket of reeds.

Merlin looks one over and says, “I wouldn’t want to use it for soup, but for this, it is perfect.”

“There are trenchers at the feast, and two roast boars, and one roast steer,” Morgana says. “There’s also a bounty of greens and summer vegetables.”

The wide open clearing is packed with people when they arrive, but they part in front of Arthur, leaving a path clear to where the roast animals are being carved. A middle aged druid woman bows and hands them each a wide round of bread, cut in half, with the crust forming the plate, and the cut side ready to accept the carved meats. “Pork, please,” Arthur says at the vast carving table.

A broad man with wide shoulders and a wide, sharp carving blade, deftly carves slices of rich meat off of the carcass, and layers them on the bread plate. The man bows and then serves Merlin, Morgana, and Uther. The crowd starts lining up behind them.

At another wide table, they find a variety of greens and vegetables, and one of the castle cooks clucks over the prince and king eating such simple fare. Arthur laughs and says, “I’ve eaten simpler food in the woods on patrol. My belly is not so delicate nor my tastebuds so jaded that I can’t appreciate something as fresh as this.”

They make their way over to one of the benches, which Arthur gestures for his father to take, as he spreads his cloak on the ground. The full cloak is large, but Merlin makes a tiny gesture and it spreads wider around them than it ever could have covered hanging from the prince’s shoulders.

“Merlin, I like that cloak.”

“I’ll put it back. There wasn’t room, and Morgana won’t want grass stains on her skirt.” Merlin kneels and then sits with his food.

Morgana smiles as she sinks gracefully down onto the cloak in a puddle of gown and says, “You don’t have laundry magic to remove stains?”

“Oh, he does,” Arthur says, finding his own seat. “I suspect he used it many times on my clothing.”

“Not as often as you might think, but yes,” Merlin laughs.

“You’ll be king tomorrow,” Uther says. “This is undignified.”

“They won’t hold it against me,” Arthur says, nodding at the crowd. Those who notice nod back, smiling.

“It is strange for me to sit up here, with you down there,” Uther says to Arthur.

“I know your bones hurt enough from sitting too long at court,” Arthur says. “I won’t ask you to sit down on the ground. It’s good for the people to see me at their level. There will be enough separating me from them tomorrow.”
“You’re planning more than what Geoffrey practised,” Uther says.

“Wait and see,” Arthur says, smiling at Merlin, who grins and then looks down.

“What are you boys talking about now?” Morgana asks.

At that, Merlin flushes pink in the evening sunshine.

“Oh, god, it’s not going to be one of those rituals, is it?” Uther asks.

“Really, Father, I’m just giving a speech to the druids at noon. Pledging myself to the land.” Arthur smiles, his face innocent.

“Why, then, is Merlin so very red?” Uther asks.

“Truly, there is nothing of the sort in my address to the druids,” Arthur says.

“You’ve already had a ridiculous public display of affection visible to the whole of the castle,” Morgana says.

“I learnt something new,” Arthur says.

“You’re changing the subject,” Morgana frowns at him.

Arthur rolls his eyes. “Of course I am. But watch.”

He puts his hand flat on the bare grass, closes his eyes for a moment, and then brings his hand up slowly. A small vine follows, curling up into the air, twisting and spiralling.

Merlin whispers a word and makes a small gesture, and a slim arbour appears, finely carved.

Arthur smiles, and says, “Twist,” and the vine quickly winds around and through the arbour, putting out wide leaves as it goes. It thickens, rippling and expanding rapidly, and clusters of flowers appear.

“Wait,” Merlin says, and the whole vine shimmers gold as pollen drops.

“Now?” Arthur asks.

Merlin nods.

“Fruit,” Arthur says, and the flowers shift, tiny green fruit appears, then grows quickly, the vines sagging under the weight of the clusters.

Uther stands, and strides to the arbour. “Why are they different colours?” he asks, touching first a green cluster and then a black one.

“I was practising,” Arthur says. “Merlin explained them to me.”

“Try one,” Merlin suggests, and Uther pulls a red grape away from the cluster.

He bites into it, and then looks startled. “No seeds?”

“It’s in the library,” Merlin says.

People are gathering close, curious.
“Oh, come now,” Merlin says. “We made a university sprout up in an afternoon, surely a grape vine is no great shock?”

A woman asks, “Did the prince make that?”

“In front of the king?” another voice says, shocked.

A low murmur ripples through the crowd.

“My son does not usurp me,” Uther says, letting his voice project. “I sought protection from the ills that unfettered magic can create, but have now been given a better option than the wholesale eradication of all magic-users. I am stepping aside while I am still able to assist my son’s transition to monarch. I have been shown the long-term consequences of my previous course of action and have chosen not to continue down that path. It is my greatest regret that my short sightedness caused so many so much harm, and I will undertake to spend my days helping to educate the people of this land so that we may create a more peaceful future. My children are both able to use magic, as were their mothers. I did not know. And I—”

He stops, and bows his head. “I am sorry. My actions have been hurting this land for many years, the recent abundance evidence that the changes are for the best.”

Another murmur ripples through the crowd.

A girl pushes forward, her eyes fierce as she looks up into Uther’s face. “You killed my mother,” she says. “Why should we be kinder to you than you were to her?”

Uther looks at her and then sinks to his knees so that he is eye to eye with her. He puts his hands out, palms up, and says, “Would my death bring your mother back?”

“I don’t understand why you get to live when she does not,” the girl says. “I have no one.”

“You will not want for anything here, child,” Uther says.

She does not waver. “I will want for my mother.”

Merlin steps forward as he recognises her, so much younger than he remembered, but the set of her jaw, the line of her nose, and the storm brewing in her grey eyes is just as it was. “Kara,” he says. “I had hoped the timing would preclude the hurt done to you.”

“Your beloved prince killed my family at his behest,” she says, and her voice is as set as it ever was.

“I know,” Merlin says. “I wish I could change that.”

“You changed so much,” she says. “Why not that?”

“It was too far back,” Merlin looks haunted. “There was only so much that I could fix and still make this work.”

“How can you forgive them?” she asks.

“Can I show you what happens when we don’t?”

“Merlin, she’s a child,” Morgana says.

“She watched her family murdered in front of her, most of her village, and only a few years ago,”
Merlin says. “She watched Arthur give the command. And then she saw him in the future that never will be, doing the same to another encampment, and it led to Arthur’s death as surely as anything you did.”

Kara smiles savagely at that.


“I would give my life to end theirs,” Kara says.

“The geas would lay you flat if you tried,” Merlin says. “And your death broke one of the best men I ever knew. He loved you fiercely. You will not succeed a second time. We are in the time of atonement, and there will be no more blood spilt in anger. You do not have to forgive them, but you must let go your revenge. If you stay to help build the peace, you will be cared for and educated, fed, and sheltered, and you will not need to live in fear. But do not think to undermine what I am building. I have lost more than you could ever dream, and I will not risk the future on your revenge.”

She is small, her body slight, her cheeks too thin, her hair unkempt enough that Merlin suspects she has just arrived. But she stares at him long and hard, no childhood left in her eyes for all she can be no more than nine at the oldest. Finally she says, “Show me.”

It is harder, knowing so little of her life, than it was with Uther, where he knew so much, but Merlin, standing before her, can show her Mordred, breaking as a young man. He can show her her own defiant death. Arthur atoning at the shrine to her village’s doom. And he shows her a little of the future, the worst and the best of it. Then, while he has her there, letting images unfurl, he probes, goes deeper than he has gone, looking for her pain.

You see it always, he sends to her, and he can feel Arthur listening. You see them dying, you see the look on Arthur’s face. But you don’t know what it means. You were too young. You mistook reluctance and grief for hatred and rage. Mistakes were made, so many. Uther’s, then Arthur’s, and mine, and yours, and it broke the whole world.

“How can I stop seeing it?” she says aloud. “I do not want to lose my memory of her, but her death is all I have. If I let go of it, I’ll lose all of her…”

“Oh child,” Uther says. “From such grief was borne the Purge, the very revenge that took your mother from you. Ask Merlin to help you, and learn to live. There is so much more than your pain before you. Do not miss it, staying trapped in the past. Your mother would not want it any more than my wife would have. Grief and rage that powerful can twist your soul.”

She stares at him. “I would create the man who killed your child. You have seen this?”

“I have,” Uther says.

“And you would forgive me that?”

“I blame myself,” Uther says.


“It is what it is,” Uther says. “I did what I did. I cannot change it, I can never atone for it adequately, and had I understood then what I do now, I know I would do it differently. But mostly, Merlin helped me set the worst aside. I look at it each day, for a time, and let it overtake me. And
then, like a wave, it goes, and I can turn back to face the world. I drown it in every night… but then
life goes impossibly on, and I go with it. If you will allow me, I would attempt to make this up to
you. But let Merlin help you first.”

“And you,” she says, turning to Arthur. “Do you atone?”

Arthur kneels down next to Merlin—who is now flanked by kneeling father and son—puts her
small hand on his own forehead, cups a hand around her head, and opens the memory to her. *I have
grieved your mother since before she died, and I will atone for her death with the rest of my life.*

She sags against his hand as the depth of his emotion hits her. He steadies her, and opens his eyes.

“You are crying,” she says. “For my mother. I thought I was the only one left who could.”


She nods.

“Open your mind, child,” he says. “I think I can give you more than we need to hide. Arthur,
Uther, be prepared to catch her.”

She lets the king and his son take her hands, and Merlin takes her head in his hands, and a moment
later, she sags, and Uther steadies her against his knee.

She lets out a sob, and Uther looks up at Merlin, puzzled.

“Let her cry,” Merlin says. “She’s remembering.”

Uther is shocked when the child leans against him and says, “I remember her spinning thread. I
loved watching her spin.”

“I’m so sorry I took her from you,” he murmurs.

“I remember my father, too,” she says. “And I remember the stories he told…” Kara pulls away
now and looks up at Merlin. “Is he really the once and future king?”

Merlin nods. “Once, for me, so long ago, he was king, and he died, and tomorrow, he will be king
again, and the whole land will live.”

“It was my favourite story, once. The king who would come and bring magic back to the land. Emrys
at his side.”

“The stories don’t say how hard it is, living it.” Merlin reaches out a hand. “Come, Kara, there is
someone you really should meet. He can help you find your place here.”

In his mind, he sends, *Mordred*… and steps out into the crowd.

A moment later, he knows the boy is near. He looks at the little girl and says, “Are you ready to let
your revenge go?”

She looks back at Arthur and Uther, who have climbed to their feet but still watch her. Looking
back up at Merlin, she nods. “I don’t think I need it any more.”

“I can show you the children’s quarters,” a quiet voice says next to them.

“Go with Mordred,” Merlin says. “You have much in common and he can help you get settled.”
Kara smiles. “Are you a druid?” she asks.

Mordred nods. “I lost people, too. But it’s good here. Arthur and Merlin and Morgana saved me. Come on, it’s really neat where we stay.”

She looks back at Merlin, and when he nods, she lets Mordred drag her off by one hand.

Nimueh, bent and aged, tugs at Merlin’s sleeve. “What did you do to her?”

“I let her look away from her pain,” Merlin says. “Reminded her there is good in the world. Nothing more.”

She nods, and hobbles over to Uther. “There may be hope for you, yet.”

Uther looks puzzled.

“Our ill bargain has been redeemed. My failing and yours have found fruit at last. Have you let go your revenge?”

“Nimueh,” he says. “Once I would have struck you down where you stood. But no, there is no fight left in me. You gave me my son. And if Merlin is your doing as well, then you’ve also given me peace.”

“I begged a favour to bring that boy’s parents together. The rest was beyond my knowing. He has redeemed us both.” She looked over at Arthur. “Tomorrow, you gain your crown and pledge to the druids. What peace do you make with the old religion?”

“It is solstice, good mother,” Arthur says. “This is only the first feast.”

“It is not a feast I seek,” she says.

“I will pledge myself to your order,” Morgana says.

“Everything we do, we do because of your goddess,” Arthur says.

Merlin bows his head for a moment and his eyes are glowing when he speaks. “Tomorrow is the start, a new counting of years. The old religion made new, the land and the king bound. Treaties will be signed that will shape the world forever. But worship is a choice, and while we may give thanks to the palpable gifts the goddess brings, we will not compel. She has never demanded. I have pledged to her to bring magic back to this land. But we will not force people to walk her path, and she has not asked us to.”

Nimueh nods. “We shall bend to each other.” She reaches out to Morgana. “Come, child. We’ve more to discuss.”

Somewhere, someone calls for music, and Arthur asks Merlin, “So, how would the future celebrate something like this?”

Merlin laughs. “Which part of the future? I mean, music… hmmm…” He looks thoughtful and then grins. “The future had so much music.”

“Can we hear it?” Arthur asks.

Merlin nods. “It’s in the library.”

By now, most of the populace has at least seen the library and its screens, so when Merlin conjures a console and a large screen hanging above it, their reaction is more bemused curiosity than surprise.

