The Dregs of Albion

by Aelys_Althea

Summary

World War III came and went, and with it the discovery of magic was made. Discovered, dragged straining into the light, and accused of being the power of the devil himself. Since, the world has become a dangerous place - fatally dangerous - for any with the spark of magic. Merlin has always known this. He's known it for as long as he could remember, since his father told him at a young age that he must keep his magic hidden. More than that, he knew from the memory of the past lives he'd lived, lives that only those imbued with magic could recall. Watching sorcerers captured, tortured in the streets, dragged off like rabid criminals by the authorities only confirmed what he already knew. Merlin has been exposed to this time and time again, with strangers, then with his father himself. The authorities have ways to subdue sorcerers. Merlin did his best to avoid them, until the time that he... couldn't. When Arthur awoke it was to a world he didn't know. A broken, dark, horrifying world of confusion and hatred. With only his memories of a forgotten kingdom to hold on to, he claws after the only person he knew to still exist. If only the world weren't so huge it would be far easier to find him.
Part 1: The Slums

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The characters, original story line and the foundations of this concept don't belong to me (though I wish they did). All thanks and credit go to the creators of Merlin - BBC and Shine, thank you so much.

Thank you too vanhelsing019 for your art! We had a bit of a mix around but got there in the end! Thanks for taking up my request to fanart. It's so appreciated :) If you'd like to have a look see here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Merlin was four years old when he first saw a man killed.

It was a matter of luck that he had managed to remain innocent of fatal sights until such a late age at all. Luck, and the fierce protectiveness of his father. For though most people saw deaths as commonplace, the murder of a fleeing victim as merely another tragedy that didn't concern them, Balinor always strove to protect Merlin.

It was that protection which had kept them on the outskirts of London for so long, rather than escaping into the less densely populated regions of far-flung micro-cities. London was the centre of the United Kingdoms and had become only more so over the past decades. As it expanded its cluttered borders, seeping like a mangled and ever-growing stain into its surrounds, it had spilled onto the very shores of the nation. The furthest reaches enveloped Brighton and stretched nearly as far north as Cambridge. Those smaller cities, from Oxfordton to Bristoll, Manchester and York Town, Glouchester and Cardrift, had shrunk only further. With that shrinking, they became only more dangerous for the habitation of a magic-user.

No, the city of London was not a safe place to reside. But it was safer than it would be without. For though their lesser populace meant fewer Hunters, fewer officials with a keen eye for criminal sorcerers, it also meant that more people noticed slight abnormalities. They noticed when something wasn't quite right, the key characteristics of a magic-user that suggested they weren't… normal.

It wasn't until Merlin was seven, however, that he truly began to grasp what the death of that first man had meant. When he slowly came to understand that the Third World War that had officially ended fifty years prior was in fact still waging. It was then that he began to fully realised that the simple possession of magic, the ability to wield it, immediately labelled one as 'outcast' and 'dangerous'. As a threat to not merely their fellows, not only their nation, but the world at large.

And that such a threat could not be ignored. That it needed to be contained. Eliminated.

Seven years old was when he finally began to understand that Elimination was what had happened to that first man. He'd seen countless deaths since, would see countless more. Each one only reaffirmed his understanding.

But it wasn't until he was eight that he realised, truly understood, that those men, those Hunters in their dark green suits and bug-like helmets hefting the electrically-charged weapons that inflicted such horrifying blows, considered his existence too. Considered, and would find him wanting, a
tarnish upon the putrid, unpolished surface of London, of the United Kingdoms. Of the world. And that he too would be Eliminated should anyone guess that he possessed the same spark of magic that coursed through his father's veins.

At eight years old, barely a week after his birthday, Merlin was torn from the depths of his sleep by the intrusion of his father. Not that Balinor was loud by any stretch, but few people slept deeply in the slums of London. Not if they wished to maintain any of the material possessions closeted behind the inadequate barriers of thin doors, leaning walls and broken windows.

Balinor shook him into full wakefulness with a jostling touch to the shoulder. The hard mattress beneath him bounced slightly at the motion. "Merlin. Merlin, get up. Now. We need to go now."

Blinking into the dim light that pooled in Merlin's half of the bedroom – for the slums were always light to some degree, even in the darkest hours of night – he pushed himself up to sitting. "Wha… what is it?"

Balinor's shadowed figure didn't turn at his words. He wove through the haphazard mess of their bedroom, one of only two rooms in their ramshackle house, in something of a frenzy. Packing, Merlin realised, and felt the sour weight of dread settle in his gut. "We're leaving," his father said, a now redundant reply to the question Merlin had answered for himself.

Shaking his head, Merlin drew his knees to his chest and clutched his thin, worn blanket more tightly to his chin. "Pappy, I don't want to go." He just wanted to sleep, to stay in one place just a little bit longer. Why did they have to leave again? It had been barely a month this time. Merlin was so tired of moving.

Balinor paused in step. In the gloomy half-light Merlin couldn't quite make out his expression. Not that he had to; he could picture it perfectly without seeing it. Balinor would be blank-faced, his expression stiff and hard and devoid of emotion but for a hint of sadness that was almost resentment in his eyes. Maybe more than a hint, if the ferocity of his packing was anything to go by. Merlin swore he could feel that simmering heat through the darkness.

"We don't have a choice."

"But why? Why do we have to –?"

"Don't question me on this, Merlin." Balinor cut him off with a sharp snap of his tongue. Turning away once more, he resumed his packing with intensified haste. "We don't have the liberty to discuss this. We need to leave. Now."

Merlin didn't protest any further. He wanted to, certainly, but he didn't. It was Balinor's tone that forbade him from doing so. There was no room for argument in his words, and if not quite cruel and dismissive his voice did ring with command: they didn't have the time.

It was not the first time they'd been forced to flee. Merlin couldn't even count on all of his fingers and toes how many times they'd scrambled to up and leave. Sometimes suddenly – in once instance they'd been at their new house for less then a week before leaving in the middle of the night – and sometimes after weeks of careful consideration to reach a regretful and inevitable conclusion.

Merlin hated moving. He had never felt particularly attached to any one house, nothing holding all that much sentimental value to him, but he still hated it. That he lost any fragile friendships he'd made, that he would have to relearn the tangled rabbit warren of streets that would surround their new residence, identical to that in which they'd previous been embedded in all but layout.
And he hated the smell. There was something about moving into a new house, something other than the thin, stained walls, the windows more often than not punctured and cracked or absent entirely, the floors carpeted in a thick layer of dust and little else and most of the furniture too mildewed or broken to be of any use. He loathed the smell, and each house carried its own strain, tangy or musky, cold or sharp or so thick he could almost see it. Each different and as repulsive as its predecessor.

But he didn't have a choice. And when Balinor finally finished with his hasty, minimalistic packing, slinging the canvas rucksack onto his back and tossing a smaller yet otherwise identical one to Merlin, he accepted without complaint. Merlin knew from past experience what weighted down his rucksack; scraps of clothing, mostly, pay-tickets if he actually had any to spare, the bare necessities. And his knives. Because Balinor always packed his knives. They were the only thing he truly ensured they brought with them.

Merlin hated those knives almost as much as he loved them.

The creak of the front door was quiet when compared to the general noise that constantly rung along the street. Merlin followed his father from the house, muted. The slums were never quiet, even at witching hour, just as they were never completely dark. The narrow channel between their house and that opposite was a smudge of blacks, greys and browns, the houses on either side little more than a pile of disorderly bending walls and tin roofs, leaning overhangs with more holes than a crocheted blanket arching over each door. The largely identical 'houses', if they could even be called that, stretched into the distance in either direction, breaking only with the end of the block and a sharp turn before an identical building.

Merlin shrunk reflexively into the shadow of the overhang of their house – their now ex-house – as an overhead spotlight swept down the narrow street, shredding the darkness with its vibrant radiance. The Spotters of the officials maintained a consistently sporadic scan, like an accusing eye sweeping along the network of narrow streets searching for any hint of disruption. Too bright, it was. Far too bright for the darkness of night that was never completely dark anyway. But Merlin was used to it. The Spotters had been raking the streets of every city sector, peering into every crevice he'd lived in, for his entire life. He couldn't imagine a time when they didn't. What was night even like without those spotlights? Without the light pollution that bathed the city in a constant, visible glow?

Balinor waited for a trio of heartbeats after the Spotter passed before stepping out from the protective shelter of the house's overhang. His footsteps made sickening squelches in the mud with his passage as he fell onto the stretch that could barely be deemed a road running between the weary, derelict houses. It hadn't rained in days, but that made little difference; the wider roads were always muddy, more like drained riverbed than actually walkways. Merlin followed him without comment, barely noticing as his weary, sagging old boots immediately caved and allowed water to dampen his sockless feet after barely a handful of steps.

It was when he chanced a glance over his shoulder, however, and saw the pale face of the kindly old widow who'd lived across the road from him that he felt a twinge of sadness, an upwelling of regret ripple through him. He liked the widow. She'd been nice, kind enough to offer him a smile ever now and again rather than the blank, nonchalant expressions or, more often, a disgruntled scowl. Merlin couldn't help but speak up when he caught sight of her, moments before they disappeared around the nearest corner.

"Why did we have to leave? I liked it here."

Merlin immediately regretted his words as soon as he'd voiced them and not only because they weren't entirely true. He hadn't particularly liked their latest house, no more than he had any prior to
It was the brief glance that Balinor cast him, touched with disapproval and just the barest spark of anger, that caused him to shrink.

Balinor waited until they'd long left the old house behind, until after they'd had to hide from a Spotter for a second time in the shadows of an overhang, before replying. "You know why we have to, Merlin. Don't ask stupid questions. We've been over this too many times and it's always for the same reason. You should understand by now." He paused in his grumbling spiel to skirt around a larger puddle in his path. "Word's circulating of sorcerers in the area. Some tattle-tale reported a sighting to the authorities. Those Hunters, they won't put up with you and they won't put up with me if they hear tell of us our whereabouts

Merlin peered up at his father as he trotted at his side. In the residual radiance of the Spotters, he could make out the tension tightening his father's face into hard planes. Balinor glanced down at him sidelong and there was sadness beneath the hardness of his expression. "And all of your little friends? How do you think they'd feel if they found out about your gift, hm?"

Merlin was silent. There wasn't truly accusation in his father's tone, even when accounting for the ring of anger, for regret drowned it out. That only made it worse, somehow, and Merlin dropped his chin to his chest, biting his lip and tightening his fingers where they clutched at the straps of his rucksack. It was made worse when Balinor continued some minutes later, speaking the words Merlin had known would arise but dreaded to hear in a nearly inaudible voice. "Next time you find yourself an injured bird or something, Merlin, don't touch it. Just bloody well let it die. Better it than us."

Merlin had never healed a broken creature with his magic again after that. He'd never been able to heal much of anything, really, not with his father's words hanging over his head.

It was at eleven years old that he truly understood how personal the Elimination of magic-users was. It wasn't until it was he being chased by the Hunters for the first time that he realised. Until his father was shot by an electrical bullet, Balinor collapsing into a writhing seizure as the green-clad pursuers closed ranks around them.

No, it wasn't until Merlin had been forced to use his magic to save them both that he understood in all certainty how dangerous it was to be a sorcerer, and that meant it was dangerous for him. It was a lesson long in coming but one he never forgot.

There wasn't all that much left of the lake. To say it had dried up would be an exaggeration, but not by much. It was a pond, really, a tranquil plane of undisturbed water that was forever shrouded in a wispy blanket of mist even on the brightest of days.

That night was the same as every night prior. The pond-like lake was illuminated by its wraith-like blanket of mist, still and silent yet with its simple presence flooding the air with heavy moisture. It defied the artificial glow of electrical light that beamed from the modest town hunkered upon its shores, radiating with its eternal reek of light pollution even at the darkest hour of night. Like a stoic and pervasive presence, the lake maintained its respectful distancing, its silent observation of the little town. Silent and, some would claim, disapprovingly judgmental of the contrast to its own natural splendour.

The old man had long since taken to staring out upon the lake's mists in the dark hours before he sought his bed. In the sparsely populated town of Glaston, the lake was something of a landmark. Lake Ave à Lone, it had been known as in the day, though time had long since abandoned both the history behind the name and the name itself. The old man remembered, but only because he'd been living on the lakeside for over ninety years, had learned of its history from his own father. It was his duty of sorts to remember such things, even if the growing resentment that many of his neighbours
had acquired for the supposedly 'supernatural' lake would have deterred most.

Pottering around his small, brightly lit kitchen, the man set about straining his cup of tea in the old-fashioned way. The familiar motions were therapeutic in spite of the difficulty his gnarled, arthritic fingers fought through. And it was only a little disheartening to know that the tea he had been straining as such for over five decades was no longer the same as it had once been even a year before. The drought that had torn through Cymry had eradicated most of the crop of his favoured leaf; its cousin grown on the mainland just wasn't the same.

Not that the man could complain. He could hardly count, could hardly remember, some of the luxuries, some of the flavour and cuisines, the herbs and spices, that had long ago garnished his tables yet had gradually or rapidly disappeared with the war. It was a combination of reasons, he knew, from the droughts and the fires to the contrasting icy freezes and torrential monsoons that gripped the shores of the United Kingdoms. But the ultimate cause, the fundamental reason... no one could dispute that.

Magic. It always came down to the destructive force of magic. Really, was it any wonder that most residents of Glaston glared upon the Lake Ave à Lone with suspicion bordering on accusation?

Settling the teapot down with shaking hands, the old man slowly lifted his mug of thin, pungent tea and turned to shuffle towards his usual seat, the single dining chair already lined perfectly to peer through the fogged glass of the window onto the lake. He had just eased his tea down onto the waiting ceramic when it sounded.

A thumping.

No, a knocking. A knocking at his door. To his house.

People didn't knock at his door. People didn't knock at anyone's door – no one used their knuckles when electrical bells were present – but on his door less than most. No one came to visit him, the cranky old man who lived alone down by the lake in his small yet well-to-do little cottage. The only visitor who had dared to scramble down the uneven steps to his front door in the past year was the government official making her annual census rounds. The man considered it most likely she simply came to discern whether or not he still lived.

Grumbling to himself, he turned to shuffle through the homely furnishings of his home, skirting his table to the front door. Only to pause in step halfway through his living room before the warm glow of his gently blowing radiator to frown at the pause, the continued thumping, and the subsequent pause once more. For the intruder – as that was what they were – assaulted not his front but his back door.

It was... disconcerting. That not only would someone come to the old man's door but that they would come to his back door. From the direction of the lake. It was even more so because nothing out of the ordinary happened in Glaston. Nothing unexpected or even particularly interesting ever happened in Somersept these days. The county was sedate in the extreme. Almost too quiet, some would say, though those people would similarly complain at the slightest upheaval, the barest break in monotony, as though it were kingdom come.

Scowling, the old man readjusted his nightrobe more firmly about his shoulders. To the continued sound of thumping, he edged back towards his kitchen, towards the laundry and the back door beyond. Along his way he paused at the solar battery tap in his kitchen to untie a Prod. The metallic rod felt warm in his wrinkled fingers, the thrum of electrical vitality coursing through its length and causing the tip to glow a faint white-blue light.
It was technically illegal to own a Prod without government approval, but the old man would never give it up. Not for the world. Not when sorcerers ran rampart across the country and an electrical weapon was the only way to combat their satanic powers. They should all burn in hell, the old man had long concluded.

Hefting the two-foot-long Prod, he edged towards the door. Touching at the ID-pad that shined with a synthesised glow under his fingertips, the man drew up the camera image of his doorstep. Afforded a birds-eye view of the other side of the impregnable barrier of the door, he could make out a figure. A man, he considered, by his height and physique. A man, alone. At his door.

The old man should leave him. He knew he should leave the intruder to his solitude, offer him no solace or the respect of acknowledging his presence. The persistent thumping certainly suggested that the intruder felt no such respect for him. And yet it was those very thumps that kept his feet rooted to the floor. He raised the Prod higher.

"What do yeh want?" He growled at the door.

Abruptly, the knocking cut off. Mid thump, an eerily foreboding silence taking its place. A silence that stretched on for one minute. Two. Until, with a similar abruptness that caused the old man to flinch, the knocking restarted.

\textit{Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-}

"Hey, yeh lil' shit, stop that racket!" Edging forwards a few more steps, the old man spun his Prod into reverse and smacked the blunt end into the door in a returning thump of disgruntlement. "If yeh want somethin', yeh be tellin' me. I ain't opening for nothin'. State yer name."

There was another pause in which the old man waited, barely breathing and glaring fiercely at the shadowy figure through the glass. He refused to allow the increased pounding in his chest, the clamminess of his hands, to dissuade him. He wasn't afraid. This was his house, and he had every right to deter any attempted intrusions, from friend or foe.

His words seemed to have an effect on the man on the other side of the door. After nearly a full minute of silence, he spoke back. In a deep voice, too; yes, definitely a man. \textit{"Oscail, a dhuine uasail maith. Ciallaíonn mé tú dochar anois. I iarraidh ach cabhair."}

The words were unintelligible. To the old man, anyway. He wasn't fool enough to think that he blabbered in mere gibberish. Likely it was a language that the old man hadn't heard before. Strange, given that not a soul within three countries distance spoke in anything but the common tongue.

"What? Speak properly, yeh fool," the old man growled. "Where d'yeh think yeh are? This ain't no Espaniol or Roma."

Another unintelligible response, muffled by the door. The old man grumbled a curse to himself, shifting from foot to foot. His mind drifted idly, longingly, back to his tea. This was one of the main reasons he so liked living by himself, one of the few reasons he chose to live down by the lake. It meant he didn't get unruly and unreasonable visitors. Certainly not in the dead of night. Glaston wasn't subjected to a curfew as London Proper was but that didn't mean people tended to wander around after dark. It simply wasn't safe.

The words of the intruder on the other side of the door had stopped. Squinting, the old man turned to peer back at the ID-pad's view once more. Gone? Gone. The figure was disappeared as suddenly as he'd arrived. Blessedly, he'd taken his disruption with him.
Harrumphing in satisfaction, the old man took a step away from the door. Well. That was that. There was nothing else to it. He could go back to his tea.

But he hefted his Prod once more. There was no way he couldn't check. No foreigner would loiter around his door, even if he were a threatening sorcerer. The man had his Prod; he'd jab the offending figure faster than he could blink should he think to conjure up some threat in a magical blast. The old man had once been renowned for his speed of reflexes and some of that speed still lingered.

The door swung outward without a creak as his fingerprint urged it into motion, the chill of outside rushing forth. It battered at the suddenly too-thin fabric of the old man's nighthrobe and bit at his bare ankle above thick slippers. And there was the man.

He hadn't disappeared. Instead, fallen to the ground like a puppet with his strings cut half a dozen feet from the doorstep and just outside of the camera's view. He peered up at the old man from his knees. "I implore, le do thoil iasacht dom chabhair," he said, and there was an almost pleading note in his voice. The expression on his face, in the hard, straight features and tightening of his pale eyes, illuminated by the thin light beaming from the old man's kitchen, was similarly faintly imploring.

The old man could only shake his head. Though he still held his Prod aloft, it was all but forgotten at the sight of his supposed intruder. For he was an unexpected sight to say the least. That unexpectedness drove even the old man's surly mood into consideration.

He was an impressive figure, of the build largely seen more in the upper class and the government officials and authorities that seemed naturally more capable of such growth with the added support of a greater surplus of rations. Broad across the shoulders, with sturdy muscles defined and noticeable even in the darkness, he appeared to be of middling height as far as the old man could tell from his kneeling state. Still, he suspected that had he been standing the intruder would have towered over him. Age had bent the old man short.

But it wasn't that which cause him to pause confusedly at the sight of the man. It wasn't the slightly demanding ring to his tone, nor the recurrence of those foreign words. Nor was it even the wetness that dripped like rain from the tufts of his dirty blonde fringe, that sagged at his clothes. No, it was more the clothes themselves that gave pause.

Wool. It looked like wool, from what the old man could make out, and he was one of only a few individuals in Glaston who would be able to identify it as such. Woollen clothing simply wasn't made anymore, not with the death of mass agriculture, and even the best of the synthetic mimics of the fabric weren't quite the same. Only the very wealthiest, the most expensive of individuals, wore the genuine product, and surely none so carelessly as the man kneeling on his doorstep. The simple long-sleeved shirt and trousers tucked into old sagging boots – was that leather?! Genuine leather boots? Surely not – looked to have been used more as casual wear, stained and worn, wrinkled as though slept in. Who in the United Kingdom could possibly have the liberty to afford to mistreat such clothing?

"What are yeh doin', boy?" The old man grumbled. The figure on his doorstep was hardly a boy, must have been at least in his late twenties, but it hardly mattered. Everyone seemed young to him these days. "What are yeh doing down here at this time of night?"

The boy only shook his head, frowning uncomprehendingly. A splatter of droplets flecked the doorstep, causing the old man to retreat slightly. "Yer drippin', yeh fool. Are yeh hoping to catch yer death?" At a similar response, he sighed. And finally, he lowered his Prod.

He was still wary. Still cautious and still suspicious of anyone who would happen upon his doorstep in the late hours of the night. But the boy was evidently in a fix and, though most of his Glaston
neighbours would deem him an antisocial old man, he was not, in fact, cold-hearted. He wouldn’t readily turn away someone in need unless he suspected them of being a sorcerer. Besides, he wasn’t a fool himself; the boy was obviously of some wealth, of a higher class, and though it baffled the old man as to what he was doing in Glaston, alongside the suspiciously, almost-supernatural lake of Ave à Lone, it would be nothing short of pure foolishness not to take the boy in. He valued his head too dearly to risk putting it on the chopping block in the event that some upstanding, pompous moneyman spluttered over the neglect of his son.

Sighing, scratching the back of his head wearily, the old man wedged himself against the wall to the side of the door. Glaring at the boy peering with his own degree of wariness up at him, he held out his arm in an indicative gesture. "Come on, then. In yeh come. What yer doing out here of a night like this – after a swim as looks like, yeh barmy fool – is beyond me. But I'm not one to judge." He knew, even as he spoke, that the boy didn’t understand him. The uncomprehending blankness of his expression was telling enough. But he continued anyway, with only another beckoning gesture of his arm. "Come on, then. In yeh come."

Slowly, with continued wariness, the boy rose to his feet. He was indeed taller than the old man, by over a head, and surely nearly twice as wide. It was a wonder the he even fit through the door.

He did, however, and managed it smoothly and passively enough that the old man was able to suppress his lingering desire jab him with his Prod. As he closed the door, however, sliding it shut with a click and locking out the chill, he maintained his grasp upon the steel rod. He wasn't a fool, even if he was kindly enough to allow wayward strangers into his home.

In a world where sorcerers drifted like a viral smog, one could never be too careful.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope you liked the first chapter! If you did, or if you've got anything you'd like to say - please :D - leave a review to let me know your thoughts.

For those interested, the translation of Arthur's Words to Irish (Gaelic) are as follows:
- "Open, good sir. I mean you no harm. I just want help"
- "I implore you, lend me your aid."
Chapter 2

The smell of the house hadn't dissipated even after a week of residency. It was a thicker smell this time; Merlin reflected that the faintly acrid tang was likely a by-product of the simmering canal that ran just to the rear of the house, the waterway passing straight from the factory region three blocks away. Or the not-quite-house, as Merlin deemed it, for it was one of the more ramshackle of the establishments he'd lived in. This one only had a single room, a leaking tin roof and three walls propped together in a triangle. One of those walls was shared with the neighbour on the left, was thin enough that Merlin could hear the verbal abuse shouted every other night by the two women that resided there. There used to be three but one night, mid-fight, one of those voices had abruptly cut off. He hadn't heard the third voice since.

At thirteen years old, Merlin had more than doubled the number of houses he'd been in when he was seven. He wasn't sure how many that was, exactly, as he'd long since stopped counting, but he knew. After a time, the memories of those closeted steads, the sleepless nights huddled into his father's side for warmth and the silent dinners of the gelatinous gloop collected as rations from the nearest Suppliers all morphed together into indiscernibility. Merlin's head was already full enough of countless memories of a past long gone, most far more vibrant than those of his current life, that he would rather struggle to maintain a hold of.

The smell of the house was only muffled slightly by the drizzle of rain that had endured for five days. It wasn't anything on the monsoonal downpour that hit the city cyclically every summer, but the persistence was, in some ways, just as bad. The roof overhead was punctured with holes that leaked in a similarly persistent dribble. Merlin had long since run out of chipped cups, crumpled buckets and coils of rags to patch up the spills.

Not that there was all that much to protect from the rain. The furniture within the room barely resembled as much. The pair of beds pressed foot to foot along one wall held mattresses whose springs had long since sunken into rigidity. The counters of what hardly warranted the term kitchen were riddled with pockmarks and so stained that the original colour was long obscured and the pair of rickety stools seated alongside them groaned at the barest hint of weight. The overhead light was no more than a bulb of spluttering light, dim and failing more often than not. Merlin actually preferred it when that light was dimmed; not only was it less offensive to the eyes to have the dirt, the mould, the rusty colouration that looked suspiciously like blood staining half of the floor hidden by darkness but it removed the even more offensive presence of the throbbing electricity from the room.

Merlin hated electricity even more than he did the smell.

That night was one of the nights that the light bulb flickered, sparked, and largely lacked any form of actual illumination. The only light that truly lit the room were the by-passing glow of the Spotters that raked the streets outside. That and the sickly glow of light pollution that bereft the world of ever being properly dark. It was enough to see by, however, certainly enough for one used to squinting through the darkness more often than not. Even more comfortable for one with eyes naturally sharpened by the swirling pool of magic that rippled beneath their skin.

Merlin stood at the kitchen counter, one of his knives in hand and a tin of the protein goop in the other. With practiced motions, he pierced the top of the tin, sliced around the rim and pried it open. The faint glisten of what might once have been cooked eco-meat was dissatisfying in its familiarity. There was never any variation in the meals afforded for dinner. Breakfast flipped and changed between a number of hard, bready biscuits and broth-like stew that, in some very lucky instances, was still warm by the time it was dished out into waiting cups. The fruit and vegetables afforded for
lunch were similarly variable depending upon what the factories could provide; at present it was mottled pears the colour of road sludge that actually held a faint sweetness.

But dinner was always the same. Probably because it was industrially made, Merlin reasoned; while breakfast and lunch was actually handed out by the government Suppliers from the storefront windows of their rundown establishments, dinner was delivered directly to each house, dropped off on the doorstep by the world-weary charity Helpers. It was a race at times to ensure that those little tins of pure, minced protein were snatched up and gathered indoors. If by chance one missed the moment of delivery by more than a few minutes, it was more than likely that it would be filched by hungry neighbours. People in the slums weren't so generous as to allow the opportunity for thievery to pass, not when someone else wouldn't be as accommodating. Really, they were hardly generous at all.

Spooning the pale sludge into the pair of waiting bowls, Merlin paused only to polish a pair of forks on his shirt – though his shirt most likely only made them dirtier – before scooping them up and crossing the room to the beds. He plopped himself down on the end of his father's, holding out the bigger bowl without comment.