“When I unwound time from the spindle, it had to go somewhere,” Merlin says. “I travelled backwards along the threads of time—the goddess helped me channel it all through the crystal cave. One of the things the future did best was storing and cataloging information. Books, music, so much of the life of the future was information. The cave is brimming with the potential of a thousand years, and when the world died, going back through history and storing it all in the crystal cave was truly the only way I could save the progress of that thousand years, without preserving the mistakes that destroyed the world. Eight hundred years from now, people would romanticise times like ours, but with the instruments and music of hundreds of years of innovation. Their celebrations looked like this.”

On the screen above the field, they can see wildly dressed people, dancing, and strange instruments, and then they can hear it. Merlin points. “That one is a fiddle. Horsehair dragged over strings. It’s the high, fast one, and it’s playing a jig.”

“I recognise the drum, is that a lute?”

“Guitar,” Merlin says.

The music changes speed and tone dramatically, and a singer’s voice starts into a ballad.

“Why can’t I understand it?” Arthur asks. “It sounds almost right, but…”

“Language changes over time,” Merlin says. “So much between now and then. It will be different now, though. I don’t know how, just… different.”

A man comes up to Merlin and asks, “Can we make instruments like that? Are there others?”

Merlin smiles, and waves a hand, and says, “There are thousands, but those were the most common, the orchestra.” On the screen they see a hundred or more people, playing dozens of different instruments.

The man’s eyes widen. “We have so much to learn.”

“We have time,” Merlin says. “Ask Nema about music.” He puts a hand on the console, and closes his eyes. The air shimmers in front of him, and with a sparkle and a ringing sound of six strings coming into existence at once, a wooden instrument drops fully formed into the man’s hands.

“That’s a guitar. Nema should be able to explain the basics to you, it’s a good way to start.”

The man stares at the instrument in his hands, and looks perplexed.

“Here,” Merlin says, taking it and sliding the strap over his head. “Hold it like this. Then when you press here, it changes the strings so they make different notes.”

His fingers run through a few rusty chords, and Arthur stares at him. “I had no idea you could… that,” Arthur says, waving his hand at the guitar.

“I spent a lot of time at university and on the road in the nineteen seventies,” Merlin says. “Playing the guitar is a good way to get a place to sleep and a meal and some tolerable company. And people tend to stay out of your personal space if you’re playing music, unless you want them closer.”
He picks out a rippling series of notes, then slips the guitar off and hands it back to the man standing in front of him. “Start there. The library has what you want. See if some of the kids want to learn, too.”

The man nods, and wanders away plucking tunelessly at the strings.

“You saved all the music of the future?” Arthur asks.

“The music that was recorded, written, digitised. Which was most of it, especially towards the end. Even the oldest written music had been played so and catalogued. I’m not sure I could have made myself rewind time if it meant losing humanity’s musical heritage.”

“Surely it would have been lost, regardless,” Arthur says.

“They sent it into space. And I’m honestly not sure it’s not still out there. I know what happened here in the solar system, but beyond? She was a little vague, and I decided I didn’t need to know. But this way… the timeline was lost but the heritage was not.”

“The music is so different?” Arthur says, as the orchestra’s music crescendos.

“We’ve not even scratched the surface,” Merlin says. “Wait until I tell you about rock and roll…”

When they arrive back at Arthur’s chamber late that evening, someone has hung clothing for the coming day for both of them on Arthur’s screen.

Merlin’s eyes widen when he realises the garments are nearly identical but for the mantles. “You really do intend to present me as your equal?”

“Of course,” Arthur says. “You won’t let me raise you above me.”

“You are my king,” Merlin says, as if such a thing is a fundamental, unalterable state of the universe.

“And you are my consort, and certainly my equal in every way that matters.” Arthur looks around the room. “So did you tidy or has the castle staff taken over?”

Merlin laughs. “I’ve let my magic do what it will here, it seems to have a cleaning bent. But the clothing…”

“I had the tailors make them the ordinary way,” Arthur says.

Merlin slides an arm around Arthur’s waist from behind. “I’m honoured.”

“I’m not sure there’s honour enough in the world.” Arthur turns in Merlin’s arms and rests his head on Merlin’s shoulder.

“The chance to fix what went wrong, and this—they’re all I need.” Merlin rests his cheek on Arthur’s hair. “Everything is going to be so different.”

“Going to be?” Arthur’s laughter vibrates against Merlin’s chest. “You’ve already changed everything.”
“Yes,” Merlin says. “But after tomorrow, we go out into the world, and make it new.”

“Let’s just get through tomorrow,” Arthur says, turning his head so that his lips brush against Merlin’s neck.

“Tomorrow,” Merlin agrees absently as a pleasant buzzing tingles through him from Arthur’s lips against his neck to his toes.
It was during the worst of the plague years that Merlin’s frustration with his lack of knowledge came to a head. His magic wouldn’t allow him to get more than miserably sick, but he lost count of how many people died. Empty villages and haunted survivors were everywhere he went. His magic seemed frustratingly inept. It wasn’t enough to wish healing; he had to understand the problem in order to fix it. Broken bones were easy enough.

He left England and its haunted few, but France wasn’t much better. He wandered, and watched Europe bloom with the Renaissance. Everything drew him to Italy, where he met Leonardo in the last part of the 15th century. He insinuated himself into the painter’s household as a servant, and though he occasionally asked questions, he mostly just watched. When Da Vinci’s interests turned to anatomy and medicine, Merlin was thrilled, and there gained an intricate understanding of how the human body was put together. Once he could see, in one of the many dissections, where everything was and how it was put together, he could make sense of what he could feel, probing a living body with magic. Curing diseases eluded him still, but wounds and other injuries became easier.

He thought, as he often did, of Arthur, bleeding out in his arms, feeling the shard of magic and metal burrowing in, unable to grasp it, and he started to have an idea of how he might pull something like that out of a body, knitting the flesh back together as it emerged.

In the dream, the memory flickers and shifts, and Merlin opens his eyes in the moonlit chamber.

“I’m here,” Arthur says. “I’m alive.”

“You weren’t.” Merlin rolls closer and rests his head on Arthur’s chest. “For so long, you weren’t. I clung so hard to the idea that you would come back to me.”

“You came back to me instead,” Arthur says.

Merlin runs his hand along Arthur’s skin. “The world is better with you in it. It was terrible with you gone.”

“Shh,” Arthur says. “Sleep now.”

The last days of the future were strange. He had allowed his sanctuary to collapse into a tiny oasis, almost completely unhinged from the world around it, while he and Zaira tested and practised and taught themselves how to take hold of the thread, find the spindle, and release the threads into the crystals. The work was all-encompassing, and he did not allow himself to think about Zaira’s fate
until their first test.

They stood in the cave, which had expanded over the previous decade. He understood the crystals, finally, knew them down to their subatomic structure. When he started the test spell, he could feel the earth under his feet shiver as he pulled, and released and tipped, working at finding the right metaphor, the right place to put his metaphysical “hands”.

He wound things back half an hour, and dropped back into normal time to hear Zaira talking about setting up the test run. He started to laugh.

“What?” She frowned at him, annoyed.

“We don’t need to set up the test run,” Merlin said. “It already worked.”

She grinned. “We did it?”

“Half an hour,” he said.

“I…” She started to say something and then whirled away from him to stare deep into one of the crystals. “It’s different than it was an hour ago,” she said finally. “If I can detect an energy difference from a half hour rewind, is it possible for them to hold a thousand years?”

“Do the maths,” Merlin said. “You tell me.”

She brought out a small device and started taking readings. An hour later, she said, “Oh, I forgot to ask. How does your body feel?”

“Normal,” he said. “Better than normal.”

Her maths showed that they needed more crystals. By a huge factor. That the energy stored would be dangerous if they tried to put too much in. It took three years of work and frustration and finally just praying to find a solution. His mother showing up in the cave was only confusing for a moment.

“You can only see these dimensions you inhabit,” the Goddess said with his mother’s voice.

“Pick another form,” Merlin told her. “I miss her too much.”

“She is a part of me,” the Goddess said, and then changed to wear Freya’s face.

“Enough,” Merlin said.

He did not recognise the old woman in front of him, but it was better that way. “As I was saying, the crystals are sufficient. You will channel time into them. We will direct it to where it needs to go.”
“Will I have any way of accessing the knowledge of this future?” Merlin asked.

“You will be part of the cave, and the cave will be part of you, and all that has been shall still be as long as you are.”

“Is that a yes? I need something specific, like, do I need to memorise how to make solar panels, or can I build a library so that it’s all accessible by everyone?”

She laughed. “Usually prophets like it when I’m vague. Yes. Yes, you will be able to draw information out. Do a test and you can see.”

It was more like a dozen tests. He took to returning a half hour later each time, but always back to that same day of the first test. The effect on Zaira was odd. Each time she helped him initiate the test, each time she was startled by his change in demeanour, until it had happened enough times that she just shrugged it off. But her speech patterns shifted, changed. He found himself slipping back into the languages of his childhood, the rough country Gaelic and middle English. And she followed without hesitating. He stopped one day, and really looked at her.

“The goddess, she comes to you?” Merlin asked her.

“I am her last priestess,” Zaira said. “I am learning to be her vessel. It is the only hope I have to survive in any meaningful way.”

“I will miss you so much,” Merlin said.

“No, you won’t,” Zaira said. “You won’t have time. And you will have Arthur and all the people you lost.”

“I will. You have made this bearable, at the last.”

“It will be better than bearable,” Zaira said. She gestured up at the high, dark ceiling, the gleaming crystals hanging down. “Every day we’ve had together will be in there. Even now, overlapping futures from our tests are already stored. I’ll be in there, and I’ll be with Her, and you will be where you need to be.”

“I hate leaving you.”

“I’ve already had a couple decades more than I could possibly have had without you,” Zaira said. “You need to stop dithering, old man, and stop testing, and go.”

“Am I ready?” Merlin asked.

“You never will be, and you always have been,” Zaira said and started to glow. “You know you’re just procrastinating.”

He reached a hand out to her, and one up to the ceiling above them. “I love you, my darling girl.”

His hand was glowing, too.

“I know, Merlin,” She said. “You’ll see me again. This time, don’t stop.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, turned, looked up to the crystals, reached out to the fabric of time
and the universe, and *pulled.*

This time it is Arthur who gasps awake, shocked by the enormity of Merlin’s memory.

“I barely understand what I’m doing with plants,” Arthur says. “What you did to the whole world…”

“Would have been monstrous if there’d been anyone or anything left alive,” Merlin says, face wet, lying on his back.

“I don’t understand how you did it.” Arthur rolls onto his side.

Merlin sits up and closes the curtains with a gesture to shut the moonlight out. The room darkens.

“I showed you what the moon and the earth and the sun are.” As he speaks, a small image of the sun appears between them, a small earth and tiny moon circling it. “It’s easy to think about the moon moving around the earth in a circle. Or the earth moving around the sun in a circle.”

The sun twirls, and the earth moves around it, and the moon moves around that. Arthur watches them, fascinated.

“But it’s not really circles,” Merlin says. Each body starts to leave a glowing trail. The earth’s is green, the moon’s is a silvery grey, and they criss and cross in thin glowing threads around the sun. “Because the sun is not the centre.”

Arthur blinks. “What is?”

“The sun orbits around the galactic centre of the Milky Way,” Merlin says, and the room is nearly filled with a galaxy, the sun suddenly tiny, the planet invisible. “But we don’t have to see the whole thing to understand what I did.”

The galaxy vanishes, and the earth and the moon reappear around a sun returned to its previous size. This time the sun moves upwards, leaving a glowing golden trail, with the planet and satellite tracing thin paths around it in a closely twined double thread. More planets appear, with their glowing threads.

“I followed the thread down to your time,” Merlin says, reaching a finger up to trace the earth’s thread down, “letting all that causality, every choice, every reaction and action and effect and cause flow into the cave as I went, unmaking. And then I found my moment—when I dropped into my body, the Goddess used me to shift that moment for the earth forward through time, like pulling a thread out of a tapestry. When I thought of all of history as the tapestry, it was impossible. When I looked at the whole galaxy, dealing with the earth was easy. So from earth’s perspective, time was effectively reversed, but without having to change time for everywhere else. Space is too big.”

“The sun is the spindle?” Arthur looks perplexed.

“The sun is the spindle,” Merlin agrees.
“It is humbling to see so many lives and so much history reduced to a thread.”

“Yes,” Merlin says. “More so when you realise that the thread is made up of tinier threads, billions of tiny fibres wrapped into a cord of history. And your thread, mine… they are changing everything.”

“I wish I could see the future,” Arthur muses, peering around the model.

“You’re already seeing it,” Merlin says, and leans over to press his lips to Arthur’s.
They wake to pounding on the door, in a room unnaturally dark, cracks of light visible around the curtain edges. Merlin pulls back the curtains to let the early morning light stream in. Leon’s voice through the door is muffled, but they hear enough to parse the words “Uther” and “morning”.