Balinor was slow to respond, even though Merlin knew he'd been aware of his motions, knew that he'd watched him dish out the meal with disconsolate eyes. Balinor was slow in responding to everything nowadays. Two years it had been since he'd been shot, since the electrical bullet to his right shoulder had struck a nerve and rendered the entire right half of his body virtually useless. Merlin didn't like to think about it, didn't like to ponder the reality of the situation they found themselves in, but he knew his father was getting worse. That the immobility of half of his limbs was gradually spreading to encompass the entirety of his body. Only that day he'd been forced to stay at home from work for being unable to clamber from bed. It hadn't been the first time such had occurred.

Merlin didn't like to think about what that meant; Balinor's handicap had already lost him nearly as many jobs as they'd had houses over the past years. There had been more than one day when the pair of them had gone without any meal other than the inadequate and Helper-supplied dinner, days when they'd shard barely half a tin of clean water. Breakfast and lunch could only be acquired by way of ration tickets afforded to the working class man and their absence had been sorely felt. Even after Merlin had struggled to step up into the workforce himself as a factory sculler they'd barely scraped by; he'd taken up the job despite his father's protests after a week devoid of ration tickets in which they'd had to rely upon the life-saving and unexpected generosity of a young Helper.

A thirteen year old couldn't acquire more than a single ration ticket a day. It was a ridiculous concept, the authorities attempts to prevent children from working even if they had no one else to work for them. Merlin could support himself just barely with his own work, but his father too? No, that Helper had saved them that week. And Merlin hadn't seen her since. Word around the block at the time had suggested she'd been taken off the storefront after that, after 'doing something she shouldn't have'.

Merlin picked at the goop absently, chewing into the relative silence of their dark house. It didn't taste bad exactly, but then it didn't really taste good. It just… didn't taste like all that much at all. That was the reality of synthesised eco-meat. Years ago, people had actually killed animals for food, had harvested the meat from bones as they'd used their skin for leather and hair for clothing. Merlin marvelled at such a lifestyle, even as he recalled revelling in it himself. How fortunate, to have such a surplus of animals at one's disposal to be able to use them for whatever whim. The only creatures that lived around the slums other than the listless figures that at times hardly resembled humans were rats, roaches, the odd half-rabid dog and a few birds. Pigeons, mostly, and those generally so thin and mangy that their feathers were hardly even usable as down, their breasts barely plump enough for meat. Years ago there sheep and cattle, pigs and chickens, grown like plants and harvested just as
nonchalantly. It was such a strange thought these days, even if Merlin did recall it as being otherwise.

Before.

Instead, that which sustained the masses in the slums was little more than calories and chemicals.

A nudge at his thigh startled Merlin from staring blankly at his knees. Glancing sideways, he drew his gaze from the half-eaten bowl his father held out towards him towards his face. The dim light was bright enough that he could make out the slightly pained expression Balinor wore. He had aged a lot in the past two years. The past two months even. Though he was hardly old, there was a lightness, almost grey, touching his dark hair and the shadowing of a feeble beard on his cheeks. His dark eyes seemed to have sunken deeply, had become little more than a pair of shadows in his face. And though his cheeks had always been thin, a characteristic of every slum-dweller, they were nearly concave these days.

"Here," he muttered, nudging Merlin's thigh with his bowl once more.

"What? There's no more –"

"I know there isn't," Balinor cut him off sharply, his voice wavering just slightly. He sighed a moment later, however, and closed his eyes. "I'm not hungry. You have the rest."

Staring at his father, struggling for expressionlessness, Merlin slowly rested his own bowl down in his lap. He tried to ignore the foreboding clench in his gut. "You need to finish your dinner, Pappy."

"I'm not hungry."

"Doesn't matter. You need –"

"You have it. I've done nothing but lie here all day. Far less work than you've done. And don't," Balinor held up a finger of his free hand in quelling, "try to tell me you haven't been working again, Merlin. I may be incapacitated but I'm not an idiot."

"I wasn't going to say that," Merlin mumbled, dropping his eyes down to his own lap once more. He caught his bottom lip between his teeth and had to frown to hold back the tears that welled in his eyes. He wasn't an idiot either. His father said he wasn't hungry? Merlin had heard enough stories to know what that meant. And it wasn't because Balinor was being generous in affording his child his own rations; where they lived, with the harshness of their lifestyle, it was as selfish not to eat all of his own food, not to maintain his strength and sustain himself, as it would be eat all rations entirely. As a child, as legally unable to work, Merlin relied on his father to support him. Balinor could hardly do that if he'd been driven to exhaustion and malnutrition.

No, if Balinor said he wasn't hungry, that he couldn't stomach the poor excuse for food, it was because he really couldn't. And that truly only meant one thing.

Swallowing, Merlin took a slow, deep breath. "Leave it, then. You might feel like it later."

"Unlikely," Balinor muttered in reply, but he didn't argue further. Merlin didn't get a chance to respond either, for barely a moment later a radiant speck of white light as small as a pearl shot into the room like a seeking arrow. Merlin started to his feet, nearly dropping his bowl as the pearl of light hung suspended before he and his father for a moment before bursting into an explosion of light.

To the painful radiance of that light, blinding and searing into his night-adjusted eyes, Merlin relaxed. Or perhaps more correctly he resigned himself at registering that there was no threat, despite the presence of an electrical gadget in the room. A Clip it was called, and to his regret Merlin had been the target of many such gadgets in the past. Merlin and his father, and every other individual in the
slums. In the whole of London, perhaps, maybe even further flung. The little globe, sent by the authorities, carried a video message to every living individual in the region. Generally those videos consisted of Official Government Announcements; everyone just called them OGAs, and not without more than a touch of resentment.

When the little globe of light flared briefly even more brilliantly, blinding Merlin in another wave, he sunk back into sitting on the end of his father's bed. A confirmation of his suspicions of the OGA were confirmed when a holographic image fizzled into visibility from the glowing light, a foot by foot screen hanging suspended in the air and boasting a depiction of some upperclassman standing behind a podium on a field of the union jack. A senator, Merlin suspected, from the refined cleanliness of his figure and the sharp cut of his suit.

"...gotta be fucking kidding me," Balinor groaned. He dropped his head back onto his mattress, dropped his bowl onto the blankets beside him, and raised a weary, shaking hand to his forehead. Merlin very much felt the urge to do the same. If an OGA had been sent out, it couldn't mean anything good for them. Not as a slum-dweller and certainly not as a sorcerer.

"Citizens of London," the man in the suit began. His voice was deep, low and a little gravely. It suited the square cut of his suit, the similarly straight chop of his closely cropped hair and the squareness of his jaw perfectly. Merlin, dropping his elbows onto his knees, turned his resigned gaze up to the picture of the senator. Balinor was right in his sentiment. It couldn't be anything good.

"Recent events have led to an uprising of complaints by both yourselves and your fellow countrymen..."

"Inner City bastards maybe," Balinor grumbled, referring to the wealthy class of individuals in central London. Merlin nodded his head slightly in agreement.

"...and as such, as your elected government and ministers for this country, we of the senate have unanimously deemed it necessary to revisit the most recent cases and act upon them. In direct response to the recent terrorist actions conducted in Exeter on April the twenty-fifth, the need to tighten the leniency towards the use of magic and sorcery in this great nation has become only increasingly apparent. For our safety, for our children's safety, for our brothers and sisters..."

The man continued with his eloquent spiel, punctuating each point, each perceived need for change and each aspect that required protection from such changes, with a jab of his finger into the podium. Merlin tuned out the pointless words; every senator seemed to think it a requisite of their speech to highlight the apparently dire needs of their family and friends, but was drawn from his inattention when he finally stopped with the monotonously familiar drone. Drawn into a cringe, that was, for the subject the senator dove into.

"In Exeter, the citizens of the once protected city experienced an incredible loss at the hands of magic users. Buildings destroyed, casualties suffered, expenses lost..."

"What he fails to emphasise is that it's those expenses that matter more to the government than any supposed casualties," Balinor muttered over the senator's words. "Bloody bullshit."

"There weren't any casualties, were there?" Merlin asked, turning towards his father. Balinor appeared darker, more shadowed, in contrast to the washed out colouration of the senator on the OGA Clip. "I thought they worked out that no one died."

Balinor nodded, glaring at the senator with a pointed curl of his lip. "No casualties, fatal or otherwise. Three buildings it was that collapsed, and word round the block says they were hardly used for anything anyway. Neglected. If it wasn't linked to magic then no one would even care they
were torn down. Were probably going to be knocked down by the authorities for something or other soon anyway."

"And the sorcerers? I overheard from the scullers that they haven't been found yet." Merlin didn't even try to hide that he'd been spending time at the factory canals anymore. Balinor had cast the knowledge into the light. There was no point in pretending anymore.

His father grunted. "Hardly sorcerers. They're little more than half a dozen kids who haven't been taught or can't remember the proper way to use their magic." Balinor shook his head. "An idiot could see they don't have the faintest clue of what they're doing. Must've been desperate to be hanging around with one another. No knowledge of the dangers of grouping sorcerers outside of a commune."

He shook his head once more, though more in sorrow than vexation. Merlin felt an upwelling of his own sadness for the faceless 'kids', most of them likely older than he. Merlin was at least a little educated in the ways of magic, of sorcery, both from Balinor and his other memories. Experience both past and Past had taught him that the likelihood of a magical disaster was indeed only doubled by an increased density of magic users. It was simple common sense: more sorcerers led to more sorcery, which led to a greater concentration of those unavoidable mishaps. Balinor always said two; two was the maximum number of sorcerers that could stick together. To guard each other's backs while avoiding the additional dangers.

Dropping his eyes from his father's shadowed gaze, Merlin turned back towards the glowing Clip. He didn't particularly want to listen but…

"…that such acts of terrorism will only increase if nothing is done further. Hence, we as a government have reached the decision that has long been deemed inevitable. As of July the first, the compulsory microchipping of every recognised citizen above and including those of the age of eight will be enforced. After careful consideration, we as your government have considered this a necessary precaution to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our people as a nation. The Compulsory Microchipping Scheme will be initiated this coming Wednesday, the twelfth of June. Attendance to the nearest Government Office will be similarly enforced. Anyone who resists such attempts at enacting this protective scheme will be considered an threat to the nation and the wellbeing of its people…"

Balinor's snort was loud enough to override the low recitation of the senator. Merlin glanced at his father sidelong as he jerked angrily upon his mattress, struggling in an attempt to roll over and away from the feed the Clip was still spouting. "Fucking kidding me… gotta be fucking…"

Glancing only once more at the Clip before deliberately tuning out the senator's words at the repetition of "for your own protection", Merlin tucked his legs up onto the bed and wrapped his arms around his knees before turning to face his father. "What do we do, Pappy?"

"What we always do," Balinor replied. "Fuck them, we don't have to bow down to their laws. A Protective Scheme? Protective my arse. It's just another way to try and filter out anyone that has any magical abilities." He continued to grumble under his breath in words too low and guttural for Merlin to discern.

Biting his lip, Merlin hunched his shoulders, sinking into himself. He wouldn't admit it aloud – he couldn't – but the thought of compulsory microchipping scared him. Scared him more than the threat of the census officials and their rag-tag team of Hunters that came knocking on the door once a year. More than the Spotters that raked the streets at night, or the Hunter squads that wandered them by day, camouflaged in the drab, torn and stained attire of the slum-dwellers incognito.
Because microchipping… there was no escaping that. The authorities preached that it was for the census, for the protection of the public, for health purposes. And for some, for non-magic users, Merlin considered that such a claim might even be valid. Balinor's old sort-of-friend Micko from down the far south-east-west sub-sector of London had been one to pick apart any gadget he could get his hands on and those filching hands had latched upon a microchip. Apparently it sent constant feeds of information to the authorities, of location, of vitals, of spikes in adrenaline that could suggest a potential threat to the 'nurtured' public. Perhaps it could be deemed a good thing, could indeed maintain the welfare of each chipped individual by discerning the very moment their health begun to deteriorate, that their lives were jeOGArdised.

It also, however, detected the presence of magic. It was like reading the release of a hormone, Micko had said, that with active use magic would flood something through the veins, enervating the nervous system, in ways non-sorcerers simply didn't exhibit. And that, coupled with the naturally warmer temperatures, the faster heart and respiration rate of a sorcerer, were clear enough indicators of the presence of magic. A microchip was a death sentence to a sorcerer. Merlin knew that, should he find himself chipped, he wouldn't even make it out of the Government Office he'd checked into before the Hunters were upon him.

And everyone knew where the Hunters took sorcerers. The term 'Facility' was what the authorities called the foreboding establishments that magical criminals were hauled into. The Pits was what Merlin knew them as. When someone went into the Pits, they didn't come back out again.

Shivering, Merlin glanced up to the Clip as it flared briefly in a slightly brighter light before dimming once more. Merely a glitch, he suspected. "… officials will be conducting a door-to-door examination of each sector of London as the first region to undertake this Scheme. It is by legal guidelines that each member of the public will submit to the monitoring of such officials, to ensure that microchipping has been undertaken and maximum protection provided for each individual of each sector. This will then be followed by a –"

"Shut the fuck up," Balinor spat, growling over the top of the senator. He hadn't turned back towards the Clip, giving the impression of ignoring it, but the rigidity of his back indicated that he was as hard-pressed as Merlin was to dismiss it entirely. "We heard you, already, you fucking bastards. We heard you. Just shut up, would you just…"

Staring with wide eyes at his father, Merlin kept his lips pressed tightly shut. Balinor got angry a lot of late and he figured it was likely a by-product of his inability to act out on that anger. He had no outlet, could only lie in his bed most of the time and ride out the heat of his fury. Such a blatant reminder of the rapidly descending status of their situation – of their world – always triggered such a response from him.

Merlin turned a glare upon the still-talking image of the senator. Still talking and most likely to continue with as such for minutes to come, only to end with profuse thanks for the lack of protest he anticipated and expected from his effective subjects. It was always that way, just as OGAs always lasted for at least ten minutes. Merlin had yet to witness one that had been any shorter.

He should just ride it out. He should just let the Clip finish while attempting to ignore the underlying threat in the senator's words that only caused Balinor to become more and more tense by the second. He could, but he didn't want to. And surely, surely just a little bit couldn't hurt. Magical scans didn't work without a thorough blood test and the use of high-tech machinery; unless someone saw, there was no way they would know.

And besides, there was no other way to silence the Clip.

Glancing briefly towards his father, to the tension quivering his shoulders as he continued to grumble
profusely, Merlin drew a deep breath. The acrid scent of the house flooded his nostrils but he strove to ignore it. And reaching down with a phantom hand into his core, into his very centre, he grasped upon the ribbon-like threads of magic that pooled within him. And he drew them forth.

It was almost like sewing, Merlin always thought. He knew this because he'd once been taught how to sew by the old mute man who had lived next door when he was... had he been four? He couldn't remember exactly, but the memory of being taught to sew, to mend the nylon clothing that had become like a second skin to him, was firmly affixed in his mind. More than any memories of learning from the Past. And he recalled it every time he drew upon those ribbons of magic and wove them to his will. To his direction, urging them with tentative nudges like a nervous child prodded by their mother from the nest-like safety of the home. Merlin wove those ribbons, felt the hot-cold swirl of magic rise in his eyes, and with his phantom hands shaped the magic as he desired.

The Clip still remained suspended like a glowing window in the centre of the room. The senator's mouth still worked, spouting repetitions of the same sentiments in different words. But now, at least, the sound was gone. Not muted, but silenced, as though a transparent wall had been erected between the Clip and Merlin and his father. With a sigh, Merlin sunk back against the wall beside the bed. The relative silence of the room, only the usual distant hum of machinery from the factories and the occasional shouts from their disgruntled neighbours echoing through the walls, was almost peaceful.

Balinor tensed further briefly, half-turning to glance towards the Clip. Merlin pretended he didn't notice him, didn't glance towards his father as he turned his shadowed eyes upon him instead. "You...?"

Merlin chewed on his bottom lip for a moment before shrugging. It was as good as an admission.

Balinor didn't respond immediately. When he did it was after a struggle to draw himself into sitting. His face became illuminated in the electrical brightness of the Clip as he leant towards Merlin. "I didn't teach you that."

Merlin shook his head, giving another shrug. He didn't really need to reply.

"Where'd you learn that? You haven't been practicing, have you?"

There was a note of real concern in Balinor's tone, worry even greater than the touch of anger. It was enough for Merlin to glance towards him, at which point he beheld the worry for himself. It invoked a tightness in his chest at the sight of his father's gaunt face so drawn and he hastened to assure him. "No, it's not... I haven't been practicing. It's just... just a memory. One of my memories."

Balinor stared at him for a moment. Perhaps he was attempting to deduce the validity of Merlin's claim. After a moment, however, he sighed and slumped back onto the bed. His head hit the mattress with a heavy thump. "A memory. From...?"

"I think it was one from my first, from experimenting," Merlin replied. He shook his head. "I can't be sure though."

"It was a clear one, though? Obviously, if you could weave complex magic like that."

Balinor gestured with his left hand towards the muted Clip. The replacement of worry with wary curiosity in his tone was very telling. He didn't even appear to be concerned that Merlin had used magic, despite the fact that it was a relatively unimpressive form, for all of its complexity.

"I suppose so," Merlin muttered. "I remember... I remember finding it out for myself. By accident. When me and my friend were hiding from Mammy. I... Will. I think it was with Will."
Nodding, Balnor heaved a sigh. "Will. He was from Ealdor, wasn't he? Albion?" At Merlin's nod, he drew another sigh. "Alright. Just… alright. So long as you haven't been using –"

"Of course not, Pappy. I wouldn't use my magic. Not at all." Merlin was firm in his words, firm for their honesty. He wouldn't, didn't, use magic. Had barely used it for more than a handful of occasions over the years. It was simply too dangerous, and that danger, the threat of the Hunters and the looming Facility, was deterrence enough. Even with the enticing desire to use the thrilling, soothing, warming power of magic itself.

No, what Merlin learned of magic came from his memories. From all of his memories, of both his past and his Past. His other memories. For as with every sorcerer, like a succession of Clips that played around him alongside his own life, Merlin saw his other lives. Those he'd lived years ago, centuries ago, millennia. Some were clearer, as though he'd indeed lived them only yesterday, and those memories always buzzed with the profound presence of magic. The others, when magic was less prominent, were like peering at the images through murky, shadowed glass. Merlin had to wonder if there were other memories, of other lives when he hadn't had magic at all, and whether he simply couldn't remember them for that lack.

It was always the memory of Albion, however, that was the strongest in his mind. He knew why, even without his father's speculation during one of the few times they spoke of the Past. It was because of the magic. Because of how he'd used his magic. For Merlin recalled that, despite magic being only slightly less shunned then it was nowadays, he'd once used it far more than he did at present. He'd explored that magic in the little village he'd lived in with his mother, and those memories, of the flooding relief, the joy and delight that had filled him when he'd allowed those ribbons of magic to flow through him, was as much a temptation as the urge to reach out for the magic itself was.

Balinor said that more memories would come. That as he grew and lived in his current incarnation, that so too would resurface the memories he'd experienced at his parallel age from a life long past. The prominent and the darker, the vivid and the blurry. Merlin found himself longing for those memories; many, if not all, were far brighter than the dark dankness and gloom of which he lived in with his father.

Like Albion. Albion was always bright.

Another flicker of the Clip drew Merlin's attention from where he'd been staring at the still, silent figure of his father. Guttering like a flame, the senator's face wavered slightly before shredding apart, leaving only the glowing, suspended pearl behind. That pearl remained only for a moment before, with a faint clicking sound and an audible whine, it darted like a firefly from the room. The absence of the little gadget felt like an oppressive weight had been lifted from the room. Merlin drew a steadying breath, felt his father draw a similar inhalation, before turning to his half-eaten dinner once more.

Scraping the bowl and ignoring the tinge of regret that surfaced that there wasn't more, Merlin unfolded himself from the end of his father's bed and clambered to the floor. Balinor hadn't moved since the Clip had left, and Merlin couldn't see for proof but he was sure he hadn't yet fallen to sleep. He'd been living with his father for thirteen years; he knew the sounds he made when he slept.

Reaching for Balinor's bowl, Merlin's fingers brushed upon his exposed forearm briefly and he paused. Froze. A familiar tightness clenched in his chest and he had to fight the urge not to shiver. Cold. His father was cold. Not the coldness of death, no, but more like the lesser warmth of someone who… someone who didn't have magic.

That was not good.
"Pappy?" Merlin knelt upon the bed to lean over his father. Lying flat on the mattress, Balinor was cast into shadow largely unbroken by the Spotters and constant night-light. "Pappy, do you feel cold?"

"What?"

"You feel cold. Should I get you another blanket?"

A grumble of mutters met his words before he spoke loud enough to be heard. "It's always cold in winter, Merlin. I'm fine. And we don't have any other blankets, anyway."

"I could get you mine –"

"Don't be ridiculous," Balinor cut him off. "Leave well enough alone, Merlin."

Silenced, Merlin hunched his shoulders slightly. He hesitated only for a moment, however, before withdrawing from his crouch on the bed. He scooped up the pair of bowls, his father's still uneaten, and slipped towards the kitchen. "I'll start a fire, then."

The sound of Balinor's jostling drew Merlin's attention briefly over his shoulder as he fell onto his knees before the single kitchen cupboard and began filching around inside. Balinor had heaved himself back up into sitting, and in the dim light Merlin could discern an angry cautiousness on his face. "Merlin, don't you use –"

"I'm not going to use it," Merlin overrode him before Balinor could expressly forbid him to use magic. "We still have some oil left. I'll just use the heater."

And pulling the ancient old kerosene heater from the cupboard, the matte sheen of the metal rusted and the cage encompassing the seat for the candle smudged with soot, he made good his claim. It was a struggle to tug the heater from its hidey-hole, even more of a struggle to drag it across the room. The iron feet left streaks in the dust across the floor, groaning at its passage. It was a heavy, unyielding thing, but Merlin would always be grateful for its presence. He'd used it only three times since they'd found it in the house and each instance had only reinforced his affection for the Relict. He couldn't imagine why anyone would willingly leave such a potentially lifesaving device behind when they'd abandoned the house, so had to conclude that it was simply too heavy to take along. Perhaps the previous residents of the house had been forced to flee on short notice too?

Despite his words, when Merlin finally managed to shove the heater all the way over to his father he had to use a spark of magic to light the flame. It was a testament to Balinor's weariness, his desire for warmth, that he didn't object. Merlin himself rarely felt the cold anymore. Not consciously, anyway; he felt it in the stiffness of his fingers, in his intensified tiredness and a greater difficulty in falling to sleep, but otherwise the chill was simply a constant presence.

Still, as the pungent scent of burning oil filled the air and a slow, tentative warmth seeped throughout the room, he had to admit that he could feel the warmth. Could feel it and revelled in it.

There were many who would frown upon the use of oils and coal for fuel. Many of the upper class members of society, those who lived in the high-rise buildings of Inner City London, would sniff disgustedly and glare down their noses at the use of such a filthy fuel source. Of course they would. Because they could. Because they could afford the panelling that drew upon the sun's radiance to power their lights, the currents that linked to the nearest wind farm channels, could afford to install an underground water mill in their own Land Plots beneath the towering buildings of their homes.

It was very easy to be disdainful of poverty when one lived without it. Merlin couldn't bring himself
to care, not when his need was dire. That every second the kerosene heater pumped warmth it also pumped toxins into the air... well, in that moment, Merlin considered the warmth more important. His father needed it. And Merlin was prepared to give Balinor anything he could to ease his discomfort. He refused to consider that the cold he'd noticed earlier could be anything but a temporary slide.

Even if a very rational, foreboding voice in the back of his mind whispered the truth. Sorcerers weren't supposed to be cold. They didn't get cold.

Balinor hadn't said another word after his cautioning. And when Merlin had fallen onto the end of his bed after lighting the heater, he'd similarly fallen back onto his mattress and huddled beneath his blankets. Within minutes, Merlin heard the distinctive hitch-catch-sigh of his sleeping breath. He'd always found it a comforting sound.

Dragging his blankets from his own bed, Merlin burrowed himself down into his seat. He wouldn't seek his own mattress, not that night. Unless Balinor objected, he'd sit on the end of his father's for the night. As he had the previous night, and the one before. As he had done every other night for as long as he could remember.

And closing his eyes, Merlin let himself drift into sleep. His last thought was a worry, and pointless worry that he couldn't answer:

What exactly were they going to do when the officials came knocking?

"What can I do you for?"
"I... um... can you be helpering me?"
"Helper... oh, you a foreigner, eh?"
"I'm... yes, I am not being from... around here."
"I'd reckon I could have guessed that, what with your funny accent. Not from these parts, I'd wager. Pretty far into the Continental Mainland, are you?"
"I... yes."
"No worries, sweetie, no worries at all. So long as you've got the rations tickets I can sort you all out. What you looking for?"
"Looking... I am looking for a clothing."
"I'd guessed as much. We are a Supplier, sweetie. I meant what were you looking for specifically? Lookie here, we've got a pretty big range. Some of the best, we've got, come right from out London. Off-casts of the Inner City folk, they are. Quite a trip too, but our boys deliver pretty far no protest."
"Need... I need clothing."
"Jeez, I got it. You've got no idea, have you? Right, lets make it simple: you show me how many tickets you've got – see, the blue ones, not the green ones; it's the blue for clothing – and I'll see how many I can... Jesus, sweetie, got a few of 'em, haven't you?"
"I have many, yes."
"I'll say. No worries, then, I'll set you on track. Reckon we could get you at least a half dozen good
outfits, couple of pairs of boots and maybe a jacket or two. You'll need a scarf, perhaps, probably a hat and some gloves, yeah?"

"Yes?"

"Yeah. No worries, then, if you'll follow me I'll take you round. Show you what we've got, like. Some of these are prime discards, you know. Some haven't been worn more'n once or twice, and all micro-knit synthetic material. Might even have a few woollens or cottons in here if you look hard enough."

"Good. That is good. I'll just –"

"Oh no, sweetie, you don't want those ones. They're girl slacks. Come over here, I'll sort you out."

"Ah. Thanking you. For helpering me."

"That's alright, sweetie. And it's helping, by the way."

"Helping…"

"You got it. Come on, darl, follow me."
The crack of Merlin's head upon the corner of the building blinded him momentarily. A volt of pain rushed through his skull, flaring the blackness of his vision into a sparking cascade of stars.

Then it cleared. He could see again. And fingers pushing off the muddy ground, ignoring the spinning in his head, he launched himself to his feet once more and pelted down the adjacent road.

It was raining. The constant, wearisome rain of spring that hadn't quite warmed up to the speckling showers of summer. The ever-present blanket of grey clouds that blotted out the sun cast a glare of blinding light upon the network of houses in the East-West-Eastern sub-sector of London's slums. The dribble rained down upon careless heads as wanderers and workers, weary elderly and stumbling children, wove in slurping steps through the clay-like muds of the streets. Holey tin roofs rung at the persistent patters, gutters showering streams to pool into the sludge below. It was a miserable day, but no more miserable than it was any other day.

It was loud. As always in the slums, there was an every constant buzz of conversation, of distant cries of anger and affront and demand that were always ignored, of hissing and puffing from the electrical tram that puttered in slogging loops on the central edge of each sector and the creaks and groans, the toots and honks, the ring of metal on metal and the smack of hammer on nail. All of it rebounded in a discordant melody with the pattering rain.

Merlin didn't hear any of it. It was merely background noise, a familiar echo of what had always simply been there and thumping in time with the rapid beating of his heart. His booted feet thumped in wet splatters through the mud, his breath gasped and arms pumped. He dodged through the thick crowds of dust-clad passers-by, vaulted over a stack of crates and ducked beneath a low hanging wire of thin, worn laundry guarded by a glaring youth. He didn't glance over his shoulder, not once, not even when he skidded into a slide as he rounded another corner and nearly collapsed in a heap.

He didn't need to spare a moment to peer behind him for his pursuers. Merlin could hear them well enough, and every ounce of his concentration was focused upon navigating the narrow, cluttered streets. The cries of the Hunters as they ordered civilians out of their path was a jarring contrast to the usual melody of sounds. Merlin's ears sharpened, pricking almost painfully in hyperawareness of the echoing calls.

Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid...

The litany of reprimands replayed over and over in his head as he ran, breath gasping and heartbeat throbbing in his temple. He didn't know who he blamed, who he accused of stupidity. Whether it was himself for being so careless with magic as to consider that even a brief display wouldn't be jumped upon like a cat upon a rat. If it was the petrified, shrieking young woman who had let out an endless, accusing wail at the sight of the magic that had been taken up by every individual within earshot. Or whether he cursed Kip for the stupidity that led him to sparking alight a fire in a side alley to heat up the broth they'd received for breakfast that morning.

No degree of warmth, no hot meal, could ever be worth being caught out for magic.

Stupid stupid stupid...
Merlin didn't know where he ran. He didn't have an idea in mind, only that he knew he had to keep running. He knew the streets of the East-West-Eastern sub-sector like the back of his hand after living there for two months. He'd made it his duty to know; it was for possibilities such as that he found himself in, possibilities he sorely hoped to avoid, that he became so acquainted with them. It was his only advantage, his only chance at evading potential Hunters should he be found out.

It was his only defence. It wasn't like he had anyone to protect him. Not since his father had died. Maybe not even before that.

Skidding across the ground, using the slickness of the mud to aid his propulsion, Merlin swept beneath a half-broken cart and the two children sitting atop it. Mud splattered in a shower at his passing, smearing his clothes to an even filthier degree. The shrieks of surprise following him as the children clambered off the cart to watch his continued flight were quickly drowned out by distance. Distance and the pursing calls of the Hunters.

A left. A right. Ducking around men and women and children, swinging from an overhang and barely flinching as it crumpled to the ground behind him. The rain smeared across his face, slicking his hair to his forehead and dripping from his chin but he hardly noticed. His chest ached, his breath scraped raw along his throat, but he ignored it. His life was on the line and he knew it.

He would not be taken to the Pits.

The cries of the Hunters were dwindling into the distance when Merlin's onward flight abruptly slammed to a halt. As he darted through a crossroads, he was thrown to the ground as a body collided into him. They tumbled in a succession of cartwheels, skidding and sliding through the mud in a dizzying heap. Once more Merlin was rewarded with a crack of his head to the metallic wall of a ramshackle building.

"Fuck! Fuck, fuck!" The figure lying atop of Merlin's tangled limbs swore in a splutter of growls. A familiar voice, though less so for the panic thickening it. Blinking to shake the fuzziness and ringing from his head, Merlin peered up into the face of his friend.

"Kip! Bloody hell, what are you –?"

"I'm sorry. Fucking hell, I'm sorry, Merlin, I didn't… I couldn't see where I was going. I…" He trailed off as he fought clamber from atop of Merlin. He didn't manage nearly as well as he might have hoped; Merlin lost his breath in a rush as a shoulder thrust into his chest, an elbow pressed into his windpipe.

Coughing, heaving himself into sitting as Kip managed to roll off him to sprawl onto the muddy road alongside him, he raised a hand to his head. It was still ringing, a painful throbbing beginning in sidelong lumps at the back of his head. He winced as he brushed his fingers across them, clicking his tongue when he drew them around and saw blood tinging his pale fingers rusty. He turned a glare towards his friend. "What the hell, Kip?"

Kip looked almost as bad as Merlin felt. Mud smeared nearly every inch of him, painting his dark skin even darker and glistening with gravelly moisture. His curly hair was matted by filth, spiked like a bird's nest, and streaks of mud broke up the faint scratch of stubble on his cheeks. His wide set eyes blinked in a squint back at Merlin, as though he were peering through blinding light at him rather than the slowly intensifying rainfall.

Shaking his head like a dog clearing its ears of water, Kip wavered as he tried to push himself to his feet. He keeled slightly, worryingly enough that Merlin raised an expectant hand to steady him. Frantic frustration faded into rising concern as Merlin heaved himself to his feet alongside him.
"I…" Kip shook his head once more. Wavering on his feet, one of his hands clapped around the opposite upper arm, hugging himself. Or holding himself together. "Sorry, I was… I wasn't looking where I was going."

"I gathered that." Whipped his gaze over his shoulder, to the left, the right, Merlin quickly scanned for potential eavesdroppers as he drew Kip into the shelter of an overhang. They crouched down to the ground, sinking into the shadows of the shack behind them. Thankfully, no one seemed to be sparing them a second thought; it said something of the slums that no one seemed to find their physical state objectionable, or even noteworthy. And filthy as Merlin was, he had to admit that he wasn't all that much more so than some of those that staggered past them, laden beneath baskets and boxes, pulling sledges through the mud or simply weaving distractedly with every step.

He leaned towards his friend, peering into his face. Merlin wasn't short by any stretch but the years age gap between them was enough that Kip had an inch or two on him. At sixteen, however, Kip had likely reached as tall as he would get. People didn't grow for all that long in the slums. Working from fifteen years of age meant the energy that would be attributed to height was better spent elsewhere.

What Merlin saw widened his eyes in immediate concern. The unfocused gaze Kip blinked around them that Merlin had attributed to their collision persisted and he trembled slightly as though cold despite the relatively mellow temperature of the day. Beneath his coating of mud, he looked pale. Worrying. It was worrying. Merlin had been practically joined at the hip with Kip for the past year, relied on him and cared for him as much as he would a family member. He'd been cursing his name for his display of pyromancy not minutes before, but now real fear took its place. "Kip, what -?"

He was cut off by a distant and distinctive call. Sticking his head out from their shelter, Merlin peered down the narrow snake of the road, nearly crushed between the lines of houses. His eyes widened. There were the Hunters. Hunters, evident more by their howling call than for their appearance, dressed as they were incognito. If anything could sound like a pack of hunting wolves. Merlin knew that sound. He remembered it, from lifetimes ago when he'd been chased himself. He knew it from the times he'd shrunken into the shadows as some poor, other target fled and failed to escape their clutches.

Quickly switching his attention back to Kip, he grasped him on his shoulder, ignoring the wince his friend gave. "What's wrong? What happened? Are you –?"

"It's nothing," Kip replied, shaking his head. "Nothing I can't handle. I just…" Dropping his gaze down to where his hand clasped his opposite arm, he tentatively pried his fingers from the filthy sleeve.

Merlin drew in a sharp breath at the scorched polyester fabric and crisped skin beneath. The rawness was smooth and faintly glossy, pink like a burn. "Shit, Kip. Did you -?"

"Got shot," Kip grunted. His lip curled in distaste, at the injury, at his attacker. Possibly at his own stupidity. "It just clipped me but you know how electrical bullets are."

Merlin nodded, eyes widening further. He knew. He knew all too well; after what had happened to Balinor, it was hard to forget. The pulses of electrical charge that shot through the body at a mere grazing touch was enough to induce potential seizing, though whether whole-body or local depended upon the area struck. More importantly, though, it temporarily stunted a sorcerer's magic. Temporarily, sometimes, or at others permanently. Merlin had seen both effects. There was nothing quite like living with one who was bereft of the magic that had once so sustained him.

"Kip," Merlin began, but he was silenced off by the sharp glance his friend turned upon him. Sharp
compared to his previously unfocused gaze, but still a little hazy. That stare silenced Merlin, stuttered his tongue. He didn't know what he'd been about to say, but was just about to continue anyway when Kip's eyes widened and in a jerk that tumbled them both to the ground hissed, "Get down!"

The tell-tale sizzle of an electrical bullet crackled over Merlin's head as he fell. Fell, and crashed atop of Kip in a jarring collapse reminiscent of their previous collision.

Rolling to the side, whipping his head around himself in a scan through the densely packed bodies of his fellow civilians for a potential attacker, Merlin slipped his hand towards his forearm, the other towards his belt. Towards a weapon. Any weapon.

It didn't take long for him to identify the Hunter that had shot at him. In the opposite direction to the way Merlin and Kip had come from, the opposite of what he would have expected, the distinctive dark green of Hunter wear atop a bug-like helmet, waded and pushed his way through the crowds. That in itself was bad. The Hunters that had been chasing Merlin before were all dressed in disguise, to blend in. This one must have been called from base. That was very, very bad. Cries of anger, of affront, met the Hunter's forceful progress, but any potential onlookers rapidly scattered.

That was agreeable enough for Merlin. Pushing himself up into a crouch, he waited just long enough for the Hunter to lurch through a break in the crowd and heft his gun before he flung his arm forward and let the throwing knife fly.

It could have been the rain. It could have been that the blows to his head were more unhinging than he'd thought. Or it could even have been that the light, balanced nature of the blades that meant even the slightest breeze could throw it from its intended path. For whatever reason, the knife didn't strike where Merlin intended it to.

"Fuck," he spat at the sight of the Hunter falling to the ground, silently clutching at his shoulder. Within a second, he had another knife in hand and had drawn his arm back to launch once more.

Only for that arm to be grabbed by Kip as he tugged Merlin to his feet. In a stumble, with only a sharp, "leave it!", he dragged Merlin swiftly past the crumpled Hunter and down the road. Merlin had barely regained his senses, barely steadied his feet to run with a modicum of surety, when he heard it. Heard the too-loud shouts of Hunters "Hut-Hut-HUT!" that couldn't be more than a block away from them rebounding off rusted walls and thin roofs. And all thoughts of his misfire slipped his mind as his feet took flight.

Their race began again.

The Hunters were truly like a pack of wolves. Coordinated, sleek and in synchrony, they moved as though their motions were choreographed. Merlin knew it was because they communicated, that their damned electronics linked them together and enabled their correspondence. Merlin and Kip may know their sub-sector like they would the backs of their hands, but the combined forces the Hunters presented them with were great. Too great.

They wove down alleyways, scaled a low building to vault between rooftops before falling back to the road below. They darted through carts, jumped through storefronts and swung from overhangs. Within minutes, Merlin found himself panting once more, both from exertion and the rising fear coursing through him. Because he could hear them, could feel them. They were drawing closer, closing in around he and Kip like a pair of snapping pincers. The demanding calls of the Hunters, like baying hounds, echoed off rooftops. Hounds with a scent, and those hounds seemed to draw from far and wide. Merlin heard a shout to his left, to his right, one from behind and one at a frontward diagonal.
They were being surrounded. It was all he could do to pump his legs faster, to keep pace with Kip who lurched at his side as he leap over the mulling masses of slum-dwellers more that he slipped through them.

It was a block from the canals that Kip once more grabbed Merlin's arm, jerking him from his headlong flight and whirling him into an alley that was little more than a crevice between two leaning buildings. Merlin immediately dropped into a crouch, dragging Kip down with him. Keep low was what Merlin had learnt. Low or high; the Hunters were less likely to notice those outside of direct eye level. Or at least they were slower to notice them.

Kip was panting even more heavily than Merlin was. He clutched his arm as though it still pained him, and likely it did. Like a burn, the mar of electrocution stung with an ever-increasing ache the longer it was left exposed to the air. Merlin had only experienced the feeling once before and it was one he wasn't keen to repeat. He still bore the scar on his chest from the shot.

The call of a Hunter rebounded into their little crevice and caused Merlin to cringe further into his squat. His heart was pounding painfully in his chest, fear sending shivers across his skin and eliciting a sharp sweat. There were few things that truly scared Merlin these days – he'd simply seen too much – but the Hunters, the Pits, the government officials… they would always be a looming terror that hung over his head.

Pressing himself into the splintered wall behind him, Merlin peered sidelong at Kip. His friend was shaking even more than he was, but there was a determined expression on his face as he in turn peered into the street side. He shifted slightly, shuffling further from the open road until he was sitting nearly on top of Merlin, pressing him into the sharp corner of the adjacent walls. At another echo of the Hunter's holler, he turned towards Merlin.

"This is not going to end well."

Merlin shook his head, not in denial but in emphatic agreement. He knew as well as Kip did that when the Hunters begun a chase they were a dog with a bone until them pinned their victim. That was just the way the Hunters were. Merlin fathomed that they even revelled in the thrill of the chase, that they wouldn't be quelled until their bloodlust was sated.

"What do we do?"

Swallowing, Kip glanced briefly over his shoulder again. The sounds of approaching Hunters grew louder. "We can't stay here –"

"No shit."

"- which means we'll have to keep running. And," he turned back towards Merlin, and his dark eyes were intense. "We have to split up."

Merlin was silent for a moment, eyes widening unblinkingly up at Kip. "No. No way."

"Merlin, there's no other –"

"No. Pappy always said that to split up was a death sentence for one person or the other. What, do you want one of us to get caught by the Hunters?"

The silence that Kip offered was reply enough. Merlin shook his head, kept shaking it until his neck began to hurt from the whiplash of the motion. He wasn't scared that Kip was abandoning him; Kip would never do that. Merlin knew that as surely as he knew Balinor would be just as unlikely to leave him. Or had been, until…
"Kip, don't. This is... we can... Pappy said that it's better to..."

"Your Pappy's dead, Merlin," Kip cut him off sharply. Brutally, too, and Merlin suspected he knew it from the hardening of his face as Merlin flinched. "This is just how it works. You or me, its one or the other."

"But what if we..."

"What if we what? Keep running? What, you want to head for the Western sector?" Kip snorted, though his voice had taken on a hysterical resonance. "That'll never work. You've seen the hunts just as much as I have. They'll chase us into exhaustion."

"We could hide."

"Where? Where the fuck could we hide, Merlin?" Kip was gasping his words now. Terrified? No, he was beyond that. Merlin could smell it reeking from him as strongly as he could scent the overwhelming aroma of rain, the stench of churned mud and the lingering pungency of sewage that pervaded it all. "Just because we managed to fly under the radar with the microchips doesn't mean that they still can't track us."

Merlin had nothing to say to that. He knew Kip was right. The methods of the Hunters, the officials and the authorities may not have been able to directly sense a sorcerer but that was about the only restriction. They could trace heat senses, trail footprints through mud that had been wiped clean of tracks days before. They could draw truths from the tongues of hapless onlookers that didn't even know that they held knowledge of an incident in the depths of their minds. They could find a fleeing rabbit in its own network of warrens – there was no escape.

"Kip..."

It hurt. It truly ached, crushing something deep within Merlin, something that had nearly been eradicated by the loss of his father. It was the part that he couldn't consider, couldn't even think about for the pain it elicited. Kip had stemmed the bleeding that had seeped from him in the months after Balinor's death, a death that Merlin, with his frustrating inability to heal, had let happen. Kip was the replacement for the family he'd lost. He couldn't lose him too.

Kip looked miserable, barely holding himself together by his determination. Somehow, out of nowhere, he pulled forth a sickly smile and offered it to Merlin. It was more of a grimace than a grin. He swallowed loud enough to be heard over the increasingly loud patter of rain, the murmur of slum-dweller and the increasing shouts of Hunters. "It'll be okay, Merlin. It'll be okay."

"No, Kip, it bloody well won't..."

"It will," Kip enforced. In an impulsive motion he leant forwards and wrapped his uninjured arm around Merlin's neck. The smell of fear flooded his nostrils as his face was pressed briefly into Kip's shoulder, the warmth of dry breath as he leant into him, pressed a chapped kiss on his cheek and whispered hastily in his ear. "Dammit, Merlin, one of us will get out of this if it kills the other." He huffed a strangled laugh. "You never know, if you really fuck up it might even be me that survives."

And then he was gone. Almost too fast for Merlin to see, he pushed himself to his feet and launched from the crevice back into the street. Merlin fell forwards at the sudden loss of support and, on hands and knees, peered out onto the road. His eyes stared widely, horrified, as he caught a last glimpse of Kip disappearing into the throngs. Mere steps behind his passage a Hunter, one of those dressed in
his green, bug-like uniform, from a perpendicular street and darted after him.

Every muscle within Merlin screamed to chase after his friend. He didn't want him to leave, didn't want to be left alone once more. He'd almost—almost—rather be taken to the Pits than to be left by himself once more. It was… the thought was nearly as terrifying as being subjected to the greedy, torturous fingers of the authorities, of their sadistic officials and the scientists under their employ.

Almost. But not quite.

The self-preservation embedded like an extra organ inside Merlin's gut urged him into action. It was the same response that everyone in the slums possessed, one that could only rarely and only in extreme situations be subverted. Kip had done it, Balinor too. Merlin… Merlin hadn't been able to push himself to that. Perhaps he never would. The fear, the intense compulsion to survive, was the propulsion behind his urge to withdraw further into his crouch as another Hunter sprinted past through the thinning throngs.

Nearly nauseous with guilt, crumpling beneath an upwelling of self-disgust, Merlin edged further back into the crevice. Turning, he glanced upwards at the wall behind him. It was high, too high to reach even standing on his toes, even with a jump. Kip might have just been able to reach, his limbs just a little longer than Merlin's, but it would have been a near thing.

With another glance over his shoulder into the street, a half-hearted scan for onlookers, Merlin allowed the magic to flow through him. The ribbons of power coiled in his legs, affording them strength and power impossible in the average man, and with a leap he launched himself up the wall. He overreached, soaring too high for his hands to grasp the jagged edge of the roof, and instead tumbled in a roll and a hollow thud of rusted metal. He released the ribbons of magic as he paused for a moment, curling into himself and fought the urge to sob.

But he didn't. He didn't cry. He hadn't cried in years, couldn't even remember the last time he'd done so.

Pushing himself to his feet, Merlin lurched into a run. Almost without his knowledge, he felt magic thrum through his muscles once more, lending strength to his weakening limbs. His magic was like that, acting upon his Past memories and experiences long abandoned to distant recollection. He didn't specialise in his skills, not like Balinor did. Not like Kip had. His magic just acted.

As he ran, falling from the rooftop onto the road once more, Merlin prayed that Kip would escape. That he would survive. The fire that ran thick in Kip's magic may have been useless for the most part, but in a fight? If he had to abandon flight and face the Hunters?

Merlin hoped that he burned them all.

"How'd you fly under the census radar?"

"I told you, my father was reluctant to submit me for microchipping due to my sickly youth."

"Sickly youth? Really?"

"It is as I've said."

"You honestly expect me to believe that you – you were a sickly youth."

"Is there something wrong with such an assumption."
"Listen, have you seen the roaches from the slums? Have you even seen the mites from the outer ring of the Inner City, from Middle City? Ever stood beside someone who's really been wading though the mud 'in their youth'."

"I have."

"You… have."

"Yes."

"And you didn't notice any particularly distinctive difference in your physicality, hm?"

"I don't understand what point you're attempting to make."

"…you… don't. Well, maybe not your body, but apparently your 'sickness' effected your mind."

"Believe what you will, I speak the truth."

"Right."

"Look, all I want is to follow the law. To do what I am supposed to do. I am offering myself up for a chip –"

"So good of you. You seem to have neglected the fact that the Compulsory Microchipping Scheme was passed over ten years ago. It's a little suspicious, truth be told."

"Isn't that indication enough of the fact that I'm not a dubious fellow?"

"Ha, dubious fellow? You're killing me, kid. But in saying that, I suppose you'd be right. Can't imagine a sorcerer would offer himself up on a silver platter like this."

"No, I'm certainly not a sorcerer."

"Good to hear. Right then, I'll just get you to take a seat here and I'll ask you some questions while I get – Josif! Josif, over here. Got a Chipper."

"Just a regular, sir?"

"Use your brains, Josif, does he look like he'd be anything but a regular?"

"No, sir."

"Then get him a regular. And you. Don't move, don't budge a muscle, don't even twitch or it'll hurt more. Don't give me that face, it only stings for a minute. You should be happy they insert them in your forearm these days rather than in the back of the neck like they used to."

"Nasty stuff, that, hey sir?"

"Nasty stuff. Right, just a quick once over. Where abouts are you from?"

"From?"

"Yes, from. Jesus, kid, if you're going to repeat every question back to me it'll be a very long interview."

"I'm from… from Exeter. Glaston?"
"Glaston? You've taken a bit of a trip then. Sea change?"

"No, this is further from the sea, actually."

"It's a turn-a-phrase, kid. Never mind. Right, father's name?"

"..."

"Kid, don't make me ask again. If I have to ask again –"

"Jackel. Jackel Montague."

"Montague? That's a big family around that region I've heard."

"Hm."

"Mother?"

"Thyme?"

"Asking me or telling me, kid."

"Thyme."

"Any siblings."

"Not that I know of."

"Right. Reason for entering the city of London?"

"Sea change."

"Ha. Real funny. Pull the other one."

"No reason, really. I just wanted a change of pace."

"I'll bet Glaston's pretty quite compared to some of the towns round London, eh?"

"Thank you, Josif, for your unnecessary contribution. If you're ready, get it over with and take yourself elsewhere."

"Sorry, sir."

"Right. So. Non...assessable. We'll just need to get your measures, your vitals, fingerprint and blood sample."

"Blood sample? What do you need my – ah, what the -! What are you -?"

"Told you it would hurt for a second. Just don't touch the spot where the chip was inserted for a couple of days and you'll be right."

"...Go hIfreann leat3..."

"What was that?"

"Nothing."
"Right. So that's all... I think we should pretty much be able to leave it at that. Thank you, Josif, that's enough."

"Right you are, sir."

"Now. I think we'll just need your contact details, an emergency contact, and... you've enough to afford your own health benefits? Insurance? Have any investments?"

"I... yes, I'll just... I'll fill the papers out myself."

"Here, use my stylus. Oh, and I forgot. Hell, how'd we miss that?"

"What?"

"Your name, kid. I've asked who your parents are and where you're from but left out your name."

"..."

"So?"

"...my name is... Arthur."

"Arthur?"

"Yes. My name is Arthur."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Just as an aside (again), the translation of Arthur's Gaelic is "To hell with you."
Merlin's back ached as he sculled his narrow gondola with practiced rows. The canal was thick, more sludge than a free-flowing river, and branched in increasingly narrowing trickles from the central circuit that ran between Inner City and the slums. A moat, Merlin had always considered it, and it truly was. No slum-dweller could pass further than a few steps onto the comparatively golden terrain of the upper class city without being pinned and ejected by an official, even if they did manage to pull themselves through the thick river. It simply wasn't done. That, and most anyone who dared to submerge themselves in the river was effectively signing for their deaths.

It was already dark. Merlin could still see his way easily enough, but the natural light of the sun glaring through the ever-present cover of clouds blanketing the sky had faded. Only the yellowish radiation of light pollution remained, casting the city of London in an ugly, gloomy glow that accentuated the constant, dismal black-brown colouration of the streets and houses, but Merlin was grateful for it nonetheless. He rarely finished with his scavenging and cleaning duties before sundown and appreciated the assistance in directing himself back towards the port.

Sculling was the dead-end job that Merlin had been embedded in for years now. There were precious few desperate enough to lower themselves to the filthy task, the back-breaking labour of ploughing through the slurry-like river in search of anything that could vaguely be constituted as valuable while unclogging blockages that dammed the waterways in gradually building heaps of stink and muck. Not only was it exhausting, consisting of long hours from dawn till dusk every day that the workers could drag themselves from their beds, but it was dirty work. Toxic at times, too, when directed to the factory regions or following a particularly dry spell when the rivers drained lower than normal, leaving an even thicker scum to plough through.

Still, Merlin couldn't complain. He couldn't dispute the wearying labour, the long hours with little reprieve, the minimal ration tickets that had resulted in his limiting his trip to the meal Suppliers to breakfast only for the past three years. It was that or submit himself to the more abusive, degrading roles of the slums, the ones that involved the upper class pleasure-seekers and more often than not ended in mutilation or drug-dependence to escape the nightmares inflicted by the more 'reputable' members of society. Merlin would take the potential lung disease from the fumes of the canals to that.

For work he must. Work or forsake the residency tickets that afforded him his single room shack embedded to the far north of London. He would be pushed further, to even greater limits if it was asked of him. Because a job, even a menial, backbreaking and thankless job only slightly more endurable than sculling, was impossible for him. Impossible for him to obtain. Impossible without a microchip. These days, a chip-check was an obligatory part of the orientation process; learn the ropes, meet the people, check the chip for general health, criminal status and magic. The Scheme introduced five years ago saw to that.

It was only the jobs that no one else wanted, that they resisted undertaking like a mule digging its heels into the mud, which Merlin could possibly scavenge. And it was widely known, acknowledged if not voiced, that those who sculled the waterways were the dregs of even the lowest slum-dwellers. The criminals. The corrupt. The magical.

Merlin rarely saw other scullers. Such was the nature of their disagreeable status, the constant fear of discovery and prosecution that he carried himself, that kept them out of sight. That urged them into the shadows, down the canals that were sheltered from public view to slip beneath the notice of authorities and Hunters. Merlin did the same. He knew the waterways as well as he did the streets of the north-east-northern sector in which he lived. He knew them well enough to know where to
avoid, which routes he should undertake during the day and which were better left until nightfall.

One quickly became acquainted with such routes.

The port that Merlin pulled into hardly warranted the term. At the end of one of the branching channels that stretched and dammed the sludgy stink, the trio of jetties backed onto a worn wreck of a building that would barely suffice to shelter from the barest hint of heavy weather. A pair of gondolas were already pulled up alongside two of the jetties, but their scullers were nowhere to be seen. It was to be expected, really; had Merlin heard the familiar, telling slurp of an oar through sludge, seen the shadowy figure of a fellow worker drawing through the moderate darkness, he would have made himself scarce within seconds. Such was the nature of the beast.

Clambering with practiced motions from his gondola, hooking the narrow boat into the jetty with a foot, he tied it stable with chilled, stiff fingers. Then, with a muffled groan barely louder than a sigh, Merlin rose to standing. The crack of his back and the accompanying complaints of his muscles drew a wince, but it was all familiar. All a part and parcel of the job description. Sighing heavily, pausing to check that the gondola was definitely tied stably enough, he turned with hands tucked beneath his armpits, and set a brisk pace off towards his house.

Not his home. The room that held the hard, uncomfortable pallet that could barely be called a home. It was just a house.