“A moment,” Arthur calls out, and they roll out of bed, each grabbing a pair of trousers to slide on. Arthur, shirtless, pulls the bar up and the door open. “It is early yet, what about my father?”

Leon steps aside, revealing Uther looking rumpled and ill-at-ease, standing in the hallway behind the knight.

“Father?” Arthur cannot remember the last time his father actually came to his chambers rather than summoning him.

“Leon,” Uther says, and looks pointedly down the hall.

“Indeed, Sire,” Leon says, and backs out with a slight bow.

Arthur steps back to allow Uther into the chamber.

“Merlin,” Uther says by way of greeting.

Merlin shrugs his way into the finely woven silk tunic. “Uther.”

“Arthur, I just wanted to say, before the coronation…” Uther pauses and runs a hand through his hair.

“Yes?”

“I want to say that I’m proud of you, and I’m happy for you. And I’m sorry.” At that, Uther looks at Merlin. “I know I cannot undo what was done, but…”

He turns, every move awkward hesitation. Then he looks back at Merlin and says, “Thank you.”

Merlin blinks.

Arthur stares at Uther, slack jawed.


“You healed me,” Uther says. “You saved my children. You saved my kingdom. You saved me from myself. You could have killed me. I probably deserved it.”
“What brought this on, Father?” Arthur asks. Merlin moves over to Arthur’s side, and Arthur reaches over without looking to take Merlin’s hand.

“I… You already have everything you could need,” Uther says. “All I can give you that has not already been lain at your feet… is my blessing. For your ascension to the throne. For your choice of spouse.”


“You’re a good human being,” Uther says. “You’ll be a great king. You were a great enough king to inspire the most loyal act I’ve ever heard of, in spite of me. I may spend the rest of my life trying to atone for my mistakes, but I’ve been given a chance to do so because you were good enough to inspire him.”

“I would not lessen the significance of the wrongs you wrought,” Merlin says, “but you should know that for many years you’ve been under the influence of curses, unchecked grief, and guilt. While you’re not blameless, it’s only now, with the curses lifted, with your grief and guilt caged, that you can even begin to be who you are again, and be the kind of man who could have a son like Arthur. You were a great king once. You can be a good man, yet.”

They break their fast with the knights in the council chamber. Midmorning, they head down to the courtyard where a crowd has gathered around the stone. Several children are on top of the large granite boulder, tugging at the sword. They jump down when Arthur and Merlin appear in their coordinated finery at the head of a procession of knights. Uther stands above on the balcony behind the parapet, with Gaius at his side. Morgana stands on another section of the balcony with her sister, Nimueh, and a number of druids.

The rest of the upper walkway is filled with visiting dignitaries.

Arthur walks slowly to the stone, Merlin a step behind him, while people reach to touch them as they pass.

They climb to the top of the stone, just wide enough for them both to stand flanking the sword.

Merlin looks down at the runes, and then looks out at the crowd and proclaims, “The rock says of the sword, ‘I am Excalibur. The one who draws me forth rules by right.’” He looks up to Uther in the balcony. “Uther Pendragon, what say you?”

“I have led this kingdom for twenty years,” Uther says, his voice ringing throughout the courtyard. “On this, my son’s majority and the anniversary of his birth, let it be known that I hereby abdicate my throne in his favour.”

“Have all who would tried their hand at removing the sword?” Merlin asks.

Nodding heads are everywhere.

Arthur smiles, and puts his hand on the pommel, then looks at Merlin, wraps his hand around the hilt, takes a breath, and slides the sword easily from the stone.

“Like butter,” someone whispers in the crowd.

Arthur grins and holds the sword aloft as a shadow passes over the courtyard.
Someone screams, and Merlin’s voice is suddenly everywhere, saying, “Be calm,” as the dragon backwings, great gusts of wind ruffling the crowd parting rapidly beneath him.

“Kilgharrah,” Merlin says, when the great dragon settles neatly into the hastily cleared space in the courtyard, his face a few feet away from the great boulder they are standing on.

“Merlin,” Kilgharrah says. “I found them.”

“There’s someone riding him!” comes from a random voice in the crowd.

The crowd stops cowering, but they are still tightly clustered against the walls of the courtyard.

Balinor and Hunith slide down from the dragon’s neck to his knee, and then to the ground.

“Thank you,” Merlin says.

“I have pulled your sword from the stone,” Arthur says.

“As was foretold,” Kilgharrah intones.

“Do I have your word that you will do naught to harm those under my protection?” Arthur asks.

“You have my pledge, as kin and liege,” Kilgharrah says.

“As kin,” Arthur echoes.

“You are bound to those I am bound to by blood,” Kilgharrah says. “I could not harm you or yours.”

Merlin hops from the top of the rock down to the cobblestones, and embraces his mother. He puts out a hand to his father, and is enveloped in a hug. Merlin looks up at Arthur and says, “My lord, I present to you my parents, Balinor, Dragonlord, and Hunith.”

“Welcome,” Arthur says with a nod, and then turns to the dragon. “I’ve sent a knight up to the high meadow with a brace of sheep for you.”

“Recently shorn?” Kilgharrah asks. “The wool can be…unpleasant. Smells bad when you burn it off, too.”

“Recently shorn,” Arthur says. “The knight is under my protection, as are all who live in Camelot, our allies, and those at peace with us.”

“Your enemies are my enemies,” Kilgharrah says, his voice carrying to the balcony, where a murmur rises among the dignitaries. “I will not eat your knight, nor any under your protection.”

“Do you require tribute?” Arthur asks.

“I do not.” Kilgharrah says. “Dragons are sufficient unto ourselves. I prefer to be left alone.” At this, he turns his head to a youth who has, apparently on a dare, come close enough to touch his leg. The lad makes a small squeaking noise and dashes back into the crowd.

“Kilgharrah,” Uther says from the balcony.

The dragon’s great head comes up abruptly, his eyes narrowing. “You live,” he says.

“You did,” Kilgharrah says. “I cannot forget it, I cannot forgive it. But I will seek no revenge on you and yours for my long imprisonment.”

Uther nods. “It is more than I hoped.”

“It is not for you, but for your son and his destiny,” Kilgharrah turns to Merlin and Balinor. “If I may?”

“Thank you for your service,” Merlin says.

The great dragon stretches upward, and the crowd shrinks from him. He takes a step back, and then formally and elaborately bows to Arthur, dropping his head near Arthur’s knee. “My king.”

“I would call you my dragon, but you are your own,” Arthur says. “May I call you friend?”

“You may,” Kilgharrah says with a low rumble, which doesn’t register immediately as the chuckle that it is.

“Friend, then. Thank you,” Arthur says.

Kilgharrah launches himself skywards with a powerful leap. He circles high above them, and lets out a long, single gust of flame as if to remind them that he can. Then he wings up the hills behind the castle, and is lost to view.

The gap in the courtyard fills in slowly, with a low, awed murmur from the crowd. “Pendragon, indeed,” calls out Caerleon from the heights. “I’ll sign that treaty of yours, lad.”

“Let him be crowned first,” Uther says from the other balcony. “King Arthur Pendragon.”

The crowd answers, “King Arthur Pendragon!”

The great hall is packed from wall to wall with people, but for the aisle marked by the existing knights standing in full armour. Uther and Geoffrey stand with Morgana at the dais. Gwen and Merlin’s parents stand near the front of the crowd.

Merlin and Arthur stand together at the door of the chamber as the royal fanfare plays.

“Any second thoughts?” Merlin asks.

“You’re asking me that, now?” Arthur laughs. “You?”

“I always have second thoughts,” Merlin says. “But not about this.”

“One of the knights said that they found Agravaine stuck at the border. Said he was coming to see the coronation and offer his advice, but he couldn’t get across,” Arthur says.

“Fancy that,” Merlin says.

Arthur takes his hand, and they walk together down the aisle, followed by the men to be knighted. Merlin and the new knights form the front row of the audience, while Arthur continues up to the dais alone.
His father embraces him, and then removes the crown from his own head, holding it at his side as he speaks. “Today, I abdicate my throne and name my son, Arthur Pendragon, king in my place.” He hands the crown to Geoffrey, who takes it with a small bow.

Uther continues. “At the same time I formally acknowledge my daughter, Morgana Pendragon. She has brought me great joy, and I will strive ever to redeem myself for her, for my son, and for all of Camelot.” He holds out his hand, and she hesitates only a moment before taking it. Together they step down to turn and stand in the front row on the other side of the aisle from Merlin.

Geoffrey steps forward, and Arthur kneels.

Geoffrey casts one look at Uther, another at Merlin, and then speaks. “Arthur Pendragon, will you solemnly promise and swear to govern the peoples of Camelot according to the Pax Drakonis?”

Arthur says, “I solemnly swear so to do.”

“Will you promise to use your power for the common good, enforcing law with justice and mercy in all your judgements?”

Arthur nods. “I will.”

At this, Geoffrey smiles. “Then by the sacred laws vested in me, I crown you Arthur Pendragon, King of Camelot.” He places the crown on Arthur’s head, and steps back as Arthur rises.

Uther smiles, too, as he calls out, “Long live the king!”

The entire room takes up the chant, as Arthur turns and grins down at Merlin. He waits a moment, then raises his hand, and the chanting stops.

“I would not be here, now, on this dais, accepting this crown, but for the action of one man. He has lived a lifetime longer than any could comprehend, has seen us at our worst, saw the world burn for our mistakes, and he has given us all a greater gift than we could possibly imagine: a second chance to reclaim a great destiny from the fire of defeat. Come up here, Merlin Emrys.”

Merlin steps forward, his staff in hand, deep red cloak flowing behind him, his face young but with a short, neat beard.

“Merlin stood up to my worst self the moment he met me,” Arthur says.

Merlin goes to one knee before him, bowing his head. “My king.”

“This may be the most respect he’s ever shown me voluntarily,” Arthur says, and the court laughs.

“I give you the respect you deserve, Sire.” Despite the light teasing, Merlin’s voice is rough.

“Always,” Arthur says dryly. “But though we butted heads from the start, he saved my life shortly after that, and saved the court from a witch bent on revenge. A mother, broken-hearted over the loss of her son. He saved me again not long after, drinking poison rather than letting me die.”

*I’d do it a thousand times*, Merlin sends, head still bowed.

“In another future, I lived for ten more years, and he was at my side the whole time. I died in his arms, only knowing at the last how much he’d done for me.” Arthur pauses, takes a breath, and then says, “He is the most powerful sorcerer this world has ever known or will ever know. He has power over time and space, and lived a thousand years after my death without ever forgetting me.
or all the people of Camelot. When the world ended, he came back here to give me, to give the whole world a second chance."

Merlin looks up at him.

“We are taking that chance.” Arthur looks down at Merlin, and caresses his head. “His undying loyalty is clear, but his love for us all is clearer. He has not only given us a second chance to avoid the mistakes of the future, but he has also given us the tools to create peace and prosperity—not only for us, but for all who ally with us. And this man who was my servant for so long, who has never stopped serving me, is, by his own right of blood, a dragonlord. He turns enemies into allies, and helps us all to be our better selves. Stand, please, Merlin.”

Merlin stands in front of him. Arthur takes a deep breath, and says, “I love you well. I pledge my heart to you, and would have you at my side both as a king, and as a man, as King Consort and Royal Mage.”

Merlin says, “I pledge myself to your side, to your heart, for so long as we both may live. My magic is yours, my heart is yours. They always have been.”

“Geoffrey?” Arthur says, and Geoffrey hands Arthur a less weighty crown than the one on Arthur’s head. Arthur turns back to Merlin, and places the crown on his head while Merlin stands, saying, “I crown you Merlin Emrys, King Consort of Camelot.”

At that, the crowd calls out, “Merlin! Merlin! Merlin!”

“Please don’t tell me to live long,” Merlin says. “I can’t help it.”

The room erupts in laughter.

“We have one more piece of business,” Arthur says, as Merlin turns to face the crowd and stands at his side.

Looking down, Merlin sees his mother, standing hand in hand with his father, tears in her eyes.

Arthur draws Excalibur. “Gwaine, Percival, Elyan and Lancelot, come here.”

The four men walk to the dais and kneel.

“Traditionally, only noblemen have been allowed to be knights. But our kingdom is changing, and soon the titles “noble” and “common” will mean little. All will be given the chance to learn and to serve as their abilities and moral fibre allow. Though most of you were born commoners,” and at the word “most”, Gwaine looks sharply at Arthur, who continues without meeting Gwaine’s eyes, “I know your fighting skills are all excellent, and that each of you has the potential for nobility of spirit rarely seen even in the true nobility. And knighting you will be my second official act as Camelot’s king.”

With the flat of his sword, he knights each of them, starting with Lancelot and ending with Gwaine. As he finishes placing the sword on each shoulder, Arthur says, “I dub you Sir Gwaine Essetir, Knight of Camelot.”

Gwaine’s eyes widen and the whole room is filled with whispers.

Arthur says, “Stand, Knights of Camelot!”

The knights stand, but Gwaine is still shooting Arthur worried looks.
“Come with me, out the side,” Arthur says to Gwaine. “We have much to discuss.” To the crowd he says, “All may go to the university, where festivities will be beginning shortly! Those attending the druid conclave should meet at the grove.”

The crowd cheers, and Arthur leads Merlin and Gwaine out the door behind the dais.

As soon as they are away from the crowd, Arthur says to Gwaine, “I know it’s not your idea of a good time, but I may have need of your royal bloodline sooner than later. Cenred is dying.”


“Your father was forced from Essetir, but had a valid claim to the throne,” Arthur says. “Caerleon didn’t help you because he didn’t want to aggravate Cenred’s predecessor. If Cenred dies, your presence there could be the last step in bringing peace to the land.”

“You’d make me king,” Gwaine says, petulant. “I wish I’d never met you.”

“I felt the same way about Merlin a few days ago, and look at us now.” Arthur throws an arm around Merlin’s shoulder.

Gwaine looks at their crowns, his expression abject horror.

“Look at it this way,” Merlin says. “If you ally yourself with Camelot, you’ll have the geas, and it will be a much easier job.”

“But Merlin…”

“Gwaine, are you actually whining?” Arthur says.

Gwaine nods emphatically. “Absolutely. Kings don’t whine, therefore I am not fit to be a king.”

“Cenred could hold on for a while,” Merlin says. “If he doesn’t attack… never mind. He’ll be dead in a week or two. Please?”

“I’d be a terrible king.”

“Consider what they have now,” Merlin says.

Gwaine’s shoulders droop. “Are you certain?”

“I am,” a voice startles all of them.

“Caerleon,” Arthur says with a tip of the head as the other ruler stepped up to his side.

“Arthur. Gwaine, I know you blame me for your mother’s poverty, but keeping you and your siblings under Cenred’s radar was important.”

“Get one of them to do it,” Gwaine says. “Galahad would be great.”

“Galahad is good of heart but Essetir requires a less… naive hand,” Caerleon says.

“Gareth?” Gwaine asks hopefully.

“In France. And don’t ask me about…”

“I wouldn’t wish him on anyone,” Gwaine says. “You’re sure I’ve a claim? ’Twould be
embarrassing to show up saying ‘Make me king’ and have it all be a case of mistaken identity.”

“Who do you think offered your father sanctuary in the first place? You’d be able to bring your
mother and siblings home.” Caerleon wraps an arm around Gwaine’s shoulder. “Come, lad, let’s
find some mead. I’m sure the druids have something in mind for these two.”

Gwaine sighs and lets Caerleon lead him off, but not without a backward glance. “I’m already
regretting letting you knight me, Pendragon!”

“Have fun, Sir Gwaine.” Arthur laughs. He turns to Merlin and asks, “How long before we need to
be in the grove?”

“Less than a mark,” Merlin says. “But we can get there instantly, so we have a little time. I suppose
crowning me and dropping that little bomb on Gwaine are your ways of spreading the misery
around?”

“You don’t want my crown?” Arthur says, play-pouting.

“Gods,” Merlin says, rolling his eyes upwards and shaking his head. “Arthur…”

“We are as official as it is possible to be, you know.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I’m sure the druids could add something…”

“Does it involve moonlight?” Arthur asks.

“We have a rare conjunction of full moon and solstice,” Merlin says. “Very rare.”

“One wouldn’t want to let such a rare conjunction go unobserved.” Arthur tugs Merlin into his
arms and studies his crown.

“We should still do the grove-at-noon,” Merlin says. “They’re expecting us.”

Arthur starts to duck his head to nuzzle Merlin’s neck, but Merlin’s small yelp stops him.

“Oh,” Arthur says, and pulls the thing off. “Unwieldy.” He wraps a forearm tight across Merlin’s
shoulders, crown dangling from his fingers as he brushes his cheek against Merlin’s.

“Arthur,” Merlin says, fondly exasperated.

Arthur grins against Merlin’s ear. “What?”

“We’re supposed to be dignified kings, leading Camelot into a new er… hey!” Merlin jumps a
little as Arthur’s other hand clamps firmly onto his arse.

Arthur ducks them back into the little hallway between the throne room and the corridor, and
presses Merlin against the wall. “What?”

“Ha…ah… nothing,” Merlin says, letting his head tip sideways to allow Arthur better access.
“Your beard tickles.”

“So does yours,” Arthur says.

“I say we get rid of them after the treaties are signed,” Merlin says.
“Tomorrow,” Arthur says, and lightly brushes his chin along Merlin’s neck.

“Oh. Yes. Definitely tomorrow,” Merlin says, and Arthur finds himself pressed against the opposite wall of the tiny hallway with Merlin’s lips on his, and the rest of Merlin plastered up against him.

The crown drops from Arthur’s fingers and his hands thread through Merlin’s hair, tracing the ornate edge of the crown still sitting on Merlin’s head.

They miss the voices in the corridor.

“Arthur,” Uther calls out as he enters the hallway. “Oh, for… I just gave you that crown, and you’re already dropping it.”

They pull apart like guilty teenagers. Arthur looks incredibly flustered and flushed, and Merlin quickly bends down to pick up the crown and set it haphazardly back on Arthur’s head.

Arthur opens his mouth, fails to come up with anything, shuts it again, and finally says, “It was going to poke him in the eye.”

“I… don’t tell me, I really don’t want to know.” Uther shakes his head. “If you don’t like the shape of that one, there are others.”

“No, it’s fine, Father,” Arthur says.

Merlin turns away, trying not to laugh.

Uther sighs. “Your dragon is in the courtyard making people nervous. He says he’s here to escort you to the grove.”

“We were just going to… oh, never mind. Showing up with a dragon is probably good politics,” Arthur sighs.

“Yes, well,” Uther says, “you might want to head down to the courtyard, then. I am retiring to my chambers until the feast.”

“Thank you, Father,” Arthur says.

“Yes,” Merlin says, his voice strained, “we’ll be down shortly, thank you, Uther.”

Uther narrows his eyes, then retreats back to the corridor.

Merlin lets out a long, sighing breath, and then starts to giggle.


“I… you… your face. And his face. And the sheer ridiculousness at my age of being caught out like a horny teenager by your father…” Merlin leans against the wall, laughing hard. “We should go to Kilgharrah.”

“You should probably stop laughing before we do,” Arthur says, aggrieved.

“Should, won’t,” Merlin says, taking Arthur’s hand and pulling him into the corridor, using his other hand to straighten the crown. “Let’s go ride a dragon.”

“You heard me,” Merlin says. “Come on!” He drops Arthur’s hand and starts running. “Bet you can’t catch me…”

“Have you gone senile in your dotage, old man?” Arthur calls out, and then breaks into a run to catch up.

Merlin catches a banister and lets his momentum carry him around the corner, flashing a grin at Arthur. “Second childhood!” he says.

By the time they get down to the entry to the courtyard, they’re both laughing, crowns askew. They stop for a moment, and breathe.

“We’re going to ride it,” Arthur says. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

“You are going to love riding the dragon. You were dead the last time it happened. This will be much better.”

That’s enough to stop their laughter. Arthur takes Merlin’s hand. “I should hope so.”

They walk hand in hand into the courtyard to greet the dragon.
Merlin sits behind Arthur on the dragon’s neck, arms wrapped around his king’s waist, chin on Arthur’s shoulder, grinning as Arthur whoops and yells with every turn.

After a few minutes, the dragon lurches and backwings to a landing in a clearing atop a low hill overlooking the university, on the opposite side of the valley from Camelot. Druids are gathered along the treeline of the grove that rings the hill. Kilgharrah lowers his head down and the newly-crowned kings slide off.

“Thank you,” Arthur says, bowing respect to the great dragon.

Kilgharrah returns the bow with a dip of his head. “I wish to see your vow to the land. This was expedient.”

“Showy, you mean,” Merlin says.

“You enjoy theatrics. They are not without appeal.” Kilgharrah looks at the druids around the clearing, and says, louder, “I, like you, have waited for this for decades. I have brought you the Once and Future King, and Emrys.”

Several druid elders and high priestesses of the old religion step forward. “We recognise your kingship,” Aglain says. “But for this, would you wear our crowns?”

Merlin holds out his hand to Arthur, who nods, and hands over his crown. Merlin removes his own and the two vanish. “Chambers,” Merlin says.

Arthur nods, and looks back towards Aglain.

Aglain holds out two carved wooden crowns. “These were made for you.”

Arthur and Merlin each take one, put them on, and then, laughing, swap. The traded crowns fit perfectly, snug and secure and far more comfortable than the metal crowns had been.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Aglain says, looking abashed.

“It’s just his giant head,” Arthur says, and Merlin rolls his eyes.

“The dragon won’t bite,” Merlin calls out. “You can come closer.”

People filter up onto the hilltop, out of the trees, until a throng of druids surrounds them. Kilgharrah is on one side of the clearing, Arthur and Merlin are eased to the highest point of the hill. A brisk wind blows, and a plain staff of wood appears in Merlin’s hand. He raises it, stilling the air around the top of the hill by letting the winds slide around and over but not through the mass of people.
Arthur waits until the air stills, warm around them in the noon solstice sun, and then speaks. Merlin amplifies Arthur’s voice while thrusting the wooden staff into the ground at the exact centre of the hilltop.

“This morning, I was crowned King of Camelot and made public my troth to the one your legends foretold, Emrys.” Arthur stands with his back to the staff. “This happens now only because of the divine intervention of the Goddess, and I have pledged to Her, to your venerated ones, and to all who would listen that I will strive to bring peace, balance and unity to this land.”

Arthur turns to scan the entire crowd and then faces Merlin, the staff between them. Arthur reaches out both hands to clasp Merlin’s, voice still amplified as he continues. “I have pledged myself to the land itself, the land I was created for and born to revive, the land I died for. My consort has, with his considerable magic, wrought a geas on the land which will keep it peaceful for all. Even I am bound by it. He himself is subject to it. And we stand here before you to bring a gift, an apology, a peace offering, and a promise that wrongful death, destruction and persecution shall not happen again for so long as it is in my power to prevent it. I am told that it is likely now that I will live very long indeed, and so this is no small pledge.”

Merlin speaks now. “Arthur was born of magic to heal the land. I was born of magic to fulfill a prophecy. We have been called two sides of the same coin, and our magic works best together. We bring magic to Camelot together. We bring peace. And we are blessed.”

They place their hands together on the staff, and Arthur meets Merlin’s gaze, closes his eyes, and sends his new awareness into the wooden staff. He can feel Merlin’s magic under his fingertips, now that he knows what to look for. In Arthur’s mind’s eye, their hands are blurring, glowing green magic from Arthur intertwining with the brilliant blue-white that is Merlin’s raw power.

*Take what you need, I’m just here to steady you,* Merlin sends. *The magic wants to do what it’s already done.*

Arthur thinks about the tree with forty fruits, the grafts, the fundamental essence deep within that he can feel but not yet explain. The magic bubbles and pulls at him like a horse too long stabled. Aloud, he says, “Grow.” Inside, the gate opens, and their magic flows into the staff, and down into the earth. For a few moments nothing visible happens, but he can feel an incredible root system diving down through the soil, breaking rock, shifting earth. He senses Merlin reach down for water and feels it bubble up along the root system, helping it. Merlin’s magic winds down with the roots and farther, radiating out in every direction.

There is a collective gasp as the staff begins to grow. When the growth threatens to separate their hands, Merlin shifts over to his side, and the slim staff becomes a sapling. Then a thousand buds become a thousand limbs and branches, each unique, and the trunk expands until it is massive, larger than they could reach around with both arms. The branches, all mostly bare but covered with tiny buds, sway high above and around them.

Arthur opens his eyes and looks up, staring open-mouthed. *Merlin, did I do that?*

*You did,* Merlin sends. *It’s not done.*

“Flourish,” Arthur says, eyes remaining open. Every branch is suddenly covered: little white and pink apple blossoms, cherry and plum and peach blossoms, almonds and crabapples and quince and pears in dozens of varieties; plus a wide variety of nuts and fruits that might never normally graft together, most never seen before in Camelot. It is a riot of tiny flowers.

*When you bring me flowers, you don’t do it halfway,* Merlin sends.
I don’t know what half of those are, Arthur sends. So it’s more like you bringing flowers to me.

There’s a sudden golden shimmer, and the branches rustle as Merlin allows the wind to tease through. A dozen people sneeze as the air fills with pollen, but Merlin lets a trickle of magic wend through the crowd and the sneezing stops.

A moment later the air is filled with a flurry of petals drifting down and every bud unfurls into a leaf, some bright green, some dark green, some red, some almost golden; different shapes and sizes, greening by the moment under the summer sun.

Then, as people watch, the branches shift and droop as the fruits grow heavy.

“Hold,” Arthur says to the tree, and turns back to the druids. “This is a gift for the peoples of the land, a symbol of our promise to bring peace and unity. We are stronger, and better, when we are not all the same. Your people are welcome in these lands, for they are yours as much as they are ours. These fruits are the product of years of human endeavor, a promise that the future-that-will-never-be will nevertheless not be forgotten. Magic is returned to the land. You are free to return to the sacred spaces and take your place as the land’s stewards.”