Merlin knew the difference these days. Not because he'd ever experienced anything so much as a home in this life – he'd barely stayed in a single residence for more than a few months at a time – but because of the knowledge he'd gleaned from past lives. From the cottage he'd lived in Gaul with his parents and younger sister, the succession of houses he'd resided in the quiet little town in Prussia, even the keep he'd grown up in under the Scottish laird who his father had sworn fealty to. Those were homes.

Most prominently, however, as he always did, he remembered his home from the time when the United Kingdom had been called Albion. Albion was always clearest in his mind, even clearer than the memory of his far-flung life in Ísland, the self-contained land to the southeast of the now-termed Greenland; magic had been, if not welcomed, at least overlooked in that time.

Albion was different. Magic had been shunned when Merlin had been a child in that time, but the memories of his past life beneath the reign of King Uther had always been his most prominent. He remembered the cosy, quiet little village of Ealdor, where he'd lived with his mother and escaped the notice of the world at large. Life had been easy, then, simple and rustic. The people had lived off the land in a way that Merlin's present life could not. They'd grown their crops, nurtured their livestock and reared them to lay eggs, carry milk and grow wool as often as they were slaughtered for their meat. There hadn't been so many people, the houses had been worn and simplistic but homely, and neighbours had been... friendly. Actually friendly.

And then there was Camelot. Merlin had only recently begun to recall his life in the grand city of the king, the largest of the Kingdom. At eighteen, considering his life in parallel to that he'd lived in Albion, he'd have been there for perhaps a little over year. Maybe more or maybe less, he wasn't sure; time was often difficult to discern from Past memories. But as he recalled with fondness his childhood and youth in Ealdor, so too did he remember those most recent months in Camelot.

He remembered the castle. He recalled the winding streets that, while still tracked with their own degree of muck and filth, were certainly cleaner than the narrow, cloying roads of London's slums. He remembered the amicability of the people, the joys of the festivals and the buzz of the marketplace. He recalled Gaius, his beloved tutor and guardian, the friend he'd made in Gwen, the beautiful ward of the King Morgana and the companion he'd made, however briefly, in Lancelot. He
remembered the surplus of servants he worked alongside that always had a kind word or a moment to spare for gossip, the blustering cook, Geoffrey the librarian and the respectfully distant yet still friendly enough Knights of the King.

And he remembered Arthur.

As he turned down one of the darker alleys between wearily leaning houses, Merlin shook his head fondly. Fondly and with a little exasperation, a little irritation and just a hint of amusement. For that had been the nature of his relationship with Arthur, his 'prince'.

The prat.

It was with more fondness than irritation, good-humour rather than anger, that he recalled their exploits. Many, in such a short time, he reflected. From their very early days, the annual tournament in which Merlin had helped Arthur defeat Valiant, when he had aided him in his search for the cure to the poison Merlin had taken for him, when he'd rescued the prince from the clutches of the vengeful Sidhe Sophia. All without Arthur's knowledge, of course, and though Merlin frequently pondered at the obliviousness of his 'superior', wondered how he could possibly have missed so many moments in which Arthur's triumph would have been impossible without magical intervention, there was no malice in the recollection. No more than there had been at the time. Perhaps even less than there had been, for Merlin recalled as one did a discarded emotion that he'd been frustrated by Arthur's lack of recognition, that Arthur had been far more likely to disapprove of his supposed laziness than to appreciate any competency on his part.

He remembered that annoyance, the disgruntlement that had underscored his growing affection for the frustrating prince. For despite their difference in stations, despite the respect that Merlin technically should have afforded to Arthur... affection had definitely been growing. Merlin had to wonder if, at the time, when he'd been living it himself, reality had been a little too firmly affixed beneath his nose to realise that. Now, in the retrospective consideration that he pondered every Past memory, Merlin appreciated the fact that Arthur was, if not quite there yet, slowly becoming a friend.

He wondered if that friendship had ever grown, ever reached a semblance of fruition. That frustrated him at times, that he couldn't peer into the future of the Past and perceive the answer for himself. How satisfying it would be, to know –

"Hut-Hut-HUT!"

The sharp call that cracked into the night, riding over the more muted sounds that constantly flooded every corner of the slums, snapped Merlin from his thoughts. He froze in step at a T-section of roads, muscles immediately rendered painfully tight, and eyes peeled immediately wide as he cocked his head to the sound. Westward, it echoed from. A different direction entirely to his house, but with the sudden terror of the closet guilty, Merlin felt himself shiver with building fear.

He would always react so. The call of the Hunters would always strike fear into his heart like nothing else.

Merlin remembered with a physical ache the last moments he'd shared with Kip before his friend disappeared never to be seen again. He recalled the chase as though it had happened but yesterday and his blood still boiled with nervous adrenaline, twitching with the urge to spring into flight as Merlin had found himself doing for days afterwards. And further back than that, he remembered the first attack he'd experienced from the Hunters, the one that had led to his father's seizures. The one that inevitably led to his death.

Merlin would regret, would always regret, that he hadn't blasted his magic into response earlier. That
he hadn't acted to protect those two people that he cared for before it was too late, before Balinor had been shot and Kip had thrown himself to the baying hounds. Too slow, he'd been. Too fearful.

Too foolish in his reflexive self-preservation.

Even knowing his foolishness for what it was, however, Merlin couldn't stem the stomach-clenching, mind-throbbing ache of terror that flooded through him at the sound of the Hunters. The shivers that scrambled up his spine at the ringing "hut-hut" that bespoke predators giving chase. Like the baying of wolves, their calls were distinctive and indicative; they'd found a trail, a scent, and it was either run their prey into the ground or seek until found and a battle ensued.

Or a slaughter, more correctly. Against electrical weapons, what could a single sorcerer do? Even a wielder of aggressive magic couldn't penetrate the conjured shields of the Hunters, couldn't combat the seizing effects of an electrical bullet, a Prod or a pair of Zappers. Flight was the only option, but even that could only end one way.

For most people, Merlin reasoned. He still maintained that there must be an out, a way to escape, even if there had been no evidence of such a possibility that he knew of.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, squeezing his eyes together for a moment to steady himself, to urge himself into motion, Merlin dropped his hands from his armpits to his belt. His fingers brushed against the hilts of his knives, touching just briefly the finger holes of his karambits secreted in their sheaths before he swallowed resolutely and set off once more towards his house. They weren't chasing him, Merlin knew. They weren't; he'd not used magic in weeks, and that he had used was barely more than a strengthening spell to urge his weary muscles just a little further to drag his body to his bed before succumbing to exhaustion. He knew this, that the only crime he was committing was scraping along the edge of curfew, but the disjointed growls of the Hunter's calls still unhinged him as they rung in his ears.

The solitude of his house was all that was on his mind, chasing even memories of the Past, of better lives and comforts from his thoughts. Merlin kept his head bowed and chin tucked, eyes fastened on the splatter of muddy footsteps on the sludgy road before him. It was always better to step in the footprints of others when trekking through the mud; he found himself giving undue attention to the task, avoiding the pitfalls of smooth, clay-like mud that sucked like quicksand.

As such, he nearly missed the boy hunkered between a pair of stinking, mildewed metallic crates. Merlin likely would have missed him entirely had he been staring ahead, but the downward cast of his chin caught sight of him from his periphery. It was a testament to his constant state of awareness that, even purposefully attempting to distract himself, Merlin still noticed him. And when he did, he paused in step.

There was something about sorcerers, some… feeling that could be felt, even without properly seeing them. A sense for the magic, felt even when not actively searching for it or gauging the strength of a particular individual. It couldn't be felt by anyone but another sorcerer, Merlin had discovered, and some magical being couldn't even feel it at all.

Merlin could. He'd always been able to feel it, taste that faint glow, smell the soft warmth, and feel the gentle sweetness in a confusing subversion of senses. Only when he'd grown older had he truly been able to register where it came from; the first time he'd really known it for what it was had been with Kip. Kip had taught him so many things – an understanding of his sixth sense was merely another one of those things.

When Merlin glimpsed the boy, barely more than a dark smudge that could have been mistaken for a pile of rags had the slums been a place where a pile of rags could accumulate without being
appropriated, he knew what he was. Knew it with the certainty that he knew his name was Merlin and had, by and large, always been Merlin. He paused in step and turned fully towards the boy. And even without seeing him, without meeting his gaze, he knew the boy stared back.

And he knew, in that instant of frozen exchange, that it was he the Hunters searched for.

It was a standoff for a moment. Neither Merlin nor the boy moved, the distant calls of the Hunters wailing like a siren, rising and falling as the wolf pack swept closer and closer. Not too close, but approaching. And then the boy rose to his feet and understanding flooded through him.

"You know," Merlin said conversationally yet pitching his voice almost too low to carry the short distance between them. "If you were looking to escape notice, wearing that cloak isn't the way to go about it."

The boy – or perhaps he was older than a boy for he was barely a head shorter than Merlin – glanced down at himself, at the heavy, floor-length cloak of mottled blacks and greys that shrouded his body and hooded his head. "What do you mean?" He replied in a hushed tone, voice thin and wavering.

"Your cloak. You're from a commune, yeah?"

"I…"

"An OGA was sent out two days ago of a sorcerer 'nest' out west near Oxfordton. Apparently the magic users were engaging in terrorist behaviour and were eradicated, but some got away." He paused as the boy flinched, shoulders hunching slightly. "They had pictures. Most everyone wore those cloaks."

The boy shifted from one foot to another and Merlin could make out a hand slipping from the folds of the cloak to tug on the lapels slightly. Nervously, he suspected, and perhaps a little guiltily.

And so he should, Merlin thought. Wearing such a distinctive cloak like that. No one wears cloaks around here. Hardly even Middle City folk can afford that sort of thing. And it's pretty distinctive.

"I didn't… I don't…" The boy stuttered, mumbling. His voice wavered even more, and his shuffling feet drew him further into the deceivingly un-protective shadow of the quiet building behind him. "You won't…"

Cocking his head sharply at another call of the Hunters – they were definitely getting closer now – Merlin cast a glance around himself. The streets were deserted, even if it was still half an hour or so until curfew was enforced. He wasn't fooled, however. The walls had eyes, as they said, and ears when those eyes were closed. Anyone could be watching, listening, joining the very distinctive dots that would paint a picture of the reality of the scene. If Merlin could deduce at barely a glance that the boy was from the eradicated commune, surely others could.

Frowning, biting his lip, Merlin made a split decision. It's not like it's something that can be seen anyway, he rationalised as, closing his eyes to hide the tell-tale golden glow of his eyes, he drew upon the ribbons of his magic. In a sewing weave that invisibly grew into existence, he stepped towards the boy to encompass him in the muffling dome that he erected. It was by and large the same that he'd been using for years, since his father had been alive, and he considered that he could weave the folds in his sleep.

When the hot-cold rush of magic had swirled and dissipated, Merlin opened his eyes. The boy was pressed up against the wall barely a foot from him, shadowed by Merlin's presence, but to his surprise didn't seem to be altogether worried. Not by Merlin's proximity, nor by his situation. Instead,
he seemed almost… fixated. From beneath the edge of his cowl, mouth hanging open slightly, he peered up at Merlin with eyes of an eerily pale blue.

A little unnerved and very aware of the rapidly approaching Hunters, Merlin glanced over his shoulder. "I've just spelled us into silence; no one should be able to hear us." He glanced towards the boy. He was still staring. Merlin ignored it. "You know I'm not going to hurt you. You can feel that, right?"

It was a bit of a shot in the dark; not all sorcerers could feel, could recognise, their own kind. That was something Merlin had discovered over the years, in the few instances he'd approached one he recognised as possessing the same abilities as he. But the boy only nodded fervently, eyes still unblinking and fixated.

Taking an uneasy shuffle backwards – that gaze truly was disconcerting – Merlin tucked his fingers back beneath his arms. He didn't feel cold – never truly felt cold – but the loss of feeling in his digits was a little worrisome. "Right. So you'll at least try and believe some of what I'm telling you?" He didn't wait for the boy to nod. "You need to ditch the cloak. You need to find a quite nook and lie low if you can't get out of London entirely. My best recommendation? Take a dive through the canal. You'll come out with pneumonia at best, infected with something that would kill you if you have any open wounds, but the grot seems to dampen the trail the Hunters are following you by. Then –"

"Emrys."

That single word silenced Merlin. Not because it held any meaning for him, but because of how it was spoken. Or not spoken, he realised. For the boy… the boy didn't speak. His mouth didn't move at the words that could only have come from him. He simply stared up at Merlin with that disconcerting gaze that was almost awed.

Merlin took another step back. His uneasiness was only growing and he felt more the fool for acting upon his inclination to assist the evidently lost and helpless boy. What had happened to his self-preservation instinct?

The baying of the Hunters seemed to grow abruptly louder, suddenly more pronounced.

"What?"

"You. You're Emrys." A small smile settled upon the boy's closed lips, a strange contrast to the solemnity of his face, his wide eyes and rounded, childish features. For tall as he was, he was still definitely young.

Shaking his head warily, Merlin frowned. "No, I'm not this Emyrs. That's not my name. What do you –"

"Yes. Yes, you are. You are Emrys." The voice – telepathy, Merlin realised with wonder; he'd never met anyone capable of mental speech before – was just faintly telling as being unspoken now. He could tell the difference now that he knew. It resounded faintly, almost an echo, as though spoken through a hollow tube. "You look a little different, not quite the same, but you are. I remember you."

"We've never met –"

"In Camelot."

That silenced Merlin, drew his attention from where it was half distracted by the gradual approach of the Hunters. Camelot. That name would always captivate him as an ideal, a Past perfection. Almost a symbol. "You know Camelot?"
The boy nodded rapidly. "I remember. I remember you. You helped me. Saved me. I will… I will never forget what you both did for me. Emrys –"

"That's not my name," Merlin repeated, but less vehemently this time. He'd met some people from his Past, could understand the boy's description of "a little different" and "not quite the same". They looked similar but for slight variations, enough to notice they were different but not enough to overwhelm the similarities. A sharper nose, darker skin, a little taller or a little thinner. But Merlin had never met anyone he'd known from Camelot. Not even his father, for Merlin had never known Balinor in the times of Albion. In subsequent lives, from the passing flickers of recollection, he knew that Balinor had always been his father, knew that he would have to have been when the name of the land was Albion. Even if he had never met him in person.

To meet someone from Camelot, someone who remembered, who he could talk to about… about Camelot… Merlin didn't recognise the boy, couldn't recall his visage even accounting for the slight differences that once-familiar faces bore, but… the boy evidently remembered him.

But Merlin didn't have the time to question him. Not now. Not when a whip-crack of suddenly louder calls drew his attention over his shoulder once more.

Turning back quickly to the boy, he made a shooing gesture. "Your cloak. Take your cloak off."

"What?"

"Take it off. You can't keep it on; people will recognise you." At the boy's further hesitancy, he stepped forward and untied the cord that fastened the cloak around his neck. It was a testament to the boy's sudden change of heart, to some trust in their long-ago history, that he didn't withdraw from Merlin's touch, didn't shrink from the contact or even frown at his presumption. "Besides, it'll weigh you down when you have to take a dive in the canal."

That caused the boy to flinch. "What? In the – the river?"

"W-why?" The boy sounded genuinely scared.

"I told you," Merlin said, bundling the cloak together and tucking it under his arm. Waste not, want not. The clothes the boy wore beneath were sturdy enough, if a little inadequate for the temperature; trousers, thin shoes and a long-sleeved shirt wouldn't raise comment in the slums, except for perhaps the fact that they were markedly cleaner and less patchy than any Merlin had seen before. "The Hunters are on your tail. They've got trackers and scanners that can trace footsteps and heat signatures. You need a pretty huge disruption to break a trail like that."

"But… but the canals are –"

"Filthy. Disgusting. Toxic and destructive. You'll be lucky to come out the other side alive." Merlin ignored the sudden whitening of the boy's face, his skin becoming nearly iridescent in the dimness of the night. Catching his arm, he peered down into his eyes for a moment, meeting his wide gaze. "But that's where I come in. By yourself, you're dead. I'll keep you alive."

Finally, after what must have been minutes, the boy blinked. His mental voice waivered slightly but with something else besides his prevalent fear. "You'll help me?"

"I will," Merlin nodded. Not because he was all that altruistic, or because he was spitting in the face of his reflexive self-preservation, as he most certainly was. Not even because, in some small part of his mind, Merlin considered that helping the boy escape the Hunters might, in some small way,
compensate for his failings with Kip. With his father. It didn't, not really, but even just a little…

The boy's eyes shone with their eerie paleness. That small smile that seemed just slightly unnatural on his lips arose once more. "Thank you, Emrys."

Fingers fastening around the boy's wrist, Merlin spun back onto the road and set off at a brisk pace. Not towards his house anymore, but towards the well-like waterhole that Merlin recalled from his sculling routes. If memory served him correctly – which he made a point of ensuring it did – the hole was marginally less toxic than its surrounding waterways. A product of being distant from the industrial region of the northern sector.

"My name's not Emrys, you know," he said over his shoulder, barely sparing the boy a glance. "It's Merlin." He kept his voice low in spite of the muffling dome of magic that still surrounded him.

The boy gave a huff, the first noise, Merlin realised, that he had actually verbally made. When he spoke, however, it was through telepathy, and shrouded in fuzzy warmth that Merlin found at once bemusing and slightly disconcerting for the hint of fondness. Who even felt such affection for someone they'd only just met?

"Then, thank you, Merlin. I... I can't tell you how happy I am to finally meet you. Again. I've remembered you for years now, you know."

"Is that right?" Merlin murmured. "I don't care.

"Hm. My Cerdan used to speak of you even before I could remember you, though, and I..." He trailed off and Merlin sensed a sadness in his ensuing muteness. It didn't take much of a leap to discern why. The boy's commune, his whole world, had been destroyed by the authorities not half a week before. Most likely this was killed Cerdan alongside it.

"It's better not to think about it," Merlin found himself muttering as he stepped up his pace to a trotting run. The Hunter's calls hadn't abated; they hadn't drawn nearer since Merlin had drawn the boy into motion either, but he didn't let that soothe him. The more distance the better.

"You speak from experience?"

Merlin was silent. He presumed that silence would be telling enough, and speaking would only intensify the quiver of pain that had taken up residence in his chest. A long residence, too; it had long since established its place.

"Sorry."

"It's okay." Merlin shrugged off the apology. "I don't care."

"I..." The boy trailed off, pausing for a moment. When he spoke again, it was with the determination of one forcibly changing the topic. "I'll repay you, you know. I will. For helping me and everything."

"There's no need for that. And to be honest, you don't exactly look like you're in a position to 'pay' anyone anything of use."

"No. I will. I always repay my debts." He sounded oddly solemn given his childish status, but then Merlin reasoned that he had reason to be. Most children his age, younger than him even, already struggled with the ability to smile with any sincerity.

"Whatever suits you," was his only reply. And he hastened their pace to a run. The distinctive "hut-hut-HUT" nipped at their heels.
It was only after they'd been running for minutes on end, nearly half an hour and chewing into curfew, that the boy spoke once more. Spoke through pants despite his words being telepathic, his shorter legs struggled to keep pace with Merlins. Not that Merlin slowed; they couldn't afford to. "I never introduced myself."

"No, you didn't," Merlin replied curtly.

Another brief silence. Then, "I'm Mordred."

Merlin spared a half second to glance over his shoulder at the boy. The stare he'd affixed Merlin with was faintly expectant, as though he anticipated the name to hold some specific meaning.

It didn't and Merlin knew why. He'd encountered people before that he'd met in the Past, people that he didn't yet remember but knew him. Merlin probably could have explained that to Mordred, but… Instead, he merely tilted his head in a short nod before facing forwards once more and lengthening his stride. Mud splashed around his shins in heavy splatters. "Good to know."

Neither spoke another word, verbally or otherwise, as they continued into the night. The predatory calls of the Hunters followed them, snouts to tracks, until an hour later there was no more trail to follow.

"Surely you understand that we can't just let you walk out of here."

"…"

"This is government property. These are government files. You are trespassing. Do you have any idea of the severity of this situation?"

"…"

"You're not making this easy for yourself."

"Then tell me what could possibly make the situation easier for myself."

"We've already been over this. Tell me the truth and –"

"I've told you my reasoning."

"You've told me a reason. I happen to think it's absolute bullshit."

"Then that's your opinion and I doubt there's much I could do to sway you from it."

"You could start by expanding a little from 'I'm looking for a friend'."

"That is entirely the truth."

"If it was a friend, there are far more legal methods of finding out such knowledge."

"Methods I've already attempted to pursue to little fruition."

"You know what that means, don't you? That you can't find your 'friend' through legal means suggests basically one of two things." 

"And what might they be?"
“Don’t play the fool with me.”

“I’m not.”

“…”

“…”

“Fine. You can’t find them? Then, if they’re a reputable citizen, they’re most likely dead. And if, as I suspect, they’re not, it means they’re not chipped.”

“Why would they not be chipped?”

“You can’t seriously be asking me that.”

“I assure you, I’m deadly serious.”

“…”

“…”

“It means they’re bloody criminals, is what. Surely you know it’s illegal to go unchipped these days.”

“I do know that. Yet my friend is hardly a criminal, nor likely to go unchipped.”

“Then they’re dead.”

“I have reason to believe they’re not.”

“Wait, so you don’t know where they are, you think they’re not a criminal –”

“They’re not.”

“- and yet you can’t find them? I think you’re being idealistic.”

“Believe what you will. I think we’ve both reached the conclusion that you won’t believe my claims no matter how I persist with them.”

“… Whatever. This just leads me back to my primary reason for questioning. What you’ve done is illegal. Ill. Le. Gal. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Desperate times have called for desperate measures.”

“There are procedures you could have gone through –”

“Procedures I have attempted. For months now. All to be deflected, to have my attempts diverted and proved equally fruitless to this find.”

“Months? Months is hardly much to comment upon –”

“I don’t have the luxury of waiting for longer.”

“Look here, I could charge you with trespassing and have you put on trial for this.”

“For trespassing? Really? They do trials for that these days?”

“You bet your arse they do. Especially if I were to ask for it.”
“Really? I wouldn’t have pegged you for one that could push for a trial had you wanted to.”

“Hey! You –”

“Aren’t you just a security guard?”

“Listen, you little –”

“I doubt that you’d be able to ‘push for a trial’ with any immediacy, and in the wait before you actually managed I’m sure I’d be more than capable to work my way out of this… misunderstanding.”

“You… you little fuck.”

“I have been called as much on numerous occasions, yes.”

“Alright, that’s it. Listen here, you –”

“What exactly is going on here?”

“…”

“…”

“L… Lady Nine!”

“Mr Kempt. Is there a problem here?”

“N-not at all! Not at all, my Lady. I… what are you doing down in security? I mean, no disrespect like, but… I mean, is there something I can help you with?”

“Nothing you personally can help me with, Mr Kempt. I noticed a disturbance on the security feed that piqued my interest and came to take a look for myself.”

“It piqued… your interest?”

“Indeed it did. Perhaps you could see to allowing me some time with this gentleman here?”

“I… my Lady, I don't think –”

“Mr Kempt, it wasn't a question.”

“… Yes, my Lady.”

“Thank you. Then if you would…”

“…”

“Well, now that we have our privacy, Mr Montague, perhaps we can drop the pretences?”

“… What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t lie, Mr Montague, when I said I'd been watching the feed. More than that, I have been listening. Looking for a friend, you say?”

“…”
"I wonder if I could request the identity of your friend?"

"…”

"Not a criminal you say, and not dead that you are aware of. And yet the records demonstrate their absence from the microchipping census. How curious…"

"What do you want?"

"Quite simply, Arthur, I am curious as to whom, exactly, you are searching for."

"Who I’m – wait, what did you just –?"

"Let us drop this pretence. I know who you are. And I have a suspicion of the type of people you may be searching for as well."

"Don’t… I don’t know what you mean."

"Arthur, enough. You may speak freely with me."

"That’s very easy to say. You yourself said you were listening on the feeds —"

"Feeds I have since rendered silenced. There will be none to overhear your words, none to start at the mention of, say, a certain collection of sorcerers you pursue single-mindedly."

"… I don’t –"

"Whom is it that you search for, exactly? It interests me how you came to unearth such specific knowledge, but you have evidently come to the understanding of the reincarnations of certain individuals from centuries past. I hazard that you have deduced that only sorcerers or those touched by significant magics are reborn?"

"What… how do you…?"

"I have my ways, Arthur. So tell me, whom is it that you seek? Is it your sister? Gaius, perhaps?"

"Gaius?"

"Ah. You did not know of his warlock status, perhaps?"

"Didn’t know… no, I wasn’t aware."

"Hm. Well, he was indeed a warlock. Both he and his wife. Yet you evidently do not seek him. Is it perhaps… you seek your manservant? Emrys?"

"…”

"You’re not surprised. I can see that he did finally reveal that he was a warlock to you. I had wondered if he would."

"That’s none of your concern. And how – how do you even know? Who are you? How do you know so much?!

"Sit down, Arthur. Your excitement is unwarranted, your anger even less so. I know because I have made it my duty to know. Just as I have made it my duty to know the identity of those individuals captured by the government and constituted sorcerers and a 'danger' to the country."
"How?"

"How what? How do I know? I have my ways. Granted, the months, even years, it takes to discover the identity of those in custody often result in any potential action on my part being too late."

"..."

"So. Am I right? You seek perhaps your Emrys?"

"...Merlin?"

"Ah, yes. That was the name he was known by, wasn't it?"

"You – how do you know all of this?"

"All of what?"


"I have my ways."

"You were there, weren't you? You were alive, in Albion. How? Who?"

"..."

"Are you a sorcerer?"

"I preferred the term priestess back in the day."

"Who? Who are you? And what do you want?"

"..."

"Tell me, or I'll hold my tongue just as well as you appear able to."

"How very childish of you."

"I'm merely lowering myself to your level."

"Similarly childish. But I have nothing to hide. Not from you. What I want is easy enough to answer. I want to preserve the last figures of a once great era, those who preserve the knowledge of magic from the height of its time."

"Preserve the knowledge?"

"Indeed. Much has been lost over the centuries. And with each rebirth, a little more of that knowledge falls into oblivion. It is my hope that, in gathering those who still retain some of those skills from times long past, such knowledge will not be further lost to time."

"That's your reason? That's your only reason to help all those people who –"

"I can only do so much, Arthur. I'm merely being realistic in my... choosiness."

"Unbelievable..."

"You can disdain me all you like. It is simply a necessity."
"You're skirting my question."

"Not skirting. Just… delaying."

"That's essentially the same thing. What are you hiding?"

"Drop your suspicions, Arthur. Times have changed. The worst you can imagine of me to be is no longer the only person I am."

"You're preparing me."

"In a way, yes."

"…"

"…"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Lady Nineve Nine. I am a member of the Confederation for the Moderated Treatment of Magical Peoples. A rather upstanding member, if I do say so myself."

"And?"