“We will join you, Emrys, and the Once and Future King, as stewards of the land and magic,” Iseldir says.

Merlin reaches up, and finds a perfect, blushing comice pear. “Now I know you’re magic,” he says to Arthur. “These usually require cold to ripen.”

Arthur shrugs. “I just told it to flourish.”

Merlin calls out, “Come, enjoy the fruits of peace,” and takes Arthur’s hand to tug him out of the crowd thronging the tree.

Arthur hesitates a moment as he notices Merlin’s crown. “You’re all roses,” Arthur says.

Merlin looks back. “I’m not the only one.”

Arthur reaches up to find the wooden crown covered with living blossoms, and yelps as his thumb hits a thorn. Iseldir notices and catches his hand before he can stick his thumb in his mouth.

“A blood offering to the tree would be symbolic.”

“So long as it’s only a bloody thumb,” Arthur mutters, and presses his thumb against the thick trunk. “Let this be the last blood shed between our people,” Arthur says, his voice droll. The crowd around them laughs.

Merlin takes the wounded thumb and presses it to his lips, healing it with a sly grin and then taking a juicy bite of pear. He hands the pear to Arthur, who does not break eye contact while he takes a bite of his own.

Merlin grins when the flavour hits Arthur’s tongue.

“I made that?” Arthur finally says.

Merlin laughs, and takes another bite. “We had help,” he mumbles, mouth full.

Arthur turns to the crowd. “You are all invited to come down to the university to feast again tonight.”
“Will you be joining us for the full moon at its height tonight?” Aglain asks as they work their way back to Kilgharrah’s side.

“We have a prior engagement,” Merlin says, staring at his sticky hands for a moment and then willing them clean with a flash of his eyes. “We will be honouring the solstice and the moon in a place most sacred. There is one more thing we must do to stabilise the Pax.”

“Does it have to do with the magic you left in the roots of the tree?” Arthur asks.

“That, and the magic simmering in the crystal cave.”

Aglain’s eyes widen. “We don’t go there.”

“I know. I planted the suggestion,” Merlin says. “I was conceived there. I was restored there. I lived there. It is mine, like no other place. And it’s dangerous for any who don’t understand it.”

“It’s full of prophecy, the legends say,” Aglain says.

“It’s filled with the history of a future that cannot ever happen. Everything in every crystal has nothing to do with our future, but it’s also a treasure trove of human knowledge, and must be protected.”

“I’ll continue to warn people away from it.” Aglain gives a respectful nod of his head and lets the increasingly boisterous crowd sweep him back towards the tree. He calls back, “We’ll be bringing libations tonight.”

“Sacred stream?” Arthur asks.

Merlin laughs. “It is, after all, a Honey Moon.”

Arthur grins. “Kilgharrah? Would you return us to Camelot?”

“I could take…” Merlin starts, and then stops. “You want to ride the dragon again.”

“I am not a horse,” the dragon says.

Merlin grins. “No, but we might sweeten the deal for you. I promised you another dragon.”

“I’m supposed to be signing peace treaties before the feast,” Arthur says.

“If Kilgharrah takes us, we’ll be back in plenty of time.”

“You don’t need me for the egg, either,” Kilgharrah grumbles.

“Arthur likes flying.” Merlin grins when Kilgharrah gives a resigned sigh and lowers his head.

“He’s very loud about it,” the dragon mutters as they climb up to his neck.

“Do you know where the Tomb of Ashkanar is?” Merlin asks.

“He had it buried with him? That old goat,” Kilgharrah mutters.

“Yes, I know.” Merlin winces in anticipation, and then the dragon leaps into the air while Arthur yells.
“I’m not sure I want you to land,” Merlin calls out as the tomb comes into view. “I don’t know if I can keep the building from falling down.”

Kilgharrah circles the tower. “I’m waiting, Merlin.”

“A moment, the spell needs to be precise,” Merlin says, distracted. He ponders. “Can you hover near a window?”

The dragon banks and drops, then beats his wings hard to hover near a door. “This is strenuous,” Kilgharrah says. “Please be efficient.”

Merlin calls out, “Ic béo dracaweard ond ic ábene onsendan þæt æg borgen weldende.”

A moment passes, and then a small white dot passes through the window and sails up to Merlin’s waiting hands. “Up, Kilgharrah! Get us higher, please!” As they rise, he conjures a bag for the egg and slips it on his shoulder.

They circle for a few more minutes, but the tower remains standing.

Merlin smiles. “Home, please.”

Kilgharrah tips a wing to catch an updraught and rises high on a column of summer-warm air with a minimum of effort.

“It’s so quiet,” Arthur says in wonder.

“We go with the wind, young king,” Kilgharrah says, his voice rumbling beneath them. His wings beat powerfully for a moment and the air rushes by their ears until he finds the current he’s looking for. “Merlin, call the air to you,” the dragon says. “The air is thin rising over the mountain.”

Arthur takes an involuntarily deep breath and realises that his breathing had been becoming laboured. The dragon’s wings are still in the updraught as they ride the air over the mountain.

“There’s not as much oxygen up here,” Merlin says. “Air is heavy and sinks, so the higher we go, the thinner it will be. I’m pulling air to us, to make our breathing easier.”

As they soar up and over the top of one of the higher peaks in the area, Arthur gasps to see the countryside stretching out beneath them. “You showed me this, but this is so much… more… There are not words.”

Merlin grins, and tightens his arm around Arthur’s middle. “Hang on.”

Arthur already has a death grip on a neck ridge. “Why?”

Merlin’s answer is lost in a rapid rush of air as Kilgharrah loses altitude to skim fast over the treetops, taking them back to the university.

Arthur actually squeals.
As they near the university, Merlin asks, “Can you find my father from here?”

“I always know where he is,” Kilgharrah answers. “Just as I always know where you are.”

“I want to give the egg to his safe-keeping. We will hatch her within a week or two, but I don’t want to leave her raising to others this time,” Merlin says.

Kilgharrah turns and banks in a wide circle around the University, and says, “It would be more convenient if you had not filled the best landing place in the area with people.”

Merlin points to his tower, and murmurs a few words. A balcony extends from the side near the window. “Land on top of my spire,” he tells Kilgharrah.

The great dragon lands neatly on the roof, great hind claws wrapping gently around the spire. He lowers his front claws to the edge of the roof. His head turns and descends until they are close enough to slide off on to the balcony. “I shall return in a fortnight,” Kilgharrah says. “I am eager to meet my new kin. Your father is below the earth here.”


“Thank you, Merlin,” the dragon says. “I am in your debt.”

“I was repaying mine,” Merlin calls out, as the dragon launches himself off the building, skims low over the clearing, and then wings up and away.

“That was awe-inspiring,” Arthur says, leaning against Merlin’s arm.

Merlin slides his hand palm to palm with Arthur’s, their fingers entwining. “Yeah.”

They watch until Kilgharrah is out of sight, and then Merlin conjures a door.

“You made a balcony, but not a door?” Arthur laughs.

“I needed a balcony. Now I need a door.” Merlin pulls it open and they walk inside and make their way down to the library, hand in hand.

Inside the library, a little bauble of light appears in front of Merlin, and seems excited. Amused, they follow it to an alcove where Hunith and Balinor are leaning against each other, reading a book together. The little light poofs into a shower of glimmering dust that disappears a moment later. Merlin’s parents look up at him, and Hunith smiles widely.

“Merlin, you look so happy!” Hunith drops her side of the book and stands. “I would have thought you two would be too busy to come find your parents.” She wraps her arms around Merlin’s middle.

Merlin laughs, and returns the hug. “We will be, soon, but first, I have something for you, sir.”

“You can call me Father, or Da,” Balinor says. “Your mother was catching me up.” He holds up the book they’d been looking at, which is titled, “Merlin’s childhood, by Hunith.”

Merlin blinks, and Arthur’s eyes light up. Arthur grins, and says, “Oh, this I must see.”

Merlin sighs. “If I’d thought this would be the consequence of the blank books…”

“You still would have done it because it’s the right thing to do,” Hunith says. “I’ve locked it to me, and you, and your father.”
“Let Arthur see, or he’ll never let me hear the end of it,” Merlin says.

Balinor looks reluctant, and Merlin just shakes his head, brings his hands together behind his mother’s back, and then folds them open. A copy of the book appears, which he hands to Arthur. “But don’t think I won’t get one out of Morgana and Gaius,” he says. Hunith keeps one armed wrapped around him but turns back to look at Arthur.

Arthur pales.

“You said you have something for me?” Balinor looks interested.

Merlin takes the pack off his back, reaches in, and pulls out the perfect, pale dragon egg. Balinor drops the book next to him on the seat and rises to his feet slowly, hands out, cupped, a desperate look on his face. “Where? How?”

“When?” Hunith asks, still hanging on, as Merlin puts the egg in his father’s hands.

“Just now, on our way home from the grove,” Arthur says. “Well, it was not at all on our way, but riding a dragon is too splendid to mind the detour.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Balinor says, with a look of fond remembrance. “What do you intend for this egg, son?” The last word has a note of bemusement. “I just need you to protect it for me, for a time. Within the month I plan to hatch her, but I want to be able to be with her all the time for her first little while, until I’m certain she’s doing well. Last time…” Merlin’s expression is bleak as he hands his father the carry bag.


“I couldn’t stay with her. I entrusted her to Kilgharrah, who is a terrible parent, and she ended up with Morgana, and then they were trapped and it broke her. It broke both of them. I won’t let that happen this time to either of them.”

“I will guard her well,” Balinor says. “I believe you have some place to be?”


“Oh, Arthur,” Hunith says, letting go of Merlin finally. “I wanted to tell you. I knew your mother, and she was a good woman. I’m so happy to welcome you to our little family, and I hope you’ll let me mother you a little, for her.”

Arthur, poleaxed, stammers and then says, his voice rough, “I think I’d like that. Thank you.”

She hugs him, and then picks up the book that Balinor dropped. “Now go on, I know you have important kingly things to do.”

“Yes, Mother,” Arthur and Merlin say together, and she laughs.

“You know this makes you Queen Mother,” Balinor says.

“It really does.” Arthur chuckles as he snags Merlin’s hand back with his free hand. “And thank you for the memories.” He holds up the book clutched in his other hand.

“Enjoy,” she says, and they make their exit.
Merlin pulls Arthur along through the maze that is the library, and then says, “There!” pointing at a staircase.

The sleek black stairs spiral up into the Future Studies building. There are a series of landings on the way up, which lead to different floors, but they climb all the way to the top, to the ground level and the amphitheatre. The dome rises above them, glittering in the afternoon sun. There are a surprising number of children in the room, running and giggling, and Gwen watching over them. Lancelot stands protectively by her, an arm wrapped around her waist. When she sees Arthur and Merlin enter the dome, she grins and calls out, “All right children, the king is here! Run and fetch your targets.”

The children each throw up a little glowing ball and scatter, each chasing their own light as it leads each child to a target.

Merlin’s eyes sparkle as he squeezes Arthur’s hand. “Did you see that? I didn’t teach them.”

“Handy,” Arthur says. “How are things settling in, Gwen?”

She walks down the steps to him. “The children are starting to mind and settle in. Now that they know they will be fed and no one can hurt them, they’re opening up a little and having fun. You two look ridiculous, by the way.”

Merlin and Arthur look at each other. Their rose-covered crowns are much the worse for wear, not having weathered the dragon flight particularly well.

Merlin reaches out and snags the dishevelled crown off of Arthur’s head with one hand, the crown off of his own with the other, and tosses them up into the air. They vanish, and their formal crowns drop into his waiting hands.

“Showoff,” Arthur says, donning the crown that Merlin hands him.

Merlin ignores him and turns to Gwen. “And are you enjoying yourself?” Gwen steps forward and tidies their hair around the edge of the crown as Merlin continues, “Is there anything you’d rather be doing?”

She blushes and glances at Lancelot and then says, “Not really. I feel like half my life is reading and the other half trying to juggle fifty children, but we fought so hard for so long for scraps for them that it’s just such a relief to finally be able to really help them.”

“You have help, surely?” Merlin asks.

“Lancelot has been a saint,” Gwen says. “And the druids, though most of them disappeared for a while today? And there are some from the town, and some parents who come with their children. But it’s definitely my house right now.”

“If you need help or want to do something different,” Merlin says, “Please let us know. It was never my intention to trap you in the role of schoolmistress.”

“It’s no trap! And Morgana visits, as do the others. We’ve several teaching the children to read and write, and of course the library is invaluable. But I would like a day off with Lance at some point.” Gwen blushes.

“I’ll speak to the druids,” Merlin says.

Arthur smiles. “I can send the knights over, as well.”
“Not Gwaine,” Lancelot says. “Percival and Leon would be a boon, though. And a few of the others.”

The doors to the dome open, and the delegations start trickling in, following the children and their little glowing baubles. The mood is light, and each group is led to a different part of the amphitheatre. There are rows of tables arrayed around the room on terraced platforms radiating up and out from a central low dais with rolling chairs lined up at each table. On the dais is a pedestal, which holds a copy of the peace treaty.

“You should sit,” Gwen says.

Arthur looks around the room. “Where?”

One of the little lights appears in front of him, and then moves slowly in the direction of the podium. Arthur and Merlin follow it past the podium to one of the tables just behind it.

Arthur looks bemused. “Is there a reason to put me here?”

“You favoured an ancient round table with your knights,” Merlin says. “It was symbolic of the equal standing of the people at the table, that all were to be heard. In this case, you are close to the podium, but not higher than those here, and no seat here carries extra privilege by way of elevation or ‘head of the table’ positioning.”

Arthur looked around the room. “And yet, we’re asking them to make me High King.”

“We’re asking them to federate,” Merlin says. “By ceding some power to a higher authority, and adhering to a common set of laws, it sets the stage for a more democratic system once the populace is educated.”

“And I’m to spend the next six years studying this myself,” Arthur laughs.

Merlin raises an eyebrow. “I could drop it fully formed into your head, but it would be better for you to understand it yourself.” He leans forward and taps the top of the table, which lights up with a library screen. Merlin’s hand flattens on the table surface, he closes his eyes, and a series of documents appear on-screen. He points at one of them; every table in the room lights up with a copy of the document.

Morgana joins them at the table a moment later, and then Uther and Gaius. As the last few dignitaries trickle in, Gwen calls for the children to come to her, and leads them to a gallery area across from Arthur’s table, behind the last row of tables at the top.

Arthur waits until the last have been seated, and then nods to Merlin.

Merlin stands without his cloak, the sleeves of his fine shirt rolled to the elbow, bearded and serious. He looks up at the kings, queens, druids, priestesses, priests, and some he does not recognise at all. “Good evening, all. Before Arthur takes over, I’d like to help you understand the tools we will be using today. I know most of you have been in the library below, and have used the consoles there. These are similar. The least disruptive way to use a console while we are in session is to place a hand on it, and think your question clearly. The answer should appear to you. If you need clarification after that, please press the red button like so,” and at that, he reaches over and touches a red button in the upper left of the screen. A light hovers over the table, visible throughout the room.

“We will address questions in order,” Merlin says. “You have all been provided an opportunity to read the texts of the documents we are asking you to sign, and we will be going over them today.
These proceedings are being recorded so that we may look back at them in the future. Arthur?"

Arthur stands, and takes a deep breath. “First of all, please understand that my goal here is not to conquer, but to unite. We have been provided a second chance, and I mean to use that to the best of my ability to avert the destruction Merlin witnessed firsthand. If you need to see that destruction for yourself, Merlin can share it with you, but I warn you, it will haunt you. The catastrophe we wish to avert is far in the future, but it involved the destruction of every human being in our entire wide world, all the animals, all the plants, all gone. And gone through our arrogance, our ignorance, and our violence. We have been given a unique gift. We have the sum of human knowledge from our past, from our future. It will take us a hundred years to understand it, but in the meantime, we still must live, we must govern, we must start to create the world we want our descendants to live in.”

He touches the document on the table in front of him and it becomes larger. “This first document is a bill of rights. It is taken from a number of sources, and is as simple and straightforward as we can make it. To summarise, all those signing to the Pax Drakonis shall affirm the rights of all people to the following: The basic necessities of living, such as food, shelter, and clothing. To freedom from violence and discrimination. To education, and health care. To opportunities to live, learn, work and worship regardless of station. And that these rights are not dependent on gender, on marital status, on age, on station, rank, place of birth or any other irrelevant factor.”

A murmur goes up through the room, and six lights pop up at once. Arthur looks at Merlin and Merlin points to Caerleon and Annis. “You first.”

“You are saying that this document makes women equal to men?” Annis asks.

Arthur smiles. “The document merely affirms what should be obvious to any woman, or any man with a wife, sister or mother.”

“You would put your kingdom in the hands of a woman?” comes a voice from one of the back rows.

Arthur looks up. “I’m told that in the future, I did. I died without heir, as did Caerleon, and in both cases the queen became head of state. I’m told that in both cases, the queen did a better job, too.”

Caerleon laughs. “No doubt.”

Arthur grows serious. “We have long discounted our women as the ‘fairer’ and ‘weaker’ sex. Women have been used up and disregarded. This is a waste of talent and resources, and will no longer be tolerated in Camelot, nor in kingdoms which ally with us. It will take some time for a change of law to become a change of attitudes, but I mean for us to start now. And if any of the other questions are about peasants having the same rights as nobles, or those from elsewhere having the same rights as those born in a place, or those who worship new gods or old, rest assured that none of those characteristics are relevant to the capacity for a person to learn. None of them make them deserve to be abused, starved, or ostracised.”

“You have no queen,” says Odin. “Yet you describe a future queen, when we saw you wed this morning, to Merlin.”

“The future I describe is not the one which will happen. I am certain that I will not be browbeaten into running a sword through Caerleon in a few years,” Arthur says with an apologetic grin to King Caerleon, “so his queen will not take over out of grief. The woman who would have been my queen follows a different path, as do I, and I wish her well on it.”
“Have you no worry for heirs?” This from Rodor of Nemeth, sitting next to his daughter in the third row.

“Heirs are never guaranteed,” Arthur says. “Children may die, or never be born. With the disproving of the superiority of blood, we lose the necessity to keep our bloodlines ‘pure’, for we know now that purity cannot and does not exist. Heirs may be adopted or chosen, and until such time as our circumstances change, my heirs, for example, at the moment are Merlin, Morgana, and yon Guinevere, in that order.”

“You would make a serving girl your heir?” Odin laughs.

Guinevere stares down at Arthur, shocked.

“I made my manservant my husband,” Arthur grins. Uther snorts, and the mood in the room lightens. “I happen to know that Gwen is an able administrator, and though it would be unlikely she would need to serve, I don’t doubt she’s able, and the court likes her. Morgana has right of blood and talent to boot, and well, Merlin… I suspect he could handle it. Perhaps.” That wins a laugh from most of the room.

They go over other provisions of the treaty for several hours, until Annis finally says, once her light is recognised, “Enough. This is simple. Arthur offers you peace, wealth and safety for your people, and knowledge beyond our imagining. We will have to adjust our thinking, and our expectations, and it will take time, but our choice is to continue losing our children and husbands to war, or to take hold of peace and knowledge and build a better world for our children. Caerleon will sign the Pax Drakonis.” Next to her, her husband nods.

“Nemeth will sign,” says Rodor.

Lord Godwyn stands. “I will sign.”

Merlin looks up, and sees Elena sitting next to her father, looking rumpled, her nursemaid at her side. “A moment, my lord.” He stands and walks across the room and up to Elena’s table. She looks at him, slightly dazed.

Merlin smiles at her gently. “I know you’ve been feeling poorly for a long time,” he says. To Godwyn, he says, “Your daughter was invaded many years ago by a member of the Sidhe. I would like to remove that from her, with your permission.”

Godwyn looks completely alarmed, and nods. Merlin bows his chin, and his eyes flash. As he gestures, Elena slumps in her chair and a glowing speck emerges from her mouth. Grunhilda stands, her face a mask of fury, and Merlin holds out his other hand, freezing her in place.

“You have both been here for days and have seen what we are doing here,” Merlin says. “You are bound by the geas, as am I, and I will not destroy you the way I did the last time. But you will not be able to take another this way. You may, however, discuss with your elders whether the folk of the Sidhe would sign the Pax as well.”

Grunhilda transforms into her true self, warts and all, and snarls, “What use have the Sidhe for human laws?”

“They are for all people who live here. If you want passage to the mortal world here, you must abide. I will not hesitate to send you back, pixie.”

The glowing speck grows and the blue sidhe becomes visible. “Send us back,” the fairy says. “We shall return in seven years with our decision.”
Merlin twists his hands, and in a strange flash of white light, both of the Sidhe are gone.

Elena opens her eyes, sits up straight, and smiles. “I feel fantastic!”

Godwyn stares at her, then up at Merlin, and says, “I am in your debt, my lord.”

“Lord Godwyn, it was my pleasure. Elena deserves a chance to be free of the burden she’s carried for so long.”

“Arthur,” Godwyn calls out, “Gawant will join you.”

“Thank you, Lord Godwyn,” Arthur returns.

There is a flurry of whispers as Merlin returns to his seat, and then King Olaf stands and says, “I reserve judgement, but we choose peace, if not your dragon pact. Yet. Tell me, will this geas of yours protect a woman’s virtue?”

Arthur looks to Merlin, who raises his eyebrows, gives an odd smile and drops his head briefly, before standing. Merlin looks Olaf in the eye and says, “Sexual violence is violence. The geas will not allow a man to force himself on an unwilling woman. As for virtue, we will soon be able to prevent most unwanted pregnancies quite easily. When such contraception is available, the concept of “virtue” becomes less relevant. If your daughter does not want to be intimate, she cannot be forced, not here. If she chooses to be intimate, it’s unlikely you could stop her anywhere. Having met your daughter, in the future, I have no doubt that her lively mind and strong spirit would thrive here. The question is whether you trust her well enough to give her the chance. But she’d be safest from rape where the geas is active.”

Olaf strokes his chin. “I’ll have your geas, if I may. For my daughter, that she may have more freedom, with less fear. But we are not ready to be ruled by Camelot’s laws.”

“Fair enough,” Arthur says.

A light shines over Alined’s table, and Arthur points at him. “Yes?”

“If we do not sign, will we be overrun?” Alined asks.

Arthur sits up straighter in his chair. “The geas may expand into border areas either at the request of the villages there, or as a result of aggression aimed at protected areas. I have no intention of waging war… without provocation. Even then, I think you will find us difficult to provoke.”

Merlin puts a hand on Arthur’s arm and looks at Alined. “Has it been difficult, restraining yourself from hitting your sorcerer since you arrived?”


Uther gives Alined a sharp look.

“Oh, don’t look surprised, Uther. How else could my fool be so exceptional? You don’t really think he wandered around with butterflies in his trousers?”

“So your reluctance to sign the treaty…” Arthur leads.

“I’ll have no part of your geas, your university or your ridiculous charter.”

“You may want to at least sign the peace,” Uther says. “Lest your metal find no buyers.”
“In peace, what use is steel?” Alined looks disgusted.

Merlin rolls his eyes, stands up, and conjures his staff out of thin air, then strides to the middle of the room. Fixing his gaze on Alined, he thumps the butt of the staff against the ground and fills the central dais with mist. “What use is metal in peace?”

In the mist, they see shining buildings rise up from the floor, and strange contraptions flying through them. “The future is made of steel and stone, and with our resources, you might find your fortunes made by the information this university contains. Or you can sit, a jealous goblin, in an empty kingdom.” Merlin waves a hand and the mist dissipates. “Your casual brutality is a habit you would do well to break, lest you find your people fled to more gentle shelter.”

“Camelot will take all who come in peace,” Arthur proclaims. “My goal is unity, peace, and a future that thrives with the world, rather than destroying it.”

“Peace, then,” Alined says. “No geas.”

“Treat your people well, or they will raise a king who does,” Uther warns.

The room is silent for an awkward moment, and then Bayard says, “Mercia will join you.”

A man stands near the back. “The druids are already with you.”

“But are you, Ruadan?” Merlin asks. “Have you let go your revenge?”

The druid’s eyes widen and he bows. “I have, Emrys.”

“Will Sefa join us at the university?” Merlin asks, and Arthur looks at him curiously.

“She is still very young, but yes. I think she will.”

Of the kings of Albion who are present, about half sign the Pax and the rest sign for peace, as the children bring down plates of food from the feast for those still talking.
The sun is sinking low, the moon glowing full on the opposite horizon, when Merlin and Arthur finally manage to extricate themselves from the Future Studies building. They walk to the university courtyard as floating lights flicker into existence over the paths.

“This thing you’ve created,” Arthur says.

“Yeah?” Merlin slides an arm around Arthur’s waist as they walk.

Arthur wraps an arm around Merlin’s shoulders. “It’s beautiful.”

The clearing opens up before them, festive and bright. A large solstice bonfire burns in the centre with a rich smell of well-seasoned wood and crackling flames. One of the older children is at Merlin’s console, and the music shifts from something orchestral to electronica. A shout goes up when the crowd spots the kings.

“I feel like they’ve been celebrating for a solid week,” Arthur says, as they’re swept into the crowd.

“It will settle down after the solstice,” Merlin says. “They’re honouring you.”

“And you,” Arthur adds.

Merlin grins. “Yeah, they are, aren’t they.”
“You never got credit, before.” Arthur tugs him though the crowd and over to his tower. “Come up and see what you’ve done.”

A minute later they’re standing on the new balcony, looking down over the celebration as the sky darkens and the moon rises high. Below them the valley is full of light, and music, and dancing people.

“I still can’t quite believe we’re at peace,” Arthur says, staring at Merlin as Merlin looks down at the party. “We’ve always had enemies, somewhere. And now, we’re safe, and the only holdouts are Essetir and the few kingdoms that have not yet sent representatives. You did that.”