"And… I was once a priestess of Albion. A great priestess, many considered me. You may know me more specifically as Nimueh."
The flickering radiance of the OGA had barely fizzled into darkness, the Clip not yet disappeared through the half-open door of Merlin's lean-to, when he started towards his pallet. With three quick strides he was across the room, fallen to his knees and rummaging for the tightly wrapped bundle shoved far beneath.

"Merlin?"

Dragging the bundle towards himself with a grunt, Merlin paused only to breathe warm air onto his stiff fingers before dropping his attention to work at the ties. In seconds they were ripped apart, the bundle unrolling in a clatter of metal to reveal his array of knives.

"Merlin, don't."

With practiced efficiency, he looped a second belt around his waist and set about outfitting himself in weaponry. Merlin never went out of the house without at least half a dozen such weapons about his person, and not only because he was usually out after nightfall these days and thus more at risk of the greedy hands of desperate thieves. But situations like this?

The words of the spokeswoman on the OGA sounded once more in his head. "It is with relief and determination that we have unearthed yet another nest of terrorists, the magic users dwelling right upon our backroom at the east-south-northern sub-sector of London. We as your government, sworn to protect you as citizens, request that all individuals remain behind closed doors this night at your earliest possible convenience, for as an roach nest stirred into activity the terrorists will undoubtedly flood the streets upon realising that their violent intentions and hidden location have been discovered..."

Violent intentions? What, their 'violent intentions' to survive? Everything about the OGA, of the cordial yet unwavering words of the senator, had driven Merlin into cold hatred. No, it was more than aggravation. He was furious fury. Terrorists was the common name used for sorcerers and indeed, most every 'terrorist' had some magical ability these days. How could they not, when even possessing magic immediately incriminated them?

No, it was not the name that struck Merlin so. It was everything else. The 'nest of terrorists', the 'roaches'… the very tone was curled with distaste, immediately giving negative connotations to the already hated. And 'backroom'? The backroom to the Inner City, perhaps, but the dismissive region the senator spoke of encompassed the majority of the city itself. The slums were the vast majority.

The very OGA itself was not a precaution to the civilians as much as it was that very accurately analogous 'stick' prodded into their midst. A warning that they were discovered with the hopes that it would urge the discovered into flight. To flight and right into the waiting jaws of the Hunters with their electrical weapons and suppressants. It set Merlin's teeth on edge, such provocation.

But even worse than that – the east-south-northern sub-sector… the 'nest' of sorcerers there… they were…

"Stop it, Merlin. Stop."

Merlin didn't pause in his strapping, in his tying and looping and snapping of knives into place, slipping into boots and hooking around his neck. But he did spare a glance over his shoulder for Mordred standing rigidly across the room.
In the four years they had lived together, Mordred had grown into a tall young man. Taller than most individuals managed in the slums, a by-product of his slightly less depraved childhood in his now-extinct commune. Taller than Merlin, even, and Merlin wasn't particularly short. He'd thinned out, however, and tall though he was, at seventeen he was rangy and spider-like for the thinness of his limbs. But even with that lankiness Mordred was a good-looking young man. Such a feature was likely more pronounced due to that thick air of entitlement he seemed unable to rid himself of, but Merlin would never reprimand him for it. He would rarely even tease the presence of such a characteristic, for it would be just one more thing in his favour when the inevitable struggle for finding a job arose.

They'd become close, the two of them, and teasing had nonetheless become a common feature of their friendship. Even with the five-year age gap, Merlin could identify that. And it wasn't only because of the shared memories of better lives in times of Albion, for truly, blissful as they were to reflect upon even as they were painful in their provocation, they were simply memories. Nothing more and nothing less, a simple moment of heartening reminiscence to ease the mind before plunging back into reality. Even after Merlin remembered when he'd first met Mordred that had hardly changed.

No, they seemed to simply… click. To get along. And though Mordred had still never spoken a word, barely made a noise save the occasional grunt or quiet chuckle, they conversed on an amicable level. Merlin never would have considered when he'd encountered the strange commune boy and spirited him away from the Hunters that he would be living within him. But it was comforting to be living with another sorcerer. Merlin saw few enough of his own kind.

In that moment, however, in the contrasting dimness that followed the absence of the Clip, Mordred was anything but amiable. His eerily pale eyes stared unblinkingly at Merlin from beneath the lank curls of his dark fringe. His arms were folded across his chest and the slight jut of his jaw bespoke objection even in silence. Mordred may have had a comparatively more sheltered childhood than most slum-dwellers, may not have seen beheld of the evils that London life rained upon its outer residents at a young age, but he was determined and resilient nonetheless. Perhaps even more than most of his neighbours for he believed he deserved better.

He was, Merlin had reflected on more than one occasion, far less humble than he had been the last life they'd encountered one another.

"Stop what?" Merlin finally asked, as, slipping his final boot knife into place he rolled his emptied weapons stash into a coil and kicked it under the bed. He rose to his feet and turned to face his friend.

Mordred's mouth didn't open as he answered, jaw only tightening further. "You know what."

"Enlighten me."

"You're going over to east-south-north."

"Impressive. Your deductive skills have developed swimmingly."

"Shut up. Just shut up."

"Your objection is noted –"

"Merlin, don't you dare go."

"You're ordering me now?" Merlin couldn't bring himself to be kind to his friend, not in that
Mordred widened his eyes imploringly. "Do you want to die?"

"Of course not," Merlin replied striding across the room. He bent to where he'd discarded his thin, patched jacket and drew it over his shoulders, wrapping the ragged length of his scarf around his neck as he did so. "I thought I'd proved my will to live on multiple occasions over the years."

"You're walking into certain death if you go. You know that."

Merlin turned towards his friend and folded his arms in a mimic of Mordred's stance. "It's hardly a certainty."

"It's as good as. Death or the Pits, there's only two possible outcomes. I know which one I'd rather."

Merlin clicked is tongue. It was a struggle to keep a reign upon his seething anger; not at Mordred, but at the situation at large. A situation that didn't leave him time to discuss further or make excuses. "That's very morbid of you," he said, and made for the door.

Only for Mordred to step into his path. "I know why you're going."

"Really?"

"Edwin wouldn't want you to try to help him."

Merlin narrowed his eyes. The objectionable crossing of his arms became more than just mimicry. "You'd know that, would you?"

Mordred's jaw jutted forwards once more. "Of course he wouldn't. He wouldn't want you to die."

"We've literally just been over this. I've no intention of —"

"Well, that's exactly what you're walking into!"

Gritting his teeth, Merlin made to move past Mordred once more. Only for Mordred to step into his path once again, a hand darting out to still him this time. "I swear, Mordred, I will knock you out of the way if I have to."

"What, with your knives?"

"If I have to."

Mordred released a faint sound almost like a hiss. "I know you want to protect him. I know that. And I know why."

"Do you?" Merlin narrowed his eyes further. He didn't have time for this. It was a far enough trip across the northern sector as it was. He would have to run as though his feet had wings to get there in time, and even then he doubted he'd be able to do so without the aid of magic.

Mordred nodded sharply. "He's the only other person from Albion we've come across. One that you knew, anyway. I know that means as much to you as it does to me."

He was right. Merlin couldn't dispute his reasoning. He'd like to think that he'd run to the aid of any sorcerer he knew should the death warrant be tacked to their forehead, but he knew that to be an untruth. Edwin was a special case, even knowing of their antagonistic Past. For that antagonism had remained in the Past. Without mutually reaching such a conclusion, just as all sorcerers were want to
do, they had overlooked the blemish of their arguments and reflected solely upon the positives. Sometimes Merlin would still feel a flicker of dislike bordering on hatred for the actions of his friend in a life lived long ago, but that flicker rapidly died. It was simply… in the past. And far removed from their friendship of the present. That friendship, barely more than a year in the making, was almost as important to Merlin as was his friendship with Mordred.

Pressing his lips together, Merlin inclined his head in a single nod. "Fine. You're right. And if you do understand that then you'll know why I've got to go."

"Even if it means –"

"Even then," Merlin cut him off, gesturing sharply in cessation. He didn't mean to be curt, didn't want to be, but Mordred was incessant. "Do you have so little faith in my abilities to survive, Mordred?"

"It's not that –"

"Because you know, I did manage a good eighteen years perfectly fine before you came along to caution me against acting 'foolishly'."

"I know that." Mordred's telepathic voice was a sorrowful murmur. He sounded deflated, and that deflation showed itself in the sagging of his shoulders, the dropping of his folded arms and the crinkling of his brow. "I'm just…"

"Worried?"

Mordred's pale eyes flickered up to meet Merlin's. His lips thinned slightly before he nodded slowly. "I don't want to loose you. You're the only –"

"You'd hardly lose me, Mordred," Merlin brushed aside with false confidence. "I told you, I've no intention of dying. And besides, even if something did happen," Merlin fought to push a smile he didn't feel onto his lips, "it's not like you need nurturing back to health anymore. Your illness from the dunk in the canal have pretty much worn off after a couple of years, I'd say."

"That's not why I…"

"I know." Merlin's poor attempt at a smile fell from his lips. He lifted a hand to clap onto Mordred's shoulder. "I know it's not."

"What happens if you do die? Or even worse than that, what happens if the Hunters –"

"Let's not jinx it, yeah?" Merlin cut him off. He skirted around Mordred, the urge to start through the door in flight a physical itch. "I'll be back in a bit. I just… I'll just help Edwin, alright? Just Edwin."

Mordred turned with Merlin as he edged around him. The expression in his eyes was baleful, mournful. It wasn't at all encouraging, but at least he'd stopped being objectionable. "Please don't die."

"Lack of faith, Mordred. Such a lack of faith."

"Use your magic if you have to."

The smile Merlin cast over his shoulder as he stepped through the door wasn't reassuring, he knew. He hadn't meant it to be; if anything it felt savage. "Oh, don't worry. I will. I'll see you in a bit, alright?" And without waiting for a reply, to the sight of Mordred peering from the darkness of their
shared shack, he darted out onto the street.

Merlin didn't expect Mordred to come after him. Not in the slightest. That was simply not something that was done in the slums. Not for friends and rarely even for family members. Balinor had been an exception in defending Merlin in the instance he'd been shot, and Merlin had responded in kind. Kip had been different as well, and care for him though he did, to that day Merlin knew not why his friend had sacrificed himself for him. He may hope that he would respond in kind, but Merlin knew that were their positions reversed that even in retrospect he would have been hesitant to do the same.

And this time? With Edwin?

Mordred was right. Merlin shouldn't go. He shouldn't. But it was more than simply the desire to help a friend, even at the risk of jeopardising his own safety. It was more than preserving one of only two people that shared his fond remembrance of Camelot, of Albion and a better time. Merlin acted because he felt like he had to. Felt the need to live up to the precedent that had been set by his father, by Kip, foolish as that precedent was. It was perhaps the wrong reason to act, but it was the real one.

And Merlin couldn't help himself. Act he must.

Pelting down the narrow network of roads, feet splashing through muddy puddles that send sprays spurting in his wake, Merlin raced towards the east-south-northern sub-sector of London's slums. He was a fast runner, he knew, but even in knowing that he similarly knew that no amount of natural speed would get him across three sub-sectors in the time that he needed to. He would get to the 'nest of terrorists' and most likely find it in shambles with not a soul remaining within a kilometre's radius. Hell, he'd be lucky to get there by morning.

So Merlin called upon his magic. It was as simple as breathing, allowing that core energy to suffuse him and grasping the roiling ribbons in his mental grasp. He coiled it around his legs, beneath his skin to lock onto his muscles, and with a mental nudge, urged it into action.

The wind slapped his face painfully as he sped into breakneck speed.

It was dangerous, to use magic in such a way. Merlin knew this from experience; to cast magic upon one's body, especially in a way that would hasten exhaustion, would hit him like a ton of bricks when he released it. But he didn't have a choice. And as he raced with the speed of an electrical Speed-Skimmer down street after street, leapt up buildings to spring across rooftops and nearly bounced off walls in his haste, he couldn't bring himself to regret it. Merlin could hardly even think of regret in that moment, so caught up was he in the empowering force of magic coating his limbs and his determination to reach his goal. He didn't even consider the sight he might present to the unsuspecting onlooker; they likely wouldn't have been able to see much of him as he passed anyway.

He was late. Of course he was late. It had taken over an hour to get to the sub-sector, even with his enhanced speed. But he wasn't too late. As Merlin drew closer to his intended destination, the internal compass that seemed born into every slum dweller leading him onwards, he heard it. The "hut-hut-HUT" of the Hunters was nearly drowned out by the cracking of punctured metal, the BOOM! of building foundations sinking to collapse, the shrieks of fear and cries of pain and terror that fought for greatest volume.

The sounds filtered into Merlin's ears at nearly the same moment that he saw first hint of vibrant, fiery orange. The spits and crackles of flame were added to the building sound, and the smell of damp plasterboard, of burning clothes and – horribly – charred meat, drew into his nostrils with every sharp breath.

Merlin hated that smell. He'd grown to hate every smell.
The mass of people abruptly sprung into visibility when he scaled another roof, rolled across the echoing tin and dropped to the muddy round on the other side. People everywhere, tripping and falling over one another as they scattered from the crossroads that had become the centre of the chaos. The sea of bodies was vastly overwhelmed, however, by the seeping throngs of dark green, helmeted Hunters that swept through them. Their bug-eyed visors flared with reflective white-blue light with each electrical blast of their guns, each stab of their Prods that downed the slum-dwellers into writhing convulsions. The sorcerers dropped like wheat before the merciless swipe of a scythe. Barely a handful of their number stood to fight with their own weapons of magic rather than flee.

Merlin abruptly ceased his headlong flight as he fell into the chaos. Fighting his stumble, ignoring the resulting weakness of his knees, he released the hold of his magic on his legs. A block away from the scene illuminated by fire, adorned in garlands of spitting sparks and acrid smoke, Merlin pressed himself into the nearest wall and dropped into a crouch.

And swiftly, with sure fingers, he tugged his knives free from their sheathes.

Merlin had no intention of fighting the Hunters. He didn't want to, knew he had to avoid attracting attention to himself. But that didn't mean he wouldn't fight if he had to. And fighting with knives was far less incriminating than doing so with magic. He'd resort to both if he had to. His determination, his resolution that even should he resist helping the other sorcerers then he would at least aid Edwin, thronned through his mind. There was no question about it now. Merlin simply had to.

He darted from the shadow of the wall in a low run, the fingers of his right hand slipped through the hole of his eight-inch karambit, those of his left wrapping around a push dagger. They fitted into his closed fists like the unbalanced claws they so resembled, comfortable with their familiarity. He'd been using knives for as long as he could remember, riding on the half-forgotten memories of Past lives in which both he and his father had been masters in the knife-dancing. It was one of the more prominent memories, the truly resounding ones, and Merlin had simply practiced upon the skills those memories provided.

Merlin had never abandoned the art. Certainly not when his father died. For the slums were dangerous, even disregarding the prowling authorities and the slinking Hunters that ghosted down the narrow streets on sleek, polished boots like owners of a grand estate. Comrades in circumstance they may be, but no slum-dweller would hesitate to pick a pocket, to scavenge a tin of eco-meat from the doorstep or ransack a house abandoned for more than a day. There were needs that must to be met, desperate needs that could only be deterred by the sharp edge of a knife.

It was like a dance, true knife-fighting. One-on-one combat. What Merlin fell into as he skirted around the masses, however, ducking between shadows and darting for cover, was not a dance. He hid rather than struck with his claws. When a Hunter turned their reflective bug-eyes upon him and hefted their gun aloft to shoot, he leapt forwards to slice the supporting tendon in the arm before striking the figure over the head in a blow that knocked him to the ground. And when a Prod swept within a hairsbreadth of him, he swung his right arm about in an arc and sliced the thick, wired tubing of steel as though it were butter before his magically-reinforced karambit. And throughout, he kept his eyes peeled for Edwin.

It was manic in the midst of the mania. Crazed, and it was a wonder that the Hunters managed to successfully strike at the terrified, fleeing sorcerers while avoiding one another. But manage they did, and with horrifying speed Merlin beheld the thickness of bodies begin to thin. As he pushed his way along the stretch of narrow road outside of what must have once been the base of the commune, the ‘nest’, he was forced into aggression. He cut through synthetic armour and parted it to slice at skin as often as he dodged the notice of the Hunters entirely. Three times in a bare minute he was forced to drop to his knees to avoid a bullet, and sucked in breath in a hiss when a fourth grazed so close to his
cheek he could smell the crackle of burning hair. Merlin rapidly descended not into passive searching but into fighting. And it didn't slow, not even when he did spy Edwin.

His friend was one of the few that had chosen to retaliate. Edwin had always been like that; determined and resolute, committed to his vendetta when he concluded that such a course was the only one he would pursue. It was the wrong idea, in Merlin's opinion. Edwin's magic was focused upon natural powers, through the connection to animals and insects with only a mild skill in wind elementals.

His winds were being pushed to their limits. A veritable hurricane surrounded him, whipping his matted blonde hair into even fiercer tangles and dragging them across his face. His mottled grey jacket was nearly torn from his back, flapping like wings behind him, and his arms were held up before him in a pose of aggression that was more an attempt at some semblance of control of the riot of air currents around him than actual aggression.

The Hunters strained to push through the winds, and their efforts worked in their favour. Nearly half a dozen of them honed in upon him, each with their own electrical gun and sparking Prod. Bullets fired into the winds but miraculously Edwin's hurricane diverted them. Diverted, yet at a lesser and lesser distance with each shot.

Merlin shouldn't help. He shouldn't. He should stay in the relative safety of the half-collapsed overhang of some unidentifiable house, remain as he was temporarily from the direct attention of the Hunters until an opening appeared for him to flee. He would have to make a beeline for the nearest canal, for the Hunters would be upon his trail within the hour, but at least he would escape. At least he would survive, if he could fight the disease that would result from such a submersion.

But Merlin couldn't do that. In a mimic of Edwin's fierce resolution, the determination that hardened his dark eyes, Merlin knew he had to help. That he had to offer his friend aid if he could possibly in any way do so. It was no longer a want but a must. And he'd act with his magic if he had to.

Slipping the push dagger back into his belt, Merlin tugged a trio of throwing knives from their sheaths instead. He didn't like to kill, didn't really even like to hurt anyone, but… Desperate times.

He drew back his arm, and loosed the knives. One, two, three, one after the other. And before they had even hit their mark, Merlin launched himself from his cover and towards his friend.

Two of his three targets went down, one dead and the other with a cry. The third lurched with the force of the knife embedding itself into his shoulder but didn't fall. Instead, he spun to face Merlin and swung his Prod like a soaring baton.

Merlin met his swing with his karambit, falling to a knee and retrieving another claw-like knife from his belt. In a spinning slash, an upward swing, he scored one, two slices to the man and three, another strike across the helmet that sent him reeling though largely unharmed. Merlin spun a second later as some sound or sixth sense alerted him to an assailant charging him from behind. He dropped to his knees in a muddy roll to spring up again in a grounded crouch. And then he launched himself at the Hunter without another pause.

It was a fierce fight. Merlin fell from one Hunter, downed another and dodged a third. He let his body flow in fluid movements from attack to defence to parry to stab. He wasn't sure if Edwin even noticed he was there, didn't pause to check and exchange even a brief nod of acknowledgement. He couldn't spare the attention.
There were more than six Hunters. Their number grew to greater than twelve after barely a minute of fierce fighting. Merlin was good with his knives, great even or so Mordred had said, but it was no match for electrical weapons, for sheer overwhelming numbers. He'd barely wetted his blades before the obvious presented itself.

It was useless to try and fight, to think he could win or even escape, without magic.

So magic he used.

Knife slices gave way to phantom propulsions of a gestured hand. As a Hunter leapt towards him, Prod raised, Merlin bodily threw him in the opposite direction with a blast of power. As a pair of attackers charged at him from opposite directions, a sweep of his arms spun them around and over him to crash into one another. Merlin had always cast telekinesis with ease, so easily that Balinor had once commented that he believed he could do as much in his sleep. He put those skills to ferocious use in batting away the Hunters that charged towards him like flies with a swat. He knew, in a detached part of his mind, that Edwin stood at his back. And with his friend's winds straining in their thinning barrier, repelling the electrical bullets fired towards them, they managed to withhold the assault.

Briefly.

Merlin would reflect that he had known it wouldn't last. He'd known they two would falter. He may have hoped for otherwise, may have considered that escape or even victory could be on the horizon. But reality could not be denied. And when Edwin's winds wavered for just a moment, when a darting bullet slipped through their defences and struck and Merlin's friend had fallen to the mud in a shuddering seizure he'd known it was over. His barrier of wind fell with him.

That didn't stop Merlin from trying to fight. It didn't stop him from rebounding the Hunters that continued to throw themselves bodily towards him, to toss his arm and cast aside in a sweeping blow the crouching figure that sought to jab a Prod at Edwin's fallen body. He would never stop, would never falter, not if he had the choice…

Choice. It was taken from him in an instant with a well-aimed bullet. From behind it struck, smacking directly into his shoulder blade. In an instant, Merlin's attacks and defences both failed completely. A fiery, blinding pain coursed through him, sweeping across his back in a stabbing lance of pain. It seared his skin, under his skin, tightened his muscles in spasms, stung the surface of every nerve ending as fiercely as a lightning strike.

Merlin didn't see the ground that came racing towards his face as he keeled over but he felt it. He didn't hear the shouts, the exchanges of the Hunters as they closed in, but he could smell them descend upon him. Pungent sweat and the artificial stink of synthetic fabrics rubbed warm by friction. Sparks danced across his eyes in a rainbow of morbid showers, an illustration of the pain that shuddered through his entire body and set his heart thrumming in discordant stutters.

His last thought as he felt the gloved hands of a Hunter clasp around his wrists, in the split second before oblivion overwhelmed him, was that Mordred had been right. That he shouldn't have gone to Edwin's aid, as useless as he had been.

It didn't help that he knew, even with the knowledge that he had failed, that he would have acted so again. Acted with the hopes of succeeding and raced to his friend's side, because he'd had to. It didn't help one bit.

"It's useless!"
"Useless? Why is it useless?"

"Why? Why? We've scoured everywhere around the London region and haven't found anything, that's why!"

"You exaggerate, Arthur. Do not let your need for immediate satisfaction muddle your brains. You have been barely searching with me for a month -"

"A month of nothing."


"No, of course not. It's just -"

"Are my people so inconsequential?"

"You know they're not. I only -"

"Then don't insinuate that they are. Simply because they were not known directly to you does not mean they are not of significance."

"I am not insinuating that. What I'm referring to, if you'll let me get a word in, is that the people we've found weren't even expressly in need of finding! You say that you're prepared to infiltrate the Facilities if you hear word of an 'Albion sorcerer' held captive, but you haven't even looked -"

"You know the difficulty of accessing the identities of those under direct custody of the authorities. It will take time to check, to make a complete study of the Facilities."

"..."

"Don't be angry, Arthur. Hope is hardly lost. Just because you haven't heard word of them doesn't mean they do not live. Neither does it expressly suggest that they have already been found by the authorities."

"How could it mean anything else? I just told you, we've scoured London, Inner City, Middle City and the slums, and Gaius is already using the connections with his network of sorcerers to search further afield. No one has heard a word of anyone even resembling Merlin or Morgana."

"No one in the United Kingdoms, no."

"What does that mean?"

"Only that they may not even be in the same country as we are."

"...what?"

"It's not impossible. I've told you I've seen them both before, however briefly, in lives other than that in times of Albion. Granted, they were both too young in each instance to recognise me in return, but I knew them well enough."

"They weren't in London? Or Britain or... whatever it's called; the United Kingdoms?"

"Quite. Morgana I stumbled upon as little more than a babe in what was thence known as Spain, while Merlin was a teen when I glimpsed him in Iceland. I myself have been born in several countries stretching across Europe. Some even further beyond. Did you know I was once birthed in
the Americas –"

"You mean that we might not even be looking in the right country?"

"…yes, that is what I am saying."

"You've got to be… you've got to be… You're only telling me this now?!"

"You didn't ask before now."

"I didn't – I shouldn't have had to! Surely it would have been obvious to think to tell me as much. Dammit, Nimueh, I've made this my life's goal!"

"And a respectable goal that is."

"Don't belittle me."

"I'm not belittling you. I am entirely sincere. And I speak outside of my own personal goals when stating as much."

"You know, I have to wonder at your 'personal goals'."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You preach that this is all for magic, all to 'preserve the knowledge of what could be lost of Albion to the past'. But you don't really care about the men and women you are supposedly saving, do you?"

"You make undue assumptions, Arthur."

"Are they inaccurate?"

"Quite."

"I can't be so sure of that. It wouldn't be inconceivable that you might hold a grudge against Merlin at least for this Past you recall. He did kill you."

"He did."

"And it would similarly be conceivable that you might hold a grudge against me for the actions of my father. That you might even resent me, may attempt to inhibit my –"

"Enough. That is the Past, Arthur."

"I of all people know how difficult it is to forget 'the past'."

"Yes, well, yours is different to mine. I have lived with the knowledge of what has come to pass is ancient history. I do not dwell upon that which does not concern my current incarnation – few sorcerers do. I am an old woman; I have long since outlived the age I reached in the fruitful times of Albion. I have… outgrown that grudge. Left it behind lifetimes ago."

"You've creating a paradox for yourself, there. Why would you be so ardent in your aim to preserve the magic of Albion if not for the fact that that knowledge is being lost to the past?"

"Simple. Because that knowledge is relevant to me in the present."
"But you always say how you hardly use magic. How is it of such relevance to you now?"

"I hardly use magic not because I cannot physically do so but because the society of the modern world will be far more likely to detect such usage then it ever has before. Technology has outpaced that which magic can compete with in self-defence. But magic is still the most important thing to me. The most important thing in the world."

"More important than the lives of the sorcerers you preach you seek to protect?"

"You twist my words, Arthur. Or you twist their sentiment. I make no pretences that I am acting to 'rescue' my fellow sorcerers for any reason other than to preserve magic. That it may appear to disregard the lives themselves of the sorcerers and priestesses is an unhappy coincidence."

"... you're a heartless woman."

"I have been called as such, yes. In many of my incarnations. Most, in fact."

"You don't care for them? Not even your own priestesses?"

"It is not that I don't care for them, Arthur. Simply that I do not know them. Why should I care for them on a personal level?"

"... bitch."

"Ha. Entirely correct. But such a trait does not necessarily mean that I am incapable of working with you."

"It certainly makes me less inclined to."

"And therein lies your immature mind."

"I'm not a child, Nimueh."

"No. You are not. You are merely acting as one."

"Bitch."

"Yes, we've established that. Congratulations on integrating modern insults of a derogatory nature into your vocabulary, my King."

"Hardly your king."

"True. But the words sound pretty enough."

"Is how it looks all that matters to you?"

"Not entirely. Words must be functional, too."

"And what, exactly, is the function of such –"

"Ahem."

"..."

"..."

"I apologise for the intrusion, but I believe you'll want to hear of this."
"Gaius. Ah, my apologies, I did not notice you come in. Please, do take a seat."

"Thank you, my Lady, but no. I shall only be brief."

"Take a seat regardless."

"What have you got, Gaius?"

"So hasty…"

'Of course I'm hasty! Any news is better than the silence we've had for the past month."

"On the contrary, I believe you would be desperate for silence at the nature of some news –"

"Ahem."

"My apologies, Gaius. Please, what have you discovered?"

"Yes, well. I have word from my contact near the Scottish Highlands."

"Nigal, his name was, wasn't it?"

"Quite so, my Lady. He has managed to unearth… a rather interesting find."

"…"

"…"

"Well. What is it, Gaius. Don't leave us hanging. Please tell me it's useful information. Of Merlin, or Morgana, or even –"

"It is indeed useful, Arthur, though perhaps not quite as much as we could hope for."

"Anything is better than nothing. Isn't that what you were saying, Arthur?"

"Do you have to be so –?"

"As I was saying, the news is not entirely as fortunate as we could hope for. Hardly positive, but it is of benefit, I believe."

"What is it?"

"Well, some years ago there was a raid upon a commune in the Highlands of Scotland, in a township known as Fort Wine. Most all of the individuals in the commune were either destroyed on the spot or carted off to the nearest Aberdeen Facility."

"Such is the way of the communes…"

"Why do sorcerers even live in them knowing the dangers? From what I've heard they always end only in disaster."

"Well, not all of them do. But think, Arthur, with less of your pig-headed mind and more of your rational thought-processing. Perhaps a perceived safety of numbers? Family groups? To drive away loneliness?"

"I'm pig-headed, Nimueh? What, for considering avoiding danger to be of greater importance than staving off loneliness –"
“Ahem.”

“Sorry, Gaius.”

“My apologies.”

“Quite alright. As I was saying, Nigal has managed to collect a significant amount of detail on the members of this commune. Or, more correctly, of those who were destroyed or captured during the incident, as well as the sorcerers evidenced to be inhabiting the area. How he managed I’ll never know, but…”

“Perhaps it is easier to come by when the fires of hatred has had time to dwindle slightly? Perhaps the information is simply not so heavily guarded after years of irrelevance?”

“You may be correct, my Lady. But for whatever reason, Nigal managed to gather a number of names.”

“Who? What names?”

“Morgana.”

“Morgan-”

“Morgana! He knows where she is?”

“No. No, there is no information on her whereabouts. Nothing but a suspected name and word of brief sighting.”

“But then…”

“What he did discover was some interesting details regarding her sister, however.”

“Her… sister?”

“Morgause, was it not, Gaius?”

“Indeed, my Lady. Her half-sister, to be precise, as she has consistently remained through at least two of their mutual reincarnations as I have witnessed.”

“What is the significance of this?”

“Evidently, Arthur, Gaius has deduced that should we perhaps be able to acquire the assistance of Miss Morgause then we may in turn be able to discover the whereabouts of her sister. Am I right, Gaius?”

“You are, my Lady. However, it may not be so simple as that.”

“How so?”

“Morgause has been a prisoner of the government Facilities for approaching eight years now.”

“…”

“… Fuck. She’s probably dead then.”

“Most likely, yes.”
"Do not jump to conclusions, Arthur. It is a lead, nonetheless. Gaius, you would not have brought up such a situation had you not a further direction of pursuit."

"Right you are, my Lady. Nigal has informed me that indeed Morgause was taken to the Aberdeen Facility some eight years ago, but that she remained there not."

"Transferred?"

"To London."

"Ah. Delightful."

"You have a very twisted perception of delight, Nimueh."

"Indeed I do."

"You too believe this information to be useful?"

"I do, Gaius. I believe that, if nothing else, it is a start. And surely such a lead will be enough to stem Arthur's complaints."

"My 'complaints' are warranted."

"From your perspective, perhaps. To myself – as to Gaius, I'm sure – they sound nothing if not the pathetic whines of a puppy yowling for its feed."

"Has Nigal got any further leads to offer you, Gaius?"

"Oh, ignoring me. Very mature of you, Arthur…"

"No, I'm afraid not. I requested he keep searching for any mention of members of the commune and their potential resurfacing –"

"No naming of names, I hope."

"Naturally. Merely to remain aware."

"Good. That's good."

"Is it really, now?"

"Yes, thank you for your obvious concern, Nimueh. It is at least a place to start."

"A very deeply embedded, complex place to start."

"Better than nothing."

"How easy for you to say."

"Yes, it is. Especially seeing as it is your job to make headway in that department. You said we'd work together, Nimueh? That you would use my name as King of Albion in return for offering your own assistance? Then get me into the London Facility."

"Just like that?"

"Do you question your own capacity to get me there?"
"Not at all."

"Then show me what you're marvellous 'pulling of strings' can do."

"... Delightful."
"How about the stink of your boots after taking a trip through Supplier Town in the east-west-western sub-sector?"

"Oh no, please, that's disgusting."

"Can't you smell that delightfully mouldering burn of scalded skin?"

"You're terrible, you know that, don't you? You know how bad I am with smells."

"Does that mean that I win?"

"Never."

Merlin shifted on the slightly spongy floor of his cell, fidgeting to press himself more closely against the wall. It was a struggle; his skin had gained a exaggerated sensitivity over the years that made even the slightest contact, the barest pressure, twinge painfully. More than that, his arms were bound to the sides of his body by the jumpsuit that wrapped him, his fingers trapped in tight mitten-like wraps and even his feet and toes socked in thick nylon that trapped them immobilised. It was hard enough to breathe at times, let alone shift an inch in any direction. And that on top of the painful lethargy that gripped the body and urged it into listless helplessness.

Merlin still tried anyway. He tried to edge just a little closer to that one, slightly thinner patch of wall of his padded cell, the one handbreadth sized space that was just weak enough that it allowed the voice of his fellow 'patient' to pass through. Her voice was still muffled, barely audible even when she said she was speaking loudly. Either her voice was so strained from lack of use or the walls really were as thick as the Doctors had suggested. Both possibilities were equally probable. Merlin was himself surprised that he was able to communicate through the walls at all and wouldn't put it past them being almost entirely soundproof. But then, Freya had been a patient of the Pits for years, had said she'd barely spoken a word for most of them. That she could still speak at all was surprising.

Two years Merlin had been in the Facility of London. Two years he'd been effectively locked in a four by four meter cell of padded white walls and floors, the only break in the continuity of their smoothness an equally white handle-less floor-to-ceiling door. Those first weeks Merlin could recall cringing from the unbroken whiteness of the cell; he'd never seen anything so blindingly clean, nor truly anything white before but the shine of the Spotters at night.

He'd never been so clean himself, either. As though fearing that any grime might contaminate that perfect whiteness, when Merlin had first awoken it was to find himself scrubbed pinkly raw to a paleness he hadn't known his skin could become. That, coupled with the cocoon like white jumpsuit that bound him like a spider's prey… he had grown to hate the colour of white.

The only break in that whiteness was when the door opened. Most of the time, once a day Merlin hazarded a guess, it was for an orderly to enter with their usual blank-faced bodyguard and administer what Freya referred to as their 'sustenance'. Merlin had to agree with her sentiment; the fluid that was pumped through his nasogastric tube could hardly be termed food. Merlin couldn't even remember what it was like to chew a meal, to drink water rather than have it directly injected into his stomach. The orderly never said anything, and the bodyguard never stepped into the room, simply watching with keen eyes as though expecting Merlin to somehow leap to his feet and strike
his feeder down.

Merlin wouldn't do that. Not because he didn't want to but because he couldn't. And it wasn't just the jumpsuit that prevented him from doing so. He didn't seem to have much energy for anything these days. No energy and… even the thought moving caused him to flinch, to wince in expectation of the pain that such motions would induce. Any sort of overt movement would send shoots of pain coursing through his muscles, would induce a spasm of trembles through his limbs that tripped over his nerve endings in jaw-clenching pains. Merlin knew he would whimper, would moan, would start to hyperventilate as the residual seizing from his last electrical treatment would course through his organs and tighten his chest. And even locked tight and straight in their mittens and socks, his fingers and toes would strain to curl as though the muscles shrunk and clasped into unbearably small fists. That happened a lot.

Still, even with the potential for movement, even with what had at first been an utterly humiliating experience of tube feeding but had since faded into mere necessity, Merlin found himself almost eager for the appearance of the orderly and bodyguard. It was a welcome break in the stasis, in the unending whiteness of his surrounding that dimmed only with the utter blackness of night more completely dark than any Merlin had ever experienced before. So dark, it was, that for his first weeks he'd gone nearly without sleep for the sheer panic that such oppressive darkness had induced. He'd come to terms with that, too. Eventually.

But the orderlies brought a bare hint of colour to the room. It was nothing particularly noteworthy; the bodyguard's grey outfit held a faint touch of blue to its consistency, boots a slightly off-navy shade of black. And the orderlies sometimes had a dab of personalised colour to their outfitting, whether in the hint of a red handkerchief poking from a pocket, the golden glimmer of a necklace, the flash of a colourful sock from beneath a white trouser leg. Merlin drank each feature in as though it were life-giving sun.

The sights he cherished, but even more than that he blessed the smells that rushed forth with the entrance of his feeder. Always sensitive to smells, even after years Merlin hated what he had considered the 'Pit Smell'. It was vaguely familiar, a sharp, stinging scent that often wafted from the Supplier and Helper's shopfronts when they doused their front counters in scalding chemicals in an attempt to drown any potential growths of bacteria.

Sterile, it was called. Sterile and chemical. And Merlin's white cell reeked of it. He longed for the brief intervals when the orderly opened the door and wafted in a breeze of slightly less pungent air. When he caught the scent of something other than chemicals and sterile cleanliness. Even the thick, sweaty smell of the heavy man-orderly that huffed through the door on the odd day was preferable to the sterile smell.

Yet even with that brief reprieve, Merlin could not long for the opening of his cell door. Never truly. Because just as likely as not it wasn't the 'sustenance' the orderly and his bodyguard that stepped from the yellow-white glow of the hallway. They came empty handed and dragged Merlin along with them for his terrifying trips from the hateful cell. Even the thought could elicit a cold sweat and violent trembles.

Pressing his forehead into the padded wall, Merlin swallowed in an attempt to rid his throat of its permanent dryness. "Alright, I've got one. Biannual vaccination."

"Which ones, shots or oral meds?" Freya's muffled voice replied.

"Take your pick."
"You can't have two. That's cheating."

"Alright then, pick your least favourite."

"That's cheating," Freya replied with a slightly strangled sound that Merlin took for a grunt of amusement. Not a laugh. Freya never laughed, just as Merlin never did. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd smiled. "But it's a tough call. I don't even know which one I hated more."

"I think the shots would have to be less unlikeable," Merlin pondered aloud.

"Really? You think so?"

"Definitely. Did you taste that medicine? It makes breakfast broth taste good."

"Yeah, but the vaccine actually hurt. I swear they chose the most sensitive area they could to jab you with. I think I'd rather a plague run through the slums than have to take that vaccination twice a year."

"It didn't hurt that much," Merlin muttered. *Not compared to... some things.*

"Yeah... I suppose you're right."

Immediately, Merlin wished he'd held his tongue, regardless of the truth of his words. Yes, the the vaccines might have looked like a pin-prick to the bullet wound of pain that was inflicted at the hands of the Pit's 'experimentations' but he didn't need to remind Freya of it. Just like him, she strove to avoid thinking too much about the hopelessness of their situation. An impossibility, really, considering where they were, where they would always remain, but try they would nonetheless. It was cruel of him to draw her attention to it once more.

Freya had been a broken woman when Merlin had first heard her. Not met, he always reflected, but heard, for they had never met face to face. Not in this life. He'd first been aware that he could hear through that one patch of wall when chance had led the Doctors to drop him alongside it after his treatment. He'd heard her screaming.

It had been at night, when that oppressive, pitch-blackness had shadowed even the impeccably white walls of his cell. The dual effects of silence and darkness had been somehow terrifying, and coupled with the aches that still sent spasms rippling through Merlin's body from his treatment even when immobilised, sleep was unattainable.

Freya's screams had almost been welcome in that silence. Or they would have been if not for the sheer terror and pain that interlaced them, the utter misery that gave way to guttural cries and finally savage growls. Strangely enough, the sounds of what was evidently a feral, angry beast in the cell alongside his hadn't scared Merlin. He had merely thanked the break from the unending silence.

That, and he knew the sound. He could remember it, could recall the source of such aggression like the distinctive timbre of his father's voice. It was a sound he could never forget. And when, hours later, the snaps and growls had faded to whimpers and finally into little sobs of pain, Merlin had managed to shuffle ever so slightly closer to that thinness of wall and speak through it.

"Freya?"

The sobs paused. In their place, heavy breaths that were more whines of agony than gasps sounded. Then, in a wavering voice nearly too quite to make out, she had replied. "Who... who is that? How... how can I hear you?"
Her voice had been strained, drawn thin by more than just the abuse of screams descended into growls. There was a gravely edge to them that bespoke misuse, as though she truly hadn't spoken a word in years.

With a wince, Merlin shifted himself slightly closer to the wall. It was still too dark to make out the whiteness that must have been only inches from his face but he found, with his attention diverted, that such darkness could be, if not forgotten, then at least momentarily overlooked. "I think the wall might just be a bit thinner here."

"The wall is… how? Why? Why would they…?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was just an accident?"

"I've never known them to make an accident before."

"Me neither."

They subsided into brief silence. Merlin held his breath, as much because it still pained him slightly to breathe, more so after speaking, as because he had to silence himself, straining his ears to hear. Finally Freya spoke once more. "How did you know my name? Do I know you?"

Merlin regretted the useless motion of shaking his head as it sent a shard of pain lancing from behind his ear to the base of his neck. He winced. "No, not… not know. Knew."

"Knew?"

"I wonder… if you'd remember me. My name is Merlin."

There was silence that met his words. Silence that could have been wary, or confused, or dubious. Most likely stunned from the tone of Freya's voice when she finally replied. "Mer…lin? It's… Merlin, it's really you?"

"You remember me?"

"O-of course! Of course I do." Freya's voice broke slightly as she spoke, warbling as her very vocal cords strained. "Of course I remember you. How could I forget?"

"It wouldn't be impossible," Merlin muttered, though he couldn't withhold the slowly spreading warmth that seeped through his chest. It felt… he felt almost good. For the first time in weeks.

"I'd never forget you," Freya replied. Her voice was barely more than a whisper through the wall. "I've… I've really missed you, Merlin."

Merlin hadn't been able to reply to that. He'd simply eased in something almost like satisfaction and without even pausing to reply had somehow fallen into sleep.

Since that first, brief exchange, Freya and Merlin had rekindled the friendship that had once lasted so briefly so many centuries ago. Merlin had never met Freya, not in any of his subsequent lives, but his memories of Albion, of Camelot and the people he'd met there, had always been strong. He remembered her, just as he remembered her cruel and untimely end.

That end was a subject they never spoke of. Just like they never spoke of the way that Freya transformed into a wild beast every night at midnight, or that she had lived with such a burden time and again, life after life.
There were many topics like that which remained undiscussed. Many that they did talk about, too; as with Mordred and Edwin, Merlin found in Freya someone he could reminisce about days gone by, better times and better lands. As always it was a tug of war between a discomfort with discussing the Past and a longing to relive it. He disregarded that discomfort for the soothing it paradoxically provided. Merlin would speak of Albion and Camelot, even with the rose-tinted glasses through which he viewed that past, and Freya would speak with similar wistfulness. Never anything particularly personal except for the odd and infrequent story of a time in long-lost childhood. Personal was one thing that they both agreed to steer clear from.

Even when it concerned the both of them. For one instance, Freya had brought up the consideration that had been nagging passively at the back of Merlin's mind for weeks. In the blackness of night, Freya's voice had seeped through the little patch of wall. "Merlin, when we were in Camelot… when you rescued me from… from the…"

"Yes?" Merlin supplied, removing the need to voice what was evidently an painful memory.

Freya sighed just loud enough to be heard. "Well, I was just wondering… I've always wondered, a little wistfully I suppose but… did you love me?"

Merlin was silent for a moment. He couldn't deny that such a consideration had indeed been pestering at him and urging him to voice his own thoughts on the matter. Only… he didn't really know where he stood. He knew where he had stood, what he had felt, but then… "I did. I think I did, Freya."

"Oh…" Freya gave another sigh, even quieter than before so that Merlin considered he may even have simply imagined it. "I think I did too." And that was the end of the conversation. A conversation that was left to the Past along with any feelings tied to it, and deliberately so as Freya thence proceeded to murmur with equal wistfulness of the boy who had once declared his love for her from the slums, had maintained that love even through the terror that had gripped him upon discovering the Bastet form she was inflicted with every midnight.

Merlin wasn't sure how he felt about such disregard. Upset? No, he wasn't truly upset. Nor even disappointed. He'd remembered, had his Past memories of Freya for years now and yet…

He knew that long ago he had indeed loved her. But even from what little he knew of her from their silent support of one another was simply… different to who she had been. It would be like loving a person without really knowing who they were. That was his conclusion, though perhaps it was more a culmination of contributing factors. That they hadn't met in even as advantageous a situation as they had long ago. That there were so many greater concerns to occupy that which could be consumed with the pursuit of love. And Merlin's conclusion on the matter was only aided by, or perhaps driven by, Freya's own stance; it might have happened, once. They might have been able to kindle something approaching what they had so briefly shared in a lifetime long ago. But no longer. Besides, even had they both been prepared to pursue such a relationship, they were hardly in the capacity to do so. Merlin felt stretched near to his limit simply existing.

Support. That was what they were to one another. A crutch, a buoy to keep one another's heads afloat in an otherwise drowning sea. For support each other they continued to do regardless of any relationship or lack thereof. Perhaps it was even better that they felt nothing outside that friendship, that mutual aid, for anything other just seemed so unattainable.

At first, Merlin had suspected it was more he that supported Freya than she him. The woman in the cell next to his was broken, had been through so much pain in every possible way that Merlin wouldn't have felt right to lean upon her, not when she was so bowed already. For though she conversed well enough sometimes, at others she appeared barely lucid. Sometimes she would simply
moan or whimper, sob and wail in a discordance that set Merlin's teeth on edge. He'd tried to console her, but when she didn't listen, didn't even appear to hear him, and the weight of his own pains and helplessness settled more firmly upon him, he ceased his attempts. And though he swore he wouldn't abandon her to her grief, her pain and misery, that he would listen to every sound she made to simply be there for his only friend in that rigid white world, his resolution soon faded. And ridden with guilt, he'd had to draw himself away from that little patch of wall that echoed Freya's sorrow into his own cell one more occasions than he could count.

Such an inclination became a necessity over time. With each instance an orderly took Merlin from his cell, each time he was drawn in winces and whimpers of pain from the padded floor for 'treatment', it became less of Merlin supporting Freya and more of a desperate need to grasp onto something. Anything that would keep him sane. And he rapidly came to realise that Freya sought just as much from him.

So they talked. Of the Past and the past, of trivial subjects and word games. Merlin spoke of his father on occasion, of Balinor in various incarnations, as well as the places he'd lived after his life in Camelot. And Freya did the same; of how she'd once lived in a gypsy caravan and had always been one for dancing ever since, of the lifetime she spent entirely alone in a little cottage deep in a forest and how such isolation hadn't really been so bad. She even spoke of what memories she still held from her time in the Lake of Avalon, a time she wasn't sure the duration of any more than why it had ceased. She seemed… saddened by the fact.

Anything that would keep them both sane they spoke of. Sometimes they didn't talk at all; once, years ago, it had been for Freya's sake, by Freya's needs, that they hadn't spoken. She had times when she needed to remain silent as much as she had those that demanded speech. In those instances, Merlin could not get a word out of her and he rapidly ceased trying.

He only came to understand why she did it at all, however, after one particularly intensive treatment session. The muscle that had carried him from the treatment room, stomping along behind the leading orderly before slinging him into his cell once more, had not been gentle with his motions. Merlin couldn't help the long, drawn out cry that had spilled from his lips when he hit the padded floor that immediately felt as hard as concrete.

"Merlin?"

Freya's voice barely parted the fog of pain that clouded Merlin's mind. He hadn't even known he was close enough to the thin patch of wall to hear her. There was no way he could reply. He hadn't felt capable of anything but short, sharp pants that hurt almost enough that he considered ceasing to breathe entirely.

"Merlin? Are you – are you alright?"

It was an empty platitude. Was he alright? Of course he wasn't alright. Freya knew that, just as Merlin knew that she only asked because she honestly knew not what else to say. That she was only struggling to help him, to convey empathy for his plight.

Even knowing that he couldn't reply. Didn't even want to reply.

"Merlin?"

Freya tried only once more to gain his attention, to urge a response, before she dropped any efforts at all. And Merlin was left to his pain, to work through the aches that sent convulsions through his limbs and pulsing throbs through his skull. Yes, that was when he knew exactly why, at times, Freya remained silent.
Other times, however, like that night, their companionship was almost jovial. Or at least as jovial as they could manage. Merlin knew his own was at least partially forced, a response to the lack of 'treatments' for the past few days that would suggest nothing if not one of even greater intensity to come. He sought a distraction. And Freya, wordlessly acknowledging his need, supplied him with one, time and time again.

Thus their games.

"I've got another one," Merlin said, forcibly shunting aside the melancholic flavour of the descending mood. "You ever been down south side in drought season?"

"Yeah. Just the once, though. Mam always said to avoid it in the heat," Freya replied. Merlin could tell from her tone that she was struggling to turn the mood as much as he was.

"She wouldn't be wrong. Did you ever walk past that Supplier front at midday, the one who made the paints? She had that rusty old green sign out the front of her house."

"Um… Oh, yes! That was… that smelt so bad. And in the heat it was supposed to be abhorrent. Something on her fire was obviously protesting being burned. What kind of fuel was she even using in there?"

"Don't know. Dead bodies? The souls of the tortured? Baby kittens?"

"Where the hell would she get baby kittens?"

"True. Definitely dead bodies, then," Merlin acknowledged. "You ever get any of that paint on your hands?"

"No. No way. That's signing your death wish, that is. Why? Did you?"

Merlin shifted slightly, closing his eyes ruefully at the memory. "Just the once. Balinor sent me off one day when I was five to go and get lunch by myself. He was sick and…” He trailed off as the memory took him. It had been almost painfully hot that day, the drought season reportedly one of the worst to have hit for years. Some of the mud from the streets had even hardened to rock-like quality. Merlin could almost smell the tear-inducing smog that smoked from the paint-grinder's Supplier, could almost see the white glare of the overhead clouds that just barely managed to smother their captive sun. He could feel the acidic sting of paint that chewed at his fingers when he'd run headlong into the Supplier carrying a tray of lukewarm paints. He could almost hear her bellowing scolding –

"Merlin?"

"Hm? Sorry, I was just…" Sighing, Merlin blinked his eyes open. That happened sometimes, getting lost in memories. Reminiscing about the past, even a dissatisfying one, was better than contemplating the present.

"Drifting?" Freya offered softly. Or at least as softly as the barrier of the wall would allow her to speak.

"Yeah."

"That's okay. It happens." She paused a moment before continuing. "Do you think you could tell me about it? Could you tell me about south sector? Even if it's just the grot of the paint Suppliers, or the muck in the streets or all of the broken, crotchety old men and women that squat under their awnings. It's just been so long since I've been outside." She paused again. "Merlin?"
But Merlin was no longer listening to her. He realised she was still talking in a distracted part of his brain, but his attention was abruptly focused elsewhere. Focused, and gradually flooding with dread as he watched the immobile door of his cell yet heard the familiar and foreboding series of click and snicks that told of mechanical locks flipping open. Dread, because he knew it wasn't time for the sustenance. An instant later, with a hiss like a sigh, the door slid sideways into its seat inside the wall and revealed the orderly and her bodyguard standing beyond.

She was familiar, the orderly. Merlin had seen her before, though couldn't recall how long ago it had been since. The wide, white trousers and overlong coat with white sleeves was the same as every other orderly's, the matching white shoes with their rubber soles and synthetic fabric make as unremarkable as the blank, indiscernible expression on her thin face. But Merlin remembered the short auburn hair falling in loose curls to her shoulder, the ruddy colour almost captivating for its break from the whiteness of his cells, just as much as was the golden bracelet of intricate links wrapped around her left wrist.

She didn't say a word, the orderly. Instead, stepping into the room, she started towards Merlin in professional strides, bend over him and, without even looking him in the eye, dropped her fingers to his neck. Merlin fought not to tremble beneath the touch, the familiar motion that foreshadowed that which was painful in an entirely different way to the rest of the treatment. He couldn't fight her, though, not even if he'd felt the urge to any longer; not only was it useless but he barely had the energy to roll himself over in the instances when he'd been dropped into his cell in a discomforting position.

Merlin closed his eyes as the orderly's fingers tugged beneath the skin-tight collar of his jumpsuit and fastened onto the metal one beneath. A distinctive, barely audible snick, the almost unnoticeable jab of a needle from that collar prodding into the back of his neck, and the woman retracted her fingers and stood to standing.

She'd barely straightened when Merlin felt the effects of the drug seep rapidly through his system. And just like that, the world seemed to... muffle. Not the sounds that Merlin no longer listened to, not the glaring brightness of fluorescent lighting from overhead or the chemical sterility that assaulted his senses. No, it was that barely there, redundant yet still integral part of him that was his magic, the magic that struggled every moment to resurface from where it had been crushed into suppression. With the fast-acting drug, that tingle of life-giving power, the presence that, until Merlin had been taken to the Pits, he had not even noticed existed, was crushed and smothered once more.

And the world became darker. Bleaker. Sadder and less... purposeful. Merlin felt what little will had urged him to turn his gaze upon the orderly, towards the bodyguard that unfolded the metallic structure of the wheelchair that would seat him, fade. That was the purpose of the drug; to inhibit what little of his magic remained within him to ensure the 'safety' of those he may encounter when leaving the room. As if his magic was even bright enough to blink its eyes open.

With a disconsolate sigh, Merlin closed his own.

Freya didn't say anything as the orderly and bodyguard manhandled him into the chair the muscle dragged alongside them. She didn't speak a word as the pair of respectively white and blue clad intruders exchanged muted mutters. And it wasn't because she couldn't hear them, though the walls likely did make it impossible. It wasn't like there was anything a word of reassurance, of protest had she the foolishness to utter it, would make a difference. It's not like either of them had a choice in the matter.

Merlin kept his eyes closed for the entire trip from his cell. There wasn't anything noteworthy about the trips to his treatment room, nothing to comment on besides an exchange of four white walls and
glaring overhead lights for white-walled corridors and slightly brighter overhead lights. The gentle jostle of the metallic wheelchair as it was trundled over smooth, cold floors swayed him slightly in his seat. The only noise besides the faint squeak of rubber wheels on polished floors was the gentle clicks of two pairs of shoes behind him.

Only when their forward motion slowed, some countless minutes later, did Merlin open his eyes. A grey door – grey, but still unremarkable compared to the whiteness of its surrounding walls – stood before him, closed and handle-less with only an infrared ID scanner pad barely larger than a hand to the right. The orderly stepped around him to press a finger to the pad and lean into it to speak. "Patient L7979M for you, Doctor."