“Wouldn’t have done it without you.” Merlin turns to Arthur with a twinkle in his eye. “Think they’ll miss us for a day?”

Arthur bites his lip. “Probably not. That lot is going to be hungover into next week.”

“We’ve a full moon to worship,” Merlin says, and his grin is positively wicked.

Arthur slides his hands down Merlin’s back. “Sounds important.”

“It is supposed to solidify your bond with the kingdom. And will help root magic deep in the land.” Merlin grins.

Arthur swallows, his mouth dry. “Best not miss the opportunity, then. Should we have some of that sacred stream first?”

Merlin holds up a wineskin full of mead. “Like this?”

Arthur grins. “Where were you hiding that?”

“Up my sleeve,” Merlin says.

“You just conjured it out of thin air, didn’t you?”

“Maybe,” Merlin says, and flips his other hand over with a flourish, producing two goblets.

Arthur shrugs. “Useful. Shall we?”

There’s a little spinning sensation, and they are deep in a moonlit wood. Arthur drops his arms and looks around.


“Follow me,” Merlin says, and a light appears overhead. They pick their way between the stones to the cave entrance, and follow the light inside.

Arthur gasps when Merlin’s light catches a thousand crystal faces. “This is where you were conceived?”

“Apparently.” Merlin tugs on Arthur’s hand to pull him further into the cave.

A few minutes later, they step carefully into a small grotto where the floor is smooth, and moonlight is starting to stream in from an opening in the stones above them. Arthur shivers; the cavern is chilly after the warmth of the summer evening outside.

Merlin notices and closes his eyes for a moment, then opens them. With a flash of gold and a
gesture, candles appear throughout the cave, and what was bare rock is now a bed of lush, soft moss.

“No real bed?” Arthur asks, teasing.

“This *is* supposed to deepen your connection with the earth,” Merlin says, and the air warms around them. He hands the goblets to Arthur and fills each with mead, then recaps the skin and sets it on a natural shelf in the cave wall. They both drink deeply of the sweet alcohol, and the goblets join the skin on the shelf.

Merlin reaches up, and with great care, lifts the crown off of Arthur’s head. His own crown joins it on the shelf a moment later.

Arthur reaches out and loosens Merlin’s shirt from his trousers, sliding his hands against Merlin’s bare skin underneath, and pushing the shirt up until Merlin raises hands over his head to let Arthur take the shirt completely off. Arthur lets the shirt drop onto a crystal, but Merlin rolls his eyes and puts it with the crowns.

“Have some respect, Your Majesty,” Merlin says.

“I’m not sure anyone has ever said ‘Your Majesty’ with less respect,” Arthur says, laughing, as Merlin—with far more reverence—slides Arthur’s shirt off, dropping a kiss on Arthur’s shoulder as it is bared.

Arthur shivers.

“I can warm it more, if you need…” Merlin says, as he turns to put the shirt on the shelf.

Arthur smiles. “I’m not cold.” Everything feels relaxed from the mead, and his whole body is warm, tingling where Merlin’s lips touched.

Merlin crouches to loosen Arthur’s boots, and Arthur puts a hand on Merlin’s head to steady himself as he steps out of them. Merlin stands to put the boots on the shelf, and when he turns back, Arthur is kneeling to do the same for him.

As Arthur finishes removing Merlin’s boots, he comes up slowly, wrapping his arms around Merlin’s legs, hands moving over arse as Arthur works his mouth on the bare skin just above Merlin’s hip, beard rough against Merlin’s skin.

Merlin’s head drops back and he sighs, his hands coming up to Arthur’s bare shoulders. “Tr… trousers,” he finally manages.

Arthur smiles against Merlin’s hip, loosens the top of Merlin’s trousers and slides them and the smalls down until Merlin steps out, completely nude.

Arthur hands the boots and the rest of Merlin’s clothing over, and starts to loosen his own. Merlin slides the trousers down for Arthur, planting a kiss of his own at the junction between Arthur’s hip and leg as he does so. When he turns back from the shelf a moment later, he has a small, carved box with a hinged lid. He opens it and gestures for Arthur to step into the stream of moonlight.

There is a little ledge next to them, stained, and Merlin sets the small box there, dipping his finger into the left compartment. It comes up stained dark.

“Goddess, guide my hand,” Merlin says softly, and Arthur’s eyes widen. Merlin reaches out and traces his darkened finger along Arthur’s chest in an intricate pattern of swirls. He goes back to the
Arthur dips his own finger in the box, pulling a thick paste up on his finger, and looks questioningly at Merlin. Merlin nods.

“Goddess, guide my hand,” Arthur echoes, and reaches out to Merlin’s chest. For a moment he worries that the result will be a mess, but his hand moves smoothly, tracing spirals on each side of Merlin’s chest and his shoulders. He finds himself putting a complex spiral around Merlin’s naval, with stripes coming down each leg and then down each arm.

Merlin waits patiently until Arthur is done, and then with a hand, turns Arthur around to trace more patterns on his back, large spirals around each shoulder blade, joining in the middle with a third spiral across the lower back. The paint is warm and thick, and Arthur is startled when Merlin’s next touch is cool and slick down Arthur’s sacrum.

“What…” Arthur starts.

“The designs are religious,” Merlin says. “For the land’s health, for magic, for love, for great bounty. This,” and Merlin slides a slick finger between Arthur’s buttocks, “is for your comfort and pleasure. If you are ready.”

“Yes,” Arthur says, and then gasps as Merlin’s finger curls, the strange gel rapidly warming. His arms reach out, grasping at air, at the cave walls, and he’s grateful when Merlin’s free hand slides around his waist, steadying him.

“I’m easing you open.” Merlin’s voice is soft, his breath on Arthur’s ear as his hand works gently. “It should feel good. If it hurts at all, I’ll know, and I’ll stop. I’ll stop if you ask, even if it’s not painful. Our offering to the goddess is pleasure, not the act of intercourse, and this isn’t mandatory.”

“But it’ll help,” Arthur says.

“There are a thousand other ways I could put magic back into the land. I can find other metaphors,” Merlin says, chuckling against Arthur’s neck.

“I want you inside me,” Arthur whispers, and then arches against Merlin’s steadying arms as a second slick finger finds its way.

“That can be arranged,” Merlin says, stilling his fingers against a small spasm. “Breathe. Release. Be patient with your body.”

“Have you…” Arthur starts.

“Yes, someone taught me carefully, because I asked,” Merlin says, and when he feels Arthur relax, his fingers begin to move slowly, deliberately.

Arthur leans his head over against Merlin’s. “I think I’m getting used to it.”

Another finger. “I’ll know you’re ready when you’re not just used to it.”

Arthur stretches and squirms, a hand reaching down to his rising cock.

“You’ll be doing the same to me later,” Merlin says, and Arthur groans, his voice deep.

The thin stretch of moonlight widens, and Arthur’s knees are quivering. “Can we lie down?”
Merlin nods against Arthur’s shoulder, and he withdraws his fingers as they sink to the mossy floor.

“It’s soft,” Arthur says, surprised, as he settles himself on his back.

“For your comfort,” Merlin says, drolly.

“That’s not soft,” Arthur says inanely, with a pointed glance.

Merlin grins and, kneeling, reaches for the little box above. “No, it’s not.”

“You want me.” Arthur grins.

“If I didn’t, this was all a terrible mistake. Ready?”

Arthur nods.

“This may get intense,” Merlin says.

“Merlin… I think it’s supposed to be intense, if we’re doing it right.” Arthur’s voice is halfway between amused and annoyed.

“Magically, I mean…”

“Merlin, come here,” Arthur says, reaching up and stroking Merlin’s slick cock.

Merlin’s eyes flash gold as he drops forward, catching himself on his arms and then reaching to line things up, saying, “Drýlác iċ ēcne eorðfæst, Iċ þē þancung,” as he slides slowly in.

Arthur gasps, throwing his head back as his whole body shudders and burns in a rush of sensation. “Wait,” he pants, but Merlin has already paused. “Move,” Arthur says a moment later, staring up at the full moon as Merlin starts to thrust slowly, carefully. Faster. With the thought, Merlin’s eyes meet Arthur’s.

I yield to you, I welcome you. Merlin sends, and his movements become faster, deeper, harder. Arthur’s hands stroke Merlin’s sides, lingering over the flexing, shifting muscles. Every nerve is alight when he starts feeling Merlin’s magic buzzing between them everywhere they touch.

His own magic rises to meet it, and he is afraid for a moment, but Merlin’s reassurance soothes the fear away almost as soon as it starts. Something unwinds, a tension releases, and Arthur is reaching for Merlin with hands, mind, and magic.

The result completely overwhelms them both, and Merlin’s rhythm stutters and breaks as he climaxes. At the same time, his magic flows through Arthur and down into the earth below, a river of potentiality pulled from the crystals around them.

As the current stabilises and Merlin collapses on Arthur’s chest, Arthur can feel the geas that covers the land, feels it spread out from the borders to the lands around them, the magic in the cave diminished not at all as the magic in the land, as far as he can feel, grows and multiplies everywhere, echoing between the cave, the library, and the great tree. And now that he feels the land filled, stabilised, he can sense how wrong it had been before.

“I couldn’t feel it then. How can I know now?” Arthur asks aloud.

Merlin mumbles something against his clavicle, then gives up and sends, I know how it felt, so you know.
Well, that’s weirdly intimate, Arthur sends.

Says the man with my cock in his ass, Merlin retorts.

Nothing weird about that. Arthur shifts under Merlin.

You’re still… Merlin reaches between them to find Arthur hard against his belly.

Arthur grins, shifts his hips until Merlin slips out, and then rolls the two of them over on the mossy bed. He reaches up and finds the slick gel, and says, “So, turnabout is fair play?”

Merlin stretches lazily and lets his knees fall open. “Oh, please do.”

“You’ll tell me if I’m…”

“You can’t hurt me, Arthur.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Merlin.”

“No, I mean… I have a lot of control… my body…” Merlin brings his knees farther apart.

“If I do this right, you won’t have any control at all,” Arthur says, pressing slick fingers in and in.

Merlin swears and presses against Arthur’s hand. “More.”

Two more fingers and Merlin says, “Just come up here and fuck me, Arthur.”

Arthur grins, slicks his cock, and obliges.

Chapter End Notes

Drýlác iċ ácene eorðfæst, Iċ þē þancung is a spell and a prayer at once, translated roughly, "I bind magic tightly to the earth, in gratitude", or "Magic I bind earth-fast, I thee thank."

And there exists online a phrasebook of conversational Old English. Just in case you get stuck in the 11th century and need to find a loo. It was actually really handy. I can now say "My hovercraft is full of eels".

Mīn wandrian-scȳf ful ēlēn is.
See it here: http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/oldenglish.htm
They wake when the sun streams in from overhead, surrounded by flowers.

Merlin grins and stretches. “Arthur, I’m starting to think you might be a romantic at heart.”

Arthur looks around the grotto, at the vines and odd cave flowers that now line the walls, and says, “I’m pretty sure that’s you.”

“Let me see,” Merlin says. “Random growing things post-coitus… no, I’m pretty sure that’s all yours.” He rolls out of the light and then takes a step deeper into the cave. “Oh, but you’ve improved the place. That’s just pretty.”

The deeper cave is alive with bioluminescent plants, reflected in the many crystal faces. Arthur stands at Merlin’s side, and asks, “How can I make things grow that I never imagined could possibly exist?”

“I knew they existed, they just didn’t exist here,” Merlin says. “We were pretty entwined last night, magically.”

“And physically,” Arthur says, grinning. He looks at Merlin, and then blinks. “Where did the paint go? And your beard, for that matter. No, I know the answer to the latter, just, why the paint?”

“The paint is about the mindfulness of creating the symbols,” Merlin says. “Patterns, intention.”

“You just wanted your fingers on me,” Arthur teases.

“Obviously, but also the mindfulness thing. And we decided we were going to be done with the beards today.” Merlin grins, and touches Arthur’s bare chin.

“What did we do last night? Besides the obvious?” Arthur asks.

“We poured most of our excess magic into the earth, strengthening the geas and widening it to every land that signed the Pax. We also improved the connection between this place and the library, adding your magic to the connection, which means that Nema will be better able to, oh, automate—for lack of a better word—some of the things that people need, especially with healing and nourishment.”

“Is that safe?” Arthur asks.
“There are safeguards,” Merlin says. “The same magic that creates the geas limits her from creating things people request out of malice. Someone might create something out of scientific curiosity but the moment there is intent to harm, their efforts will become fruitless.”

“So someone could make a poison out of genuine curiosity, but if someone tried to steal it…” Arthur looks thoughtful.

“It would probably end up on the floor. Or ceiling. Or simply resist being picked up or touched.”

“So do you think the Goddess was happy with our offering?” Arthur says, moving behind Merlin, hands running down Merlin’s bare sides.