Barely five seconds later and the door hissed its opening breath to present the wide, sparsely furnished room beyond. An operating theatre, Merlin had heard it called, though he knew not the validity of such a name; he'd never seen any such 'theatre' in the slums, nor in the Past. The room was at least ten times the size of his cell, of constant, reflective, marble-like floor and pale wall, immaculate metallic counters atop cupboards along every wall and shelves above stored with a variety of glass phials and tubes in racks and coils of cords interspersed by a multitude of electrical instruments of function Merlin knew only about half. And he knew that because – no. No, he didn't like to dwell on that.

In the centre of the room was the bed. More of a pallet, really. Long enough for a tall man to fit easily, if not comfortably, despite the thin attempt at padding over its unyielding hardness. Merlin was all too familiar with that bed, with those just like it, with the stretch of lighting radiating directly from the roof of seemingly no individual globes. He was also far too familiar with the Doctor that stood beside that bed, the hard lines of his synthetic jacket falling to his knees in a white so pristine it almost glowed. He knew that Doctor, knew the man's pointed features, his nose long and hooked and prominent enough to resemble a beak. Just as he was familiar with the other two Doctors that 'treated' him specifically.

The beak-nosed man – for Merlin had still never learned his name – turned towards the door as Merlin was wheeled inside. His fingers still tapped at the electronic pad that projected a Clip-like hologram before him despite his attention focused instead upon their entrance. Something not quite a smile touched the corners of his lips. "Ah. Yes, just on the bed, if you would," he directed the orderly and her bodyguard. As though the procedure of Merlin's visits was ever carried out any differently.

Manhandled once more, Merlin was shifted onto the hard bed. He fought back a wince at the contact of fingers to skin; it would always hurt, any kind of touch. His nerves were simply shorted, too sensitive to even the gentlest of prods.

Not that that was the worst of it. And as his head rocked slightly on the headrest of the bed, Merlin fought back a rising nausea that welled within him at the prospect of what was to come. The upwelling of memories, the phantom feelings of aching, throbbing pain, the sharp stabs and constant shudders of electricity that neither sores nor wails could alleviate, assaulted him. Merlin had to clench his jaw, had to bite back the trembles that already coursed through him at the precognitive thought. Not magical, no; he simply knew what was to come. Because it was always the same, to some degree, and there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing he could do to stop that which loomed ever closer.

He had tried, once. More than once. For weeks, even, Merlin had fought against the 'treatment' that was conducted upon him. As the thick, tight bracelets that read his vitals were clamped around his wrists and ankles he'd kicked and fought. When he'd been strapped onto a pallet for a pair of cannula's to be poked into each elbow, his blood drawn to a frightening measure, he'd cursed and
spat, vowed destruction upon those blank-faced orderlies that had held him down. When more than a
dozen hands had pinned him immobile, tilting his head back to feed the nasogastric tube through his
nostril, he'd nearly managed to roll free of their restraints and had writhed like a beached fish even
when his efforts consistently proved fruitless.

Even when his head had been shaved to bare scalp for the pads of electrodes to be gelled to his skin,
to be linked up for an electroencephalogram that had deteriorated into active stimulation of
brainwaves that had left his muscles and limbs twitching like a prodded rabbit in the jaws of a fox,
he'd fought.

That fight had died. It wasn't abrupt but a slow, tumbling roll down a shallow hill, a gradual decline
from steadfast objection to passive resistance to neutrality and finally resignation. Merlin hated it. He
hated that he knew he'd given up fighting, that even had he the energy to object, had his limbs not
been as weak and disoriented as a newborn babes, he wouldn't have fought back. What was the
point? It wasn't like there was any escape anyway.

Merlin remembered when he'd thought the Pits were simply an execution ground. A site that
convicted criminals and sorcerers alike were dragged into kicking and screaming their protest only to
have those protests cut short with a slash of finality.

They weren't. That wasn't what the Pits were. The conviction wasn't short, not as merciless as a swift
death. What awaited was far worse.

'Electrocution therapy' was what the Doctor had termed it. What he'd termed one of the treatments, at
least. Not the beak-nosed doctor but a tall man as bald as Merlin now was himself. He hadn't
explained further, and Merlin doubted he even addressed him as he hooked him up to cables and
cords, slid needles into muscles so thin that Merlin couldn't even feel them. He'd watched as a series
of metal clasps had been clipped onto those needles, plugs fastened to the electrodes of his scalp, and
then he couldn't remember anything else. He never could. The searing, whole-body pain, the volts
that shocked every nerve ending and coursed beneath his skin like a rippling flame, forbade any kind
of thought other than "stop, stop, STOP, make it STOP".

That 'therapy' was the primary treatment, but there were others. In his early days at the Pits, when his
limbs had still been strong enough to hold his body upright for more than a minute or two, Merlin
had been put through physical trials. Running in a room that never seemed to end and driven by
heated floors that scorched his bare soles should he slow. Keeping himself aloft in a crate of water
for hours on end and only pulled loose when his trembles became so profound that the water had
thrashed about him in rapids. Dodging unseen projectiles in a dark room that slapped him like an
open palm with each strike.

Provoking his magic was what they were doing, Merlin had deduced. Trying to get a rise from the
beast they had tethered so tightly. So Merlin had done his utmost to ensure that that 'beast' remained
silent. And slowly, those trials had limited until they finally ceased. Abruptly at the end; Merlin could
remember the last time he'd been urged into standing to run. He remembered the tugging of hands
that had pulled him to his feet and then… nothing else.

Merlin suspected that his physical inadequacy after that point was what was largely responsible for
the end of those trials.

Not that his treatments stopped. Far from it. Electrocution therapy was merely one aspect. Merlin was
fed through passive machines that seemed to do nothing but read his physical state as often as he was
exposed to the painful sensory stimulators, the blinding light and the deafening booms, the sharp
smells and heated burns. He had become all too familiar with the jostling of the cannula's in his arms
as chemicals were injected intravenously, could almost identify some of the drugs that were forcibly
seeped through his system, that caused him to see colours, to twitch uncontrollably, to be struck with headaches so fierce and unending that he still felt the effects a day after their active assault had ceased.

It was all one and the same by now. Merlin feared his 'treatments' with the reflexive fear of his subconsciousness, but consciously he felt… nothing. Resigned perhaps, briefly terrified but… no, there was simply nothing. After a bare moment, nothing. It was almost worse that Merlin didn't even know what the Doctors sought; why didn't they simply kill him? Let him die? What were they searching for, why did they subject him and Freya and all the other sorcerers for all he knew to the bodily pains that wrought havoc on the wreak of his body?

It seemed so pointless. And in many ways, that only made it worse. Merlin was under no allusions – he knew the only reason he was still alive was because the Doctors kept him that way.

The beak-nosed Doctor, his voice thin and reedy, was talking in a murmur to the orderly by the door. Merlin might have been able to make out their words if he'd strained his ears, but he didn't. Didn't bother. Instead, he simply fastened his gaze upon a familiar point across the room. A smudge of greyness, barely larger than a fingerprint. It was the only smudge on white walls that he'd seen in the entire Facility.

The hissing breath of the door signalled the departure of the orderly, though Merlin knew the bodyguard remained behind. The Doctor's clicking footsteps followed, approaching with slow, measured steps as though distracted or in contemplation. Merlin didn't glance towards him when he drew into sight, but could make out the pose of his concentration as he bowed his head over the holographic pad before him in his periphery.

"…try a… maybe take two…" he murmured to himself, tapping away in silent jabs of his finger. Merlin ignored him. Until he caught the words, "Oculo-IncitaI". Then his jaw tightened to withhold the onrushing flood of bile into his mouth.

There was nothing he could do when the Doctor stalked across the room and hefted a spherical contraption from a shelf in the right hand corner. He couldn't move even had he wanted to, even if the drug that was suppressing his magic didn't similarly instil lethargy even more profound than usual into his very bones. Merlin could only stare directly ahead, resolutely ignoring both the return of the Doctor with his contraption and the rising dread that seeped as he strained to drink in every last detail in his field of vision. It would be the last Merlin would see for days, he knew, and not only because he would be blinded by the pain but because blindness was a product of this particular treatment, if only temporarily. A week of temporary was far too long.

Sometimes knowing what was to come was worse than remaining in wary ignorance.

Minutes later, however, when darkness flooded his vision, Merlin didn't remember any of that. He didn't recall his need to catch every last flicker of light before that light was taken from him, because his attention was very resolutely turned elsewhere. Towards his temples that seared with pain, towards the burning tips of the spherical headpiece that dug into his scalp, towards the mind-numbing throbs that jolted through his mind.

His lack of vision seemed inconsequential when compared to that.

Merlin was hardly aware of the trip back to his cell. He knew that it wasn't in a wheelchair this time but on a gurney that jostled just as much as its two-wheeled counterpart.

He did feel the moment he was tossed back into his cell, however. A rationale part of his mind knew
that he was never 'tossed' as such, that the muscle of the orderly-bodyguard duet eased him to the
floor with, if not gentle, than certainly not careless motions.

The sound of the door closing hissed unduly loud in Merlin sightless state. He barely considered it,
so inward focused was he to the thrumming echoes of pain that continued to quiver through his head.

Tears had never been something that Merlin was prone to in response to physical pain. He'd cried
when he'd woken that morning he found his father dead, had shed tears for Kip when he'd finally
made it back to his house after watching his friend fall prey to the Hunters. But pain? No, there was
little tears could do to counteract physical distress. Tears were to leech out the deep, black grief that
pooled within his chest, easing the pressure just slightly.

When Merlin blinked his swollen eyes painfully, however, it was to feel the warm trickle of those
sorrowful tears slide down his cheeks. Not because he was hurting physically, for such hurts were a
constant to his world. It was his loss of vision that truly ached, even if he was only temporarily
blinded. There was something so… so impossible and unmatchable to such a loss. It was almost as
profound as his loss of magic.

So deeply embedded was Merlin in that loss, in holding himself rigid to avoid triggering his aching
muscles into protest, that it took hours for him to register that he was beside the thinnest point on his
wall. That the sounds of guttural snarls and gnashing teeth that grew and died in volume in spasms
from the cell beside his died. And that the whimpers that replaced them were almost desperate in the
chant that was barely intelligible through the blubbers.

"...can't… it won't… hurt, it hurts – I… why can't I just… stop, make it… stop…"

In bursts of words barely louder than a whisper, Merlin heard Freya cry her own pain and misery. It
pierced him even through the fog of his own hurts, through the grief of his loss of vision and the
regrowing, manifesting knowledge of his own helplessness. There was something about hearing
another's pain, about witnessing the heartbreak of a friend, that somehow managed to afford one
strength.

Twisting his head slowly, but still too fast to avoid the shooting pain that momentarily cramped his
neck, Merlin pressed himself against the padded wall he found himself against. When he tried to
speak it took three tries to manage more than a croak. "Freya? Freya, can you hear me?"

The pants and sniffles, the stutters, continued for a moment longer before they died. A full minute
passed before she replied. "Merlin, you're… you're back."

"Yeah…"

"It… it was a l-long one."

"It was." Merlin's voice wavered, warbling like a crying bird.

Freya was silent for a moment, the only sound a near silent gasp that hitched her breath. "Are you…
are you alright?" Merlin didn't even get a chance to reply before she continued in a rush. "No. No, of
course you're not alright. I'm sorry, I –"

"It's fine," Merlin cut her off. A lie, they both knew, but it hardly mattered. "I'm fine, Freya. Are
you…?"

"I…" Freya's voice caught once more. "I'm…"

"What can I do?"
"Do? What is there to do?"

It was a rhetorical question, Merlin knew. And yet in spite of that, he felt the desire, the need, to do something. He didn't even know what it was that was going to croak through his dried lips until the words spilled forth. "Do you remember Beltane, Freya? All the way back in the Past, when the festival lasted all day and night. Did you ever dance around a May Pole, or tie ribbons in your hair, or sing the ditties that your Mammy taught you since you were a little girl?"

"I… I remember," Freya muttered. Though her voice was hushed and flat, there was just a hint of wistfulness in it. A familiar wistfulness, the one that always touched her tone when they shared memories of better times. "We lit the fires at sundown on May Day and they burned all through the night."

Merlin closed his eyes – a useless motion but enacted anyway – and let himself drift through his memories. It hurt almost as much as it soothed. "The smoke was thick but it was a good smell. It never left more than a pile of ash behind it. It always smelt even better when it rained, with the mix of wet and dry and the smell of clean water."

"You would remember the smells," Freya said with a huff of not-quite laughter. But Merlin didn't even hear her. He was lost to those memories.

He recalled Beltane, the orange fires that cast a glow upon the night sky that was entirely different to the light pollution that hung over London. A sky that was a blanket of navy black, speckled with pinpricks of stars more plentiful than any of the sparse smattering he'd ever seen in his current life, more than in any of his lives in the past centuries. He remembered Ealdor, his mother's bright, fond smile and the smell of her cooking of an afternoon. He remembered his friend Will and the hours they'd played while shirking the duties their parents had assigned them.

He let himself Drift. Drift as he tried to avoid doing, for the taste of such beautiful, fond memories was bittersweet when compared to those of his current life. The visions of the Past seemed all the more vivid for being unable to see. He saw the walls of Camelot, impossibly tall but protective rather than looming and ominous. The buzz of chatter in the marketplace that carried a decidedly brighter tone than any sound he'd heard in his the slums of London. Merlin remembered with fondness the little nook of a room in the loft of Gaius' rooms that was barely larger than his cell but was so much more welcoming that it was almost jarring in contrast.

The warmth of tears swum once more into his closed eyes but didn't ease the ache in his chest as he recalled his mentor. As the image of Gwen's chiding yet smiling face swum into the forefront of his mind, the sound of their mixed laughter as they shared a brief word in passing in the hallway.

He remembered the Knights and their ready acceptance of his presence in their midst, the almost brotherly affection they afforded him and he returned in kind. He knew realistically that he was blotting the down points, the dark days and those of trial from his mind, but the bright scenes, those flooded with joy, were so much more prevalent than those Merlin had ever felt in this twenty three years of life that he had lived that he couldn't help himself. He recalled the deep, gravelly tones of Kilgarrah as he spoke in twisted riddles and even those had a rosy tinge to them, an affection for times long lost and wonders more powerful than any he'd encountered since.

Most prominently, however, and brightest of all, he remembered Arthur. His prince that he knew, even without having experienced it directly, was to be his king. Arthur, who he had once been so critical of, who he had rolled his eyes for and grumbled at his every order, yet who had grown on him like a persistent wart. A burden at times, yet he had slowly become his friend.

Or more than a friend, Merlin considered. He'd never really thought of himself as anything but
servant and friend to his prince, but... but there had never been anyone quite like Arthur. Not in his
life in Albion and not in any of them since. It was different to that of a friend, of a brother, or even,
should he consider it, of a lover. There was something that had bound the two of them, that had
forged a bond between them that could never be replicated. He missed the easy banter he had never
truly spoken with his current words, he missed their camaraderie as the raced from quest to desperate
quest. He even, he considered ruefully, missed the long-suffering orders Arthur had given him, the
chiding that had held as much sincerity as it did exasperated fondness more often than not. The
moments that Arthur had shared a smile with him – a genuine smile – was incomparable to anything.

When Merlin cried, it was not so much for his loss of vision. It was for the loss of Balinor and Kip,
for Freya who suffered alongside him, for the absence of his beloved mentor in Gaius, his friends in
Gwen and Gwaine and Lancelot and the Knights. And pervading and encompassing it all, like the
presiding king Merlin knew he had become, was Arthur. Merlin cried as much for Arthur as for the
rest of them.

Somewhere in Merlin's battered mind he registered that his tears became sobs. Sobs that shook his
body in painful tremors only slightly yet strongly enough for him to wish they would cease. He
couldn't stop them, though. Just as he could do nothing to stop the audible sobs that seeped through
the wall from Freya's cell alongside his.

Tears didn't truly help, Merlin knew that. They couldn't heal anything. They couldn't prevent the
future tortures that would return with certainty and they certainly couldn't bring back those who had
long since passed. But for a moment, just a moment, Merlin let himself believe that it would. And if
nothing else, the black pit in his chest did seem dampened.

Just slightly.
"Just let me do the talking, Sebille."

"As you say, sir."

"I don't care what Nimueh has told you, I'm taking the reigns here. Don't say a word unless I speak to you directly."

"Of course, sir."

"If, by a slim instance that I should err in my words –"

"I shall too remain silent, sir?"

"… No. No, you may speak."

"Very good, sir."

"…"

"Mr Montague? Mr Montague, is it?"

"Doctor Vagus, I presume?"

"Indeed I am, indeed I am. I am most sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Yes, well, we are on something of a tight schedule."

"Of course, of course. My deepest apologies. I regret that I was seeing a patient at the time –"

"Patient? A patient?"

"Ah. Yes, well, that is what we call the, ah... criminals in our charge."

"What a strange term to call them by…"

"Miss Barrows, I believe we just discussed –?"

"Of course, sir. My deepest apologies."

"Yes, well. Doctor Vagus, perhaps we could hasten our meeting along?"

"Of course, of course. I expect you've less inclination to remain in our Facility than most would after your wait? Again, I must express my sincerest regrets for my own delay. Had the situation been unavoidable, I assure you that any members of Lady Nine's faction would hardly be left –"

"Really, could we move this along?"

"Ah, erm, of course, Mr Montague, of course. If you'll follow me."

"Is it far? To her… what do you call them?"

"Room? Not at all. Entering through the Portus Gate places one right in the midst of our patient's rooms. Not far at all to her room."
“You keep calling them patients.”

“Yes…”

“Why?”

“Well, erm, well it is simply a matter of course. Many of our Doctors are indeed doctors, have been trained and qualified in the art of ensuring the wellbeing of the citizens of our country. I myself graduated from London’s Municipal College of Medical Doctoring. I specialised in neurobiology for nearing a decade before I was accepted into the ranks of the Facility’s Doctors.”

“Neurobiology?”

“Indeed, Mr Montague. It is somewhat relevant, given the circumstances.”

“How so?”

“… You don’t…?”

“Don’t what?”

“Mr Montague, you are entirely aware of what we study here, are you not? I would have thought that a member of Lady Nine’s faction would -”

“I am aware. Regail me anyway.”

“Ah. Yes, well… as you are surely aware, the study of the malicious disorder that is magic has been largely inconclusive. We have, however, largely narrowed down the locality of the source of this disorder to the brain. The medulla oblongata specifically. Not entirely, of course; there are still trigger areas. I personally suspect that the placement of magic lies in multiple locations, as alike to ganglia along the spinal cord rather than a centralisation in mimicry of cephalisation.”

“I see.”

“Erm… yes, well, therein lies my role as a neurobiologist. If we can target the region of the… the brain, or as I suspect the locations along the spinal cord, in which the growth spawns, we are that much closer to eradicating it entirely.”

“… And you believe you are close?”

“Hm… perhaps not close, but we grow nearer every day. If we – just down here, turning to the right – if we continue with our studies, then I believe we will shortly accomplish our goal. The main concern is that many of our patients are evidently unable to meet the requirements that would lend itself to ease of discovery.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, the study is rigorous, and at times a strain to the body. If you understand my meaning.”

“What kind of strain?”

“Ah… overstimulation?”

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

“Surely Lady Nine has informed you of the, erm… the status of many of our patients? It is a
dilemma, of course, a weighting of costs to benefits of discovering the source of magic to eradicate the threat it poses and overtly straining our subjects. If you understand."

"What happens to your patients?"

"... Mr Montague, surely you are aware –"

"Just answer the question, Vagus."

"Of... course. It is, ah, unfortunate, you must understand, but those fully under the sway of magic are barely even acting with conscious inclination any more. It is our belief that magic skews the mind, in a sense turns one rabid to lash out at even those held dearest."

"What. Happens. To your patients?"

"... I am left with the impression that you are perhaps a more, shall we say, conservative member of Lady Nine's Confederation. Perhaps?"

"You could say that."

"Ah. Then... Mr Montague, I hesitate to say, but I believe that a visit to Patient K5992F may not be appropriate –"

"Is this the room?"

"... Yes, Mr Montague."

"How do you see inside?"

"Perhaps –"

"Let me see inside, Vagus."

"Of... of course. I'll just... Let me just..."

""

""

"Is she... dead?"

"No! No, not in the slightest, Miss... Barrows, was it?"

"She certainly looks dead."

"Sebille..."

"I'm merely making an observation, sir."

"She is not – our patients are not so neglected as to be left for dead in their very rooms."

"Not... neglected?"

"No, not in the least! What you, ah... what you see before you is the... the rather unfortunate effects of our research in... in attempting to unearth the –"

"This. This is Morgause Drakon?"
"...It is."

"May I enter the room?"

"Such would be inadvisable, Mr Montague. She does still carry her magic, despite our best attempts to induce otherwise."

"She hardly looks capable of lifting a finger."

"Y-you'd be surprised, Miss Barrows."

"You call your subjects patients, Doctor Vagus?"

"Of course. Woebegone as they may appear, and cruel though we may seem, we are attempting to cure them."

"To rid them of their magic. That is to cure them."

"Indeed, Mr Montague."

"... You are a very... interesting man, Doctor. I should very much like to talk to you further."

Light. Bright, then followed by an illuminated white ceiling.

Then more light. Brief and passing, then ceiling.

Merlin couldn't concentrate on anything besides the rapid change between blinding fluorescence and unmarred ceiling. He was only faintly aware of the jerking of the gurney beneath him as he was trundled back towards his cell. He couldn't feel his fingers anymore, or his toes, but for the toes at least that was nothing terribly unusual. He'd not been able to feel anything below mid calf for... it could have been nearly a year now, but time was hazy. Merlin couldn't even fathom how long he'd been in the Pits.

All he knew was the passing of a day. The visit from the orderly to pump sustenance into his stomach, the whiteness of the walls of his cell that faded to obscurity with the cyclical, impenetrable darkness of 'night', the less regular and yet more... objectionable visits to one of his three nameless Doctors. They all merged together. They gradually overpowered even his fondest memories, even as new memories of parallel Past lives kindled in his mind arose. They dissipated like smoke, pulled apart at sun splits fog and vanquished it into non-existence.

The memories were fading. His world had become his cell, the hallways, and the changeable yet entirely similar faces of the orderlies, the bodyguards, the doctors. Even Freya was barely more than a presence anymore. When was the last time they'd spoken to one another? Was it days or weeks? Months? When was the last time he'd spoken at all?

Merlin couldn't remember. He couldn't find it within himself to even try to remember. Even an attempt was like a tug-of-war, a struggle against the ever-present, unshakeable pain that flared systematically in about his body. A twinge here that flamed moments later into a scorching burn, a twitch of unfeeling fingers that cramped seconds later into a vice-like curl of digits as though they attempting to crush the life out of a bug within a clenched fist. Merlin's skin felt rubbed raw along every inch that touched the seemingly coarse interior of his jumpsuit, while he swore that even in stasis his bones protested their very existence. Headaches were a constant and unwelcome companion that made the lights that passed overhead an assault to his senses.
He looked anyway. Even of there wasn't anything else to look at.

Drifting was what Freya had called it. The process of falling into old memories and escaping into visions of greater comfort, of times gone by that were simply better. Merlin fell back to wandering through cluttered streets with sky-high buildings, to climbing through the Moors outside his Laird's castle, to chasing his little sister through a field of spring flowers and butterflies. And even though Merlin rarely experienced such wonders in newness anymore, that must have been what he fell into then as he Drifted back towards Camelot, for his ears didn't hear so well anymore and the voices he sometimes heard resounded loudly enough to discern meaning. Almost as loudly as that of a real person.

As Merlin Drifted, the exchange of the orderly and the bodyguard filtered into his memory hallucination. "… don't even think he understands the meaning of overtime, you know?"

"Of course not. He's the boss. He stays exactly as long as he wants to and not a second longer. It's his prerogative as a superior."

"Yes, and that's all well and good, but don't overlook some of the shit I have to put up with, you know? I mean, honestly, it's like he doesn't even look at the logs we check out on every day…"

And alongside that, his vision. A visionary sound. It had to be a vision, for it was far too good to be anything but.

"…talk to you... I sincerely doubt you could help me…"

It was the snarky tone that gave it away. The condescension at the inability to obtain 'help' from another, the note of entitlement that suggested he had every right to demand just about anything and that to deny it would be a crime unto itself. That he entirely directed the discussion and dammit, if his conversation partner didn't fall in line then he'd sorely regret it in the days to come.

Merlin couldn't remember when he'd exchanged such words with Arthur. He couldn't pinpoint the exact time, couldn't wade through the fogginess that eternally clouded his mind to discern the when.

But for the first time in… in years, he felt something. The beginnings of the shadow of a smile touch his lips. He let his eyes slide gently closed to simply bathe in the memory.

Only a memory.
Part II - The City

The Facility hummed. That was the impression Arthur got. Although that was the impression he got from most buildings with fluorescent lighting. They seemed to buzz with the presence of electricity, like a persistent mosquito trapped in an otherwise silent room.

But Arthur barely heard the buzzing. Which was saying something because the sound was one he'd been unable to help but notice over the years. But in that moment, standing in the pristinely clean, white hallway of widely spaced walls and pale, polished floors, he didn't spare the sound a second thought. His attention was fixed solely upon the wall in front of him. The wall that had become a window with a smattering of presses onto the ID-pad by Doctor Vagus.

He couldn't look away. From the instant that section of white, framed wall had faded into glass, had revealed the small room of padded walls beyond, he'd been frozen. Since the attention of himself, Sebille and Vagus had all turned to the corpse directly in the centre of that room. He hadn't even been able to blink.

Morgause. Morgause Drakon, the doctor had called her, though Arthur knew her as for her father's name in the Past, Gorlois. There was little evidence of the hard-faced, vengeful woman in the half-curved figure. Next to nothing save for the shape of her eyes, perhaps, of her nose. For there was so much that differed, so much changed, that she was barely recognisable. And that was accounting for alterations that Arthur had come to realise was a constant with the reincarnations of the sorcerers.

Morgause was broken. Sebille had been justified in assuming her dead, that she wouldn't have been able to make a motion to fight back, for Arthur had seen dead with a healthier visage than that the woman in the white jumpsuit, of boot-like socks sewn together and arms seemingly absent for the sleeves attached along the length of the torso. She was thin, incredibly thin; more so than a plague victim or even some of the half-starved criminals who had once filled Camelot's dungeons. That much was evident even through the shapeless suit. Her face was gaunt to the point of hollowness, cheeks sunken in shadows and bones prominent beneath her brown-grey skin. A network of veins surrounded the pits of her closed eyes, spreading out like rivers draining from a lake and stretching across the smooth baldness of her head.

She was pitiful. Arthur would never have expected he would ever feel such a generous sentiment for the woman, for the terrorist that had assaulted his kingdom and wrought mayhem, the woman who had done so much to draw his sister from his side, but there it was. It was impossible to feel anything but pity. Pity and pervading horror. Arthur would have thought the same for his most hated enemy.

He effectively did.

It was a struggle to draw his attention from Morgause to the Doctor. He swallowed, fighting the dryness in his throat, and with a physical effort turned towards Vagus.

"You call your subjects patients, Doctor Vagus?" Arthur couldn't quite keep the venom from his tone. It was all he could do to suppress the urge to glare at the man beside him.

Thankfully, Vagus didn't appear to notice. His attention was turned towards Morgause with an odd expression affixed upon his face; it was part sympathy, as one would truly expect to see for a patient, and yet part… disdain? Exasperation? As though observing a child who had made a foolish error and was facing the punishment for their actions. "Of course. Sorry and pitiful as they may appear, and cruel though we may seem, we are attempting to cure them."
"To rid them of their magic. To cure them." The incredulity in Arthur's voice wasn't quite concealed. Rid a sorcerer of magic? As well drain them of their blood! Even Arthur knew that, and he had only truly begun to understand magic in recent years.

"Indeed, Mr Montague."

Slowly turning his own gaze back towards Morgause, Arthur fought to swallow the distaste that lathered his tongue. "You are a very… interesting man, Doctor," he ground out between clenched teeth. There were so many other terms he could have used, would have liked to have used, but he bit them back sharply enough that he tasted blood in his mouth. "I should very much like to talk to you further. And for you perhaps to have a rather intimate conversation with my fists.

Arthur had rarely been one to descend to fisticuffs in all seriousness, not since he was a boy and rarely even then. He'd always been more partial to demonstrating his expertise and superiority with a weapon. Yet the urge to introduce Vagus to his knuckles in the most immediate sense was almost overwhelming. Or perhaps to crush his head into the faintly reflective glass of the window before them.

Evidently his murderous intent didn't register to the Doctor. Vagus, still peering at Morgause, smiled slightly as though at a shared joke. "I would be more than happy to assist any member of Lady Nine's faction, of course. It is my duty to be as supportive of my patients as possible. Any help I can afford I would be more than eager to offer."

"I sincerely doubt you could help me," Arthur nearly snarled.

Vagus blinked as though awakened from a spell. He turned towards Arthur. "I beg your pardon?"

But Arthur was done. Talk he may wish to with the doctor in future, to suck every last drop of information from him as to what exactly they did with their 'patients' that could possibly make them look like that. But it disgusted him, sickened him and angered him to a degree it was either leave now or risk killing the man who had been involved in such treatment of another human being. More than involved, he believed that what he was doing was actually beneficial. That he was doing what was right.

That Merlin and Morgana, for all he knew, were in little better state? That the two people Arthur had dedicated his life to finding in his attempt to make some sense of the world he'd woken up in years ago, to have some purpose, could have been similarly tortured?

Unforgiveable.

He turned to Sebille at his side, completely ignoring Vagus' question. The thin, ash-haired woman met his gaze and he could see within the black depths of her eyes the chilling counterpart to his fiery inferno of anger. Arthur knew that, if they were to avoid an explosion of furious magic from the woman that would not only destroy the ward in the Facility but would completely blow their cover, they needed to get out.

"Sebille, I believe we're done here."

Her thin lips thinning further, the woman held his gaze for a moment longer before nodding curtly. 

"Ah, yes, ah… of course, then perhaps if you'll follow me?" Doctor Vagus turned to face them fully, stepping into Arthur's line of sight as his eyes were drawn one final time to the shell that had once been Morgause. "Perhaps on the way out we can – ah, I apologise, would you mind, um…?"

Arthur glanced back towards the Doctor at his words. Vagus was gesturing once more, urging him to
step backwards with an apologetic expression on his face. He made a pointed gesture to a pair of
approaching figures as they trundled what Arthur knew to be called a gurney as they murmured
quietly to one another. Obliging – because it was a demand and not a question in the Doctor's gesture
– Arthur drew himself back along the one of the white walls alongside Sebille. His eyes drew to the
pair of individuals wheeling the gurney as Vagus fell into place beside him.

One was dressed in white, in those ridiculously wide trousers that looked more like skirts and seemed
a fashion of the times with a long coat of tight sleeves and button-less tunic over the top. The middle-
aged man was speaking casually with his companion, a tall, burly woman with close-cropped hair
clad in greys that looked almost blue, in that tight-fitted stretchy material that Arthur had noted was
favoured for ease of movement and accompanied by thick boots of darker blue. They nodded at
Vagus and spared Arthur and Sebille a faintly curious glance as they passed before them. The gurney
made a faint squeak of wheels on polished floor.

Arthur nearly missed the patient lying half-dead atop the pallet. He was lying so still, with a thin
white sheet pulled up to his chin, that it was easy to overlook him. Although whether it was a him
was difficult to discern; when compared to Morgause, with the baldness and thinness of face it was
difficult to assign any particular gender. Arthur thought it was a he, though.

It was as the man's eyes flickered open briefly, however, as his eyes drifted unseeingly towards
Arthurs for barely a moment before closing once more, that Arthur realised. That the entire world,
the Facility, Sebille, Vagus, Morgause, all of it, seemed to fade into irrelevance. For with that gaze,
accompanied by cheekbones made even sharper than their usual prominence, the angular features he
was so familiar with more pointed for his thinness, that vividly blue gaze recognisable even in
unseeing haziness, told Arthur exactly who he was. Even distracted by the tube coiled from his nose,
it was impossible to miss.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't see anything from the moment Merlin's eyes met his own, unseeing
yet drawn to Arthur nonetheless. Because he knew it was Merlin, with the immediacy that he'd
known that Gaius, for all of his difference in skin colour and the slight variation of his features
details, was he. It was difficult to discern how much of Merlin's slight differences were a product of
his rebirth and how much was from the mistreatment of these supposed Doctors.

Merlin didn't look quite as bad as the corpse that was Morgause. But it was a near thing.

It was perhaps a blessing that when Arthur was gripped but an intense wave of rage he froze before
he lashed out. Every muscle within him felt bunched and straining in immobility. It would crack
soon, Arthur knew in a detached part of his brain, and then all hell would break loose. He knew this
and didn't care. His attention was focused solely upon the closed face, the face of the effectively dead
man who was his dearest friend as he was wheeled past, down the hallway and around the corner.
Only his eyes seemed capable of movement, following the passage of the gurney. The white and
blue pair that pushed Merlin took up their murmured conversation once more as casually as if they
weren't pushing the bed of a victim of torture.

_They... I've found him, I've finally found him and... what have... they've... what have they done to
him?!_

Like a stuttering candle, Arthur's thoughts guttered in and out of intelligibility. Horror waged against
the rising tide of anger and was rapidly drowned like a tent of twigs beneath a roaring bonfire. Arthur
didn't know exactly what 'treatments' these doctors were performing on their 'patients' – even
Nimueh didn't truly know, only suspected – but whatever it was... Arthur would make whoever had
done it, whoever had dared to hurt someone he cared for, pay. They would pay dearly.

"...tague? Mr Montague, would you, erm... did you perhaps wish to stay longer?"
Unable to speak, barely able to breathe, Arthur forced his head to shake in dissent. His arms, somehow having folded themselves across his chest, gripped his opposite forearms almost painfully tightly. It was that or risk strangling the man beside him before charging after Merlin.

Which he couldn't do. Wasn't allowed to do, Nimueh said, not without blowing their cover and destroying what little chance they had of freeing any sorcerers further.

Thankfully, Sebille – quite in contrast to the orders he'd given her once more – spoke for him. Even her voice was slightly strained. "No, Doctor, I don't believe we shall. Our visit was only intended to be brief."

"And you… found what you were searching for?" The tone of Vagus' voice was curious, completely devoid of any repentance. It shouldn't have been. It should have held in droves. 

As if we'd tell you, Arthur thought. He couldn't even look at the man for suspicion that his mere gaze would stab him to death.

Sebille replied once more. "Yes. I believe we have."

Vagus said something else that Arthur ignored, his attention still focused upon the empty hallway that Merlin had been pushed down. Every part of him was being withheld only by Nimueh's cursed precaution, tampering down the desire to sprint around the corner and destroy everyone in sight. It was a fierce battle.

Arthur didn't know how he managed to make it from the Facility. He didn't recall speaking further to Vagus and hoped that he hadn't, for the sake of their cover if nothing more. He registered that Sebille was similarly hushed, though Vagus himself seemed to perceive nothing unduly out of the ordinary. Curious, he was. Curious and perhaps faintly suspicious but only faintly.

They barely made it back to Nimueh's estate before Arthur exploded.

The vase was the first victim. A relatively plain vase of shaped glass, empty even of flowers. It struck the wall with a splintering shatter, pieces showering onto the faux-wooden floorboards in a tinkle of fractured pieces.

"I hope you're going to pick that up."

Arthur ignored Nimueh's dry words. He didn't even glance towards where she sat sedately, hands folded in her lap, across the room. Turning in a sightless circle on the spot, he hardly saw the room he stood in the centre of itself, the trio of faux-leather couches, the shelving and buffets outfitted in books and ornaments he'd never cared to do more than notice the presence of before, despite having spent more than his fair amount of time in Nimueh's personal parlour. He did notice the ornaments now, however, in the brief moments before he picked them up and lobbed them across the room.

A statue of a bird went next. Its decapitated head rolled into the centre of the pieces of shattered vase.

"I'm going to kill those fucking bastards."

It always felt good to cuss in the modern tongue, Arthur had found. He'd taken to the vocabulary with the ease that he'd always adopted alternative linguistics. Except for today, however. Today, he felt only frustrated by the words. They were so inadequate to express what he really felt.

And how he felt… it was a good thing they'd made it back to Nimueh's estate in time. He'd likely be
charged with insanity if seen in public and he could hardly bring himself to care.

"Those fucking," he kicked at the sofa as he passed, "fucking," another ornament joined the growing collection of shards on the floor, "bastards." He struck the wall with a fist and the ensuing lance of pain that raced through his knuckles eased him none. "Those fucking –"

"I do believe you are in need of a broader supply of profanities," Nimueh said with her usual quiet calmness. "Not that they are inaccurate but merely – Arthur put that down now or you will regret the day you awoke upon the shores of Lake Avalon. You've no idea how much they cost, both in expense and uniqueness."

It was the absolute chilling iciness of Nimueh's tone, a chill that seemed to blanket the room, which paused Arthur in the act of picking up the delicate little pot plant and lobbing it across the room. A shame, too, for he fathomed that the spray of damp soil across the pastel walls would have been quite satisfying. Fingers clenching around the ceramic pot, trembling with anger violently enough to shake the flower on its stem, he turned towards the woman across the room.

Nimueh looked younger than her years, but that in no way made her appear young. Her posture was straight and her face free of lines save those at the corners of her red-rouged lips, her shadowed eyes, at her neck above the high collar of her modest dress. Yet for all of the sharpness of her gaze her hands were beginning to spot with age, her hair pale to white-grey but for a streak or two of the deep burgundy that had been characteristic of the priestess of Arthur's time. Old? Yes, she was old. Arthur didn't know quite how old – the simple hardness of her character forbade asking – but she was older than Gaius, that much Arthur knew, and Gaius was getting on in his years. Into his sixties, he was, so a respectable age.

Or… a respectable age for Arthur's time. These days, at least in middle to upper class society, he was hardly middle aged. So much was different in the modern world, and not the least of it the strange, robe-like garb of 'synthetic' fabric that outfitted anyone of even relative wealth.

Nimueh's age could not have been further from Arthur's mind in that moment, however. Nor could the welfare of a potted plant, even if it was one of only few plants other than the clinging carpets of moss that adorned drainpipes. He was angry. Angrier than he'd been in years. Furious, even. His rage had been explosive enough that, in the short walk from the front door of Nimueh's impressive estate to her inner parlour, the few servants he'd encountered had immediately turned tail and disappeared in the opposite direction in a flurry of black skirts and wide trousers.

It gave Arthur a sadistic sense of glee – despite the fact that he generally disliked mindless intimidation – that his anger could still invoke fear in others. A glee that died rapidly when the image of Merlin arose once more before his eyes. That image had barely given Arthur reprieve since he'd seen him.

Arthur had dedicated his life to finding Merlin and his sister. It had been a dedication that had been gradual in developing after he'd awakened, what with every other trial he'd come across: an unfamiliar world, an unfamiliar language, a general regard of distrust and fear from all encountered and a complete incomprehension as to what he was doing here.

This world, this kingdom shrouded in a perpetual blanket of clouds that blotted out the sun and allowed only a piercing white glare to pervade and illuminate that below, was far different to that Arthur had known. Far different to any kingdom he'd known. From the people, all of whom spoke in a foreign tongue, to the houses of strange cottages and incredibly tall, square-faced buildings founded upon materials he'd never seen, it was different. There was a distinct lack of anything green, of anything besides the constant planes of brown and grey, and in the first weeks after he'd awoken Arthur had seen few animals save pigeons, rats, roaches and the stray mangy dog.
And that was disregarding the mindboggling and seemingly impossible instruments that he'd encountered inside the people's houses.

Arthur was at a loss. One of the last memories he had before his... sleep, his dreams, was of the battle at Camlann. Of Mordred and the wound he'd been dealt before he returned in kind. Of Morgana and her fit of insanity before her death.

And of Merlin and his revelation of magic. Of the flight they'd made towards the Lake that Merlin had claimed could heal him. It had seemed such an incredibly huge secret, a horrible secret, a betrayal even, at the time.

In the light of waking up in the new world, that secret had seemed somewhat less... consequential. There was simply so much more to deal with, what with Arthur's entire world, his entire purpose and his identity as a king cast brutally to the side. An existential crisis was what Arthur had later come to know it as being called; this new world had names for the kind of thing he experienced in the weeks after awakening, the months he'd lived in the strange little cottage with the old man whose name he hadn't been able to discern for the majority of that time.

It was only after nearly a year, when his knowledge of the language and the world had been frustratingly explained to him by old man Mite, that he'd set his feet upon a definite path. And it had all been the result of a chance encounter with a sorcerer.

Sophia her name was. She'd recognised Arthur before he had her. A Sidhe he remembered her as being from his own time, though in the wary privacy of her home she hadn't called herself such. It was she who had explained to him the impossibility of reincarnation, a phenomenon that Arthur had never heard nor even considered before. And it was she who had given him hope that those few he'd known who possessed magic in his time would exist in this world too.

Merlin and his magic leapt to the forefront of his mind. If there was anyone Arthur could trust, it would be Merlin, his servant and, more than that, his dear friend who had seemingly acted with his magic for Arthur countless times before. That Sophia had told him, with a rueful smirk, had saved him from her own clutches in times gone by. She hadn't seemed resentful of the fact; amusement was very definitely the impression that Arthur got from her at the time, almost as though she were reflecting on the harmless folly of her youth rather than her own death. It baffled Arthur entirely.

But even baffled, Arthur had left her hidden home, the dwelling embedded in the distant reaches of Town Exeter, with a goal in mind. He would find Merlin. And even it did fill him with as much dread and apprehension as hope, he would similarly search for Morgana. Before her insanity she had still been his sister. Perhaps, after learning what Sophia had taught him of the reincarnation process itself, if she was young enough he could even catch her before her mind had been turned.

Arthur would find Merlin and Morgana. And any other sorcerers from his time, those he didn't know. And then... well, Arthur didn't truly know what came after but his first resolution was trial enough to complete. He'd not yet found them to be thinking of what came next.

The Facility... the authorities of this modern world's 'government', the reigning power that had so disastrously taken over from the monarchy of Arthur's time, had wreaked such havoc that he wouldn't even know where to begin or in what direction. He didn't know what to do, didn't know where to start. All he knew was that the people of this New World, the minority that were sorcerers, were being treated with an injustice that he couldn't stand. Not with the knowledge of magic that he had come to understand.

And Nimueh's suggestion that they simply preserve magic was not a route he intended to go down. At least not how she intended; the woman appeared to disregard the welfare of the magic-users
themselves in her greedy search for the knowledge and capability they possessed. To preserve magic
if not necessarily the people? No, it wasn't right.

Arthur didn't like Nimueh. His dislike was not only due to the Past he knew they shared. He'd never
truly met her, but he'd heard enough stories from his father to be wary. A priestess of terrible power
and great cunning she was known, and had brought disaster to every situation she encountered. Or at
least, that was what he'd always been told. That was the understanding he had clung to in his years
as a prince, when magic had been a threat and a danger to all who were victim to its works.

Now? Arthur still didn't like her. She was disagreeable and merciless in her single-minded
determination to 'preserve the knowledge of the magic that would be lost'. And yet… she was his
only chance at reaching his current goal. That much he had deduced. Somehow, the priestess who
had been so renowned for her magic had climbed the rungs of a magic-hating society to a position of
power. It was that power that Arthur knew he had to use.

In the instant after seeing Morgause, he'd known with a certainty that had hitherto been tentative, that
the Facilities must be destroyed. Drain magic from a sorcerer? Even Arthur with his limited
knowledge of magic could see that such a route would only end in disaster, in genocide for all with
the barest hint of magical capabilities.

After seeing Merlin, he'd known he had to do something now.

Refusing to be cowed by Nimueh's hard gaze, Arthur turned a glare upon her. "Did you know?"

"Did I know what?"

"Don't play the fool with me, Nimueh. I know Sebille sent you a voice message in our trip back.
Did. You. Know?"

Blinking slowly, Nimueh actually seemed to deflate slightly. It didn't quite ease Arthur's anger,
especially given that her defiance still remained strong, but he felt it might be possible to restrain
himself from hurling the miniature potted plant across the room. Maybe. He still struggled with the
redness clouding his vision.

Her eyes fixed on the plant in Arthur's grasp but he had the distinct impression that she didn't see it.
"Did I know that what the Facilities enacted upon sorcerers was little more than torture? That it was
not a prison of holding for execution as most in the world deem they are?" She bowed her head
slightly, regally. "Yes, I did know that."

"You told me the sorcerers were kept there," Arthur growled through his teeth. His dislike for
Nimueh flared to something approaching hatred. Perhaps it was already there. And though he knew
it was a misdirected hatred for the authorities that controlled the Facilities it felt good to have
somewhere to focus his anger. Well, not good, but mildly relieving. "You didn't tell me what they
did to them."

"Of course not. You'd have thrown a tantrum."

Arthur didn't think. In a darting whip of his hand, he lobbed the pot plant across the room. The
resulting shower of dirt and the shattering crash wasn't nearly as satisfying as it should have been.
Nimueh didn't even flinch. "With good reason! They don't just kill the sorcerers; no, death would be
a mercy from what I saw. What do you know, Nimueh? Do you know what they do?"

Nimueh blinked again slowly. Her lips pursed slightly, the rosebud redness a startling contrast to her
pale skin and equally pale dress. It was like a bloody gash across her face. "You broke my plant."
"I swear, by God, I'll break more than that if you don't give me some answers."

"Oh, you still believe there's a God? Even after all you've seen?" Nimueh arched an eyebrow. "Your faith is admirable."

Lip curling in a snarl, Arthur strode across the room towards her seat. Stopping at far too close a proximity to be deemed polite, he folded his arms and loomed over her. Nimueh didn't seem intimidated in the least. "You will give me answers. Now."

Nimueh's eyes narrowed. "You are no longer a king, Arthur, to so command others as you would subordinates."

"I don't command you as a subordinate but request as my due. You owe me an explanation. Did you know about the... the treatment? About Merlin?"

Finally, Nimueh fully deflated. Her fight didn't leave her – it likely never would, not until death – but she bowed for the moment. As though allowing this one leeway. "Fine. I'll tell you what I know." She peered up at him, narrowing her eyes further. "But sit down, Arthur. I dislike so straining my neck."

"I'll stay exactly where I am, if it's all the same."

"It is not, actually."

"Then I'll have you know..."

"Oh for goodness sake, Arthur, seat yourself. I've a mind to knock you down myself if it will let me know of Merlin's state."

At the sound of Gaius' voice, Arthur glanced over his shoulder. And as always in the older man's presence, in the face of his steadfast, grounded aura, he felt his anger quell. Slightly. Enough that, as Gaius walked into the room and seated himself on one of the two remaining sofa's, Arthur felt it possible to do the same in the other seat. He sat rigidly, yes, but sit he did.

Gaius bore but a half-resemblance to his Camelot self. His skin, for instance, was a coppery brown of but a few shades lighter than his grey streaked hair and wrinkled as though aged by the absent sun. He was taller than he had been, taller than Arthur, and less bowed by his years though not for fewer number of them than Arthur had known him to carry in his own time. His hands were the same, though, as dextrous as ever, as were his sharp eyes, the squareness of his face and the familiar bushy eyebrows that could bring any stuttering excuse to an embarrassed silence. And the way he carried himself, as though he had every right to be exactly where he was at any given moment. It gave him a respectable countenance that even did a little to waylay the ridiculousness of his set of wide trousers and shirt, the pale blue garments so loose as to appear more of a night robe than day wear.

With his usual manner, as soon as he entered the room his passive domination pervaded. To be situated between both Gaius and Nimueh was to find forced muteness an acquired characteristic, one which Arthur had found himself a victim of on many an occasion. One he'd fought long and hard against. In this instance, however, his posture still rigid with the anger that boiled like magma through his blood, he was more than happy to allow Gaius to take the reins in the situation. Especially given that he was far more agreeable to Nimueh than Arthur was himself, and anybody else, including Sebille, had fled upon entry to the house.

Gaius had affixed Nimueh with his steady, unwavering gaze. "I have heard what happened."
"From Sebille?"

"From Sebille," Gaius confirmed her query. "She did not recognise Merlin herself, having never met him in person, but suspected his identity from Arthur's response."

"Yes, I'm sure Arthur deemed the situation unnecessary of explanation," Nimueh turned hooded eyes towards Arthur with just a hint of accusation. "That would naturally be the only reason he would hold his tongue."

Arthur kept silent, putting to use the regal aloofness he'd embraced as a king. It had never been so warranted. Gaius, ignoring their silent confrontation, edged forward slightly in his seat. The motion captured Nimueh's attention. "Is it true, Nimueh? You would know, surely, of the intent of the Facilities. It would surely be impossible for your Confederation to remain ignorant of their attempts."

There was a slightly chiding tone in Gaius' voice that Arthur doubted anyone else could have gotten away with without Nimueh retorting with a scathing remark. She appeared mildly disgruntled, her lips thinning, but not as much as she perhaps would have had Arthur said as much. A tongue-lashing would have been the more likely outcome.

Slowly, she nodded her head. "I did not know in so many words, no. I have been to the Facilities but once in my entire political career and during such visit was only shown what I could deem to be the more 'agreeable' individuals in their… care. I believe that the only reason my request was granted in this instance was because my station has recently been afforded greater liberty and yet it was not myself who would be doing the visiting."

"That would make a difference?" Arthur asked.

"Evidently."

"Why?"

"Perhaps you, as considered merely an understudy of higher order, would be deemed less capable of responding to any disagreeable encounters you should make?" Gaius suggested. He met Arthur's frown with a steady gaze. "Lady Nine's request could hardly be disregarded entirely, not with the current movement battering at the doors of the authorities, but neither could they allow her the opportunity of becoming a first-hand witness." He turned back to Nimueh. "Perhaps?"

Nimueh bowed her head in less of an assent and more of a shrug. "Perhaps. I do believe that, ultimately, our opportunity to see Morgause was based more upon luck than any other contributing factor."

"They didn't want you to see and become a 'first-hand eyewitness'," Arthur said slowly. "So then they evidently feel you could do something about it?"

He spoke with a hint of confusion, fumbling through ignorance and speculation. Nimueh had, by and large, kept him firmly out of her business. He knew only the bare minimum of her station as a Lady of the Confederation for the Moderation of Treatment of Magical Peoples, and that was how she liked to keep it. It didn't help that such ignorance was how Nimueh liked to keep the world at large; the better to achieve her personal goals, she claimed. Even with the plethora of intelligence systems that Arthur could access, both the SpiderWeb and the less public Networks, he could find next to nothing but the barest sketch of her character. Not even her age was afforded to the public. Such was the way with many higher political figures. It appeared that the more embedded into the intricacies of governmental workings one was, the less the rest of the world saw of them.
Nimueh said it was to protect her safety and the nature of her goals. Arthur had to wonder whether she was protecting herself more from her enemies or her allies.

At Arthur's words, Nimueh's face hardened. "I can do... some. But little. Evidently, or our current situation with the authorities and the Facilities would not be as grim as it currently is."

"What could you do?" Arthur asked.

Nimueh shrugged. "I am a notable figure. There is weight behind my words. Should I make any overt claims as to the dubious nature of the Facilities' actions, an investigation may take place."

"An investigation? By whom?"

"Exactly," Nimueh sighed. "By whom. Those who would investigate would most likely either be already informed of the actions of the Facility or could easily be silenced by means of money or, in less monetarily driven cases, blackmail."

"Then... they fear the public? That those of the civilian class will discover what occurs?"

"Little enough good that would do in most cases," Gaius muttered grimly. "Most would revel in the thought of a sorcerer being tortured to 'heal' them of their magic."

"Indeed," Nimueh agreed with a sombre nod of her head. "Magic-induced terror is bred into the children of modernity. The only objection that would arise would be the possibility of like treatment afforded to non-magical individuals. Even such treatment of the criminals that are similarly carted into the Facility would raise a greater concern for the public than the sorcerers."

They three fell silent for a moment. Arthur reflected blackly upon the bleakness of their situation, his anger and objection dying to a simmering heat; it was true what Nimueh had said about the view of sorcerers, even given that the Confederation was maintaining its stance that magic was not 'all that bad' as most would consider it, with most meaning everyone. That the authorities had allowed – more through their persistence than any form of agreement – the Confederation to maintain their education decree, to inform the public of the 'real' power of magic, meant little. The unnatural power of magic itself, even utilised for beneficial purposes, even for healing, was viewed with nothing short of terror.

Old prejudices died hard.

After a moment of silent contemplation, Gaius finally spoke. When he did it was directly to Arthur. "You saw Merlin?"

There was deep pain in Gaius' voice. A loss that had been dampened by the hope instilled by Arthur's resolution and yet smothered once more by his latest discovery. Arthur could understand entirely his sentiment. On the one hand, there was the joy and triumph of finally finding Merlin. On the other, however, the far larger, darker and more horrifying level, there was the pain of what the site of that discovery entailed.

And what Arthur had seen.

In an instant, Arthur's anger rose to the fore once more. He felt the almost irressible urge to kick something. Anything. Or someone.

With a rigid jerk that seemed to make his neck creak, Arthur nodded. "I did."

Gaius swallowed, his face a visage of the pain that was tightening Arthur's chest. "He was... was
Arthur couldn't look at Gaius when he replied. Instead he affixed Nimueh with a stare he knew was faintly accusing yet could do nothing to smother. "Morgause was broken. Anyone could tell simply by looking at her. And Merlin..." He had to swallow down the tightness of his throat. "Merlin wasn't far off." If he wasn't there already, he thought. Arthur narrowed his stare accusingly. "Did