*You returned the magic to the land, my darling boys. I am well pleased.*

Arthur startles, hard, looking frantically around and covering himself.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Merlin says, turning around. “I’m pretty sure she cares not at all about your nakedness.”

Arthur shivers, alarmed. “I think I want clothes now.”

“Is it going to be like that every time?” Arthur says as they pull on their boots.

“You mean, with the whole of magic flowing through us?” Merlin asks.

Arthur gives a small nod. “It was spectacular, but I think I’d like it to be just about us, sometimes.”

“We were vessels,” Merlin says. “I think we can still use the magic, but I don’t think it will ever be quite like that again, because it no longer needs to be. Don’t you feel different?”

Arthur looks startled. “Lighter. Like there’s an itch I didn’t know I had that has been thoroughly scratched. Does this mean I won’t be randomly making the castle bloom?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Merlin’s smile is wide. “I rather like the flowers.”

“You would.”

They stand, face to face in the sunlight, the cave dark beyond them.

“Shall we go back?” Merlin asks.

Arthur gives him a sly grin, *reaches* with his mind, and is well satisfied by Merlin’s surprised squeak as they appear a moment later in Arthur’s chamber at Camelot. “As you wish.”

“That is really unsettling,” Merlin mutters.

“Turnabout…” Arthur laughs.
A week later, when many of the dignitaries have left (most leaving their teenage and adult children behind at the university) and the kingdom has begun to settle into a new normal, they ride from the castle together, Merlin and Arthur leading, flanked by the knights and with family trailing them. Gwen rides at Lancelot’s side, Morgause at Morgana’s, and together they ride out to one of the clearings Merlin knows Kilgharrah can land in easily.

The dragon is already waiting when they arrive, and several of the knights lead the nervous horses away. “I felt the three of you,” Kilgharrah says to Merlin. “You, and him, and the egg. All moving. I hoped it was time.”

“It is,” Merlin says and turns to his father. “Now that I have you here, is there anything special I need to do? I’ve always thought I bungled it terribly last time.”

“There’s not much to it,” Balinor says. “Call her name. Protect her and teach her.”

“I left her with Kilgharrah last time,” Merlin says. “It didn’t go well.”

“Oh, no. It wouldn’t. I’m surprised he let you,” Balinor says. “He’s not wired for it.”

“From what I understand of Merlin’s future, and my past, hiding a dragonet in Camelot would have likely resulted in discovery,” Kilgharrah says.

“I will care for her,” Morgana says.

“We all will,” Balinor says. “The more human contact she has early on, the better she will be at human language.”

“Oh.” Merlin says. “Of course, that would explain it. She wasn’t around people for her first year or two. I haven’t asked, but the two of you… Are you staying?”

Hunith and Balinor look at each other, and then Hunith says, “For a time. Though with your geas, Ealdor is safer than it has been in my lifetime. My garden…”

“You will never want again,” Merlin says.

“Oh, I don’t need wealth,” Hunith protests. “You and your father safe is more than I ever thought I’d have.”

“Regardless,” Arthur says. “You will find your home in Ealdor well whenever you return. I’m sending a patrol with supplies and instructions to shore up the town.”

“Thank you, sire,” Hunith says with a formal bow.

“Please, don’t be ridiculous, I’ve wed your son. You can call me Arthur.”

She blushes. “Arthur.”
Kilgharrah clears his throat. “I would like to see my kin.”

Merlin takes the egg from his father, and puts it down in front of Kilgharrah, then speaks her name, deep and loud. “Aithusa!”

“Don’t help,” Balinor says.

“He knows that. We have chickens.” Hunith elbows Balinor gently.

Balinor asks Merlin, “Have you meat?”

Merlin makes a gesture, and a platter of cold meat trimmings appears on his hand. “I had them prepare this at the kitchen.”

They watch as the egg cracks, and bits fall away until finally the tiny white dragon bursts out, wings sticky but rapidly drying.

“Each person you want her to bond with should feed her a morsel,” Balinor says. “She can form relationships without that, but it helps her know. Of old, every dragon in the area would bring a food gift in the first day or two, and most of the dragonlords.”

Merlin nods, and hands the platter to Arthur, taking a piece of meat and holding it out for the baby dragon. “Eat,” he says, and then deeper, “Φάω.”

She pounces, stumbling, grabs the gobbet of beef, and tosses it up and then swallows. Silently, she opens her mouth, and leans forward. Merlin picks her up, and Morgana is at his side with a wet bit of meat in her hand.

“Hello, darling,” Morgana coos. “That’s right.”

One by one each feeds Aithusa until she curls up against Merlin, and falls asleep.

“How often does she need to see Kilgharrah?” Merlin asks Balinor.

“She doesn’t, but it might be more relevant to ask when he needs to see her.”

“I will return, Emrys. If I am welcome,” Kilgharrah says.

“You are always welcome in Camelot,” Arthur says.

The great dragon dips his head, then gently nudges the tiny sleeping form in Merlin’s arms. “Good,” he declares, and then launches himself upward.
It is nearly a month later when Merlin manages to locate Freya. She lives in one of the treaty kingdoms, under the geas, and he debates with himself for three days whether he should go see her. The mental muttering is clear to Arthur, who finally says, “Stop being ridiculous and go check on her. I trust you.”

“Come with me,” Merlin says.

“If you want me to.”

“If I go at all, I’d rather you were there,” Merlin says, and at that, transports them to the edge of a lake, where the air is still in the hot summer sun. Grasses wave along the lake edge, and they can see, in a clearing a little way away, a druid encampment.

Hand in hand they walk towards the camp. Giggling children chase each other, in a tumbling ball of children that comes to an abrupt stop in front of Arthur and Merlin.

A little girl gasps, and a mental whisper of Emrys goes up.

“Well, I know who the important one is here,” Arthur whispers dryly in Merlin’s ear.

The activity in the camp stops, and then people come quickly forward.

A tall woman—in her forties, Arthur guesses—steps out of the small gathering crowd.


Merlin scans the people before him and asks, “Freya, I sensed she was here with you a few days ago. Is she all right?”

“She is,” Berit answers. “She handfasted on Lammas, and they left this morning for Camelot, for the university.”

Merlin blinks. “Has anyone tried to harm her recently?”

Berit laughs. “Well, two weeks ago, Morfran tried to grab her and ended up falling into the lake. Your geas has been entertaining in that regard; the boy was a menace. She just laughed and he went off in a sulk. Haven’t seen him since, nor his mother.” Her tone left no doubt as to Berit’s opinion of both son and mother.

“And her betrothed? Is he a good man?” Arthur asks.
“Grania is a lovely woman,” Berit laughs. “They will do well together.”

Arthur and Merlin look at each other, and then Merlin laughs. “That they will. We’ll look forward to seeing them at Camelot.”

“Thank you, good kings. We have been afraid of losing our home here for twenty years, and the peace is allowing us to plan for our future, at last.”

“Send word if you need anything,” Merlin says. “Anything at all.”

A man in his thirties pushes forward to the front of the crowd. “Are you returning to Camelot then, now?”

“We are,” Arthur says.

“My daughter can’t travel, she’s ill. I understand you have the best healers in the land there? Could you take her?”

“Show us,” Arthur says.

The man leads them to a shelter, where a little girl lies listless on a pallet. Arthur and Merlin kneel to either side of her, and each puts a hand on her shoulder.

Do you see it? Merlin sends.

Arthur nods. The bone’s wrong here, and the wrongness has spread… Aloud, Arthur says, “So many places? Can I do this?”

“Look to the healthy tissues,” Merlin says, and shows Arthur what he means, then turns to the father. “She has a cancer in her bones. We should be able to fix it.”

The druid’s face wars between consternation and relief. “I heard Camelot had the best healers. I did not hear that it was her kings.”

“I have studied more of the human body than any human being alive,” Merlin says. “And Arthur’s healing talent is unequalled, though he is still new to it. If we can help her here, you may not need to travel at all.”

“Merlin, what makes the bone wrong?” Arthur asks.

“There’s a genetic mutation. The instructions in the cancer cell allow it to grow out of control. It’s usually one tiny change that throws the whole thing off.”

“That’s… DNA?” Arthur asks.

Merlin’s eyes glaze as he taps into the geas, and uses it to access the library. A moment later, he reaches out to put his free hand on Arthur’s arm, and together the two of them start teaching the little girl’s body how to fight, and how to heal, and how to be whole again. As the magic starts to work, Merlin watches her closely.

She convulses at one point, and Arthur looks at Merlin in alarm, but he just shakes his head. “She’s battling the cancer herself, very hard. It isn’t easy, even with the magic.

When the active attack of the cancer has stopped and reversed slowly, Merlin starts fortifying her while Arthur actively works to heal the damaged tissues. Three hours in, she opens her eyes, and smiles. A few minutes later she starts asking questions. Four hours in, she gets up, throws her arms
around her father, then asks to go play.

As she runs out of the hut, Arthur and Merlin stand.

“I thought I would lose her,” her father says, tears streaking his face. “Mirna is my whole heart.”

Arthur is leaning heavily on Merlin, but at that, he looks over and says, “My pleasure.”

“We will come to Camelot for the winter,” the druid says. “If you will have us.”

“All are welcome,” Arthur says. “And I would love to see how she’s doing.”

A few minutes later, Merlin takes them home.

That night in their chamber, Arthur says, “That was as true a battle as any I’ve fought with brigands. I want to learn more.”

“I just stopped people from hitting each other,” Merlin says. “There are still plenty of battles to fight. And so, so much to learn.”

“You already know it all,” Arthur says.

“Not even close,” Merlin says, laughing. “I just have a good library.”
They spend the winter studying, and practising, and sorting out the bumps and unexpected challenges brought about by their new reality. When spring comes, Arthur and Merlin ride out with their small band of knights, with Morgana and Gwen, on a grand tour of Albion. They return at the end of the summer without Gwaine, who has stayed behind in Essetir as that country’s new King.

The next Ostara, Merlin’s baby sister is born, and his parents return to the university for good.

Ten years later, all of Albion is united, and envoys from Eire and France have come, asking for Merlin’s Peace and the Pax Drakonis. That year, Merlin’s first child is born, and Arthur’s second.

Thirty years on, and it is obvious to Merlin and Arthur that Arthur is not aging, though they fake it, both of them. Their children are of age, and the world is nothing like Merlin has ever seen, and like nothing Arthur could have imagined; a strange mix of science and magic, technology and witchcraft that work together.

The library yields new secrets daily, but those who study the library itself suggest that it may be several hundred years before the contents are truly understood.

Physical violence is unthinkable to the younger generation. Competitive urges have been satisfied with sport, but even there, the hardest attacks are with words. Arthur’s throne becomes an elected position, mostly symbolic. The populace elects him by a landslide every time.
Fifty years after the first signatures on the Pax, Merlin and Arthur “disappear”, shedding their age and venturing out into the wider world.

They watch the world together—sometimes in it, sometimes retreating from it—for a thousand years, before she comes to them again.


“It’s gotten a bit dull,” Arthur says. “No enemies to fight, they’re all on our side. There is no other side.”

She grins. “I might have another adventure for you both, if you’re done here.”

Merlin looks at Arthur, “I’ll go with you.”


End Notes
Content warnings: Everything that happened in canon happened, but everything past the middle of first season gets "written over" due to a time travel incident. So there's far less death, sexism and general nonsense than the show had.

There is some talk of Merlin being suicidal/depressed/filled with buckets of angst, mostly in the form of memories/dreams/flashback/conversation.

This is quite deliberately a low-conflict denouement for the entire series, the happy ending we never got. It's pretty much what happens when you take a level 80 mage and drop him into a level 3 adventure. You know how we spent the whole series wanting to watch BAMF!Merlin working magic with Arthur and bringing about their glorious destiny?

Yeah. This scratches that itch.

This story does not contain any sexual violence. In fact, it contains very little violence at all. Oh. Right. Except the end of the world and the death of humanity. But it gets better!

ETA: 6-17-2017
So I just read And like the cycle of the year, we begin again by katherynefromphilly, and I think that pretty much anyone who enjoys this fic will enjoy that one and vice verse. It's a different approach to the same problem, and extremely satisfying. Neither of us encountered each other's stuff prior to this week, but came to some similar conclusions in vastly different stories, and I feel like I'd be remiss not pointing her story out because it is so good I read it twice in less than a week and it scratches the same post-finale itch.

(Lest I understate the significance of me reading ANY 200k story twice at all, let alone in a week, I'm working on three stories right now, two in other fandoms, one original, and barely read Merlin fanfic at all anymore, let alone novels thicker than most Harry Potter books.)

ETA: 1 year later.
I feel like it's really important after you read through all this to click through to the large version of the cover art because there are visual gags in the lettering if you zoom in enough, which make much more sense after you've read the whole story.

I'm publishing an original web serial! It's A Lon Story.

Find me Tumblr.

Please comment, kudo and share!

Works inspired by this one:
Illustration for Complementarity, Entanglement and the Uncertainty of Destiny —or— A Feminist Mage in King Arthur's Court by procoffeinating

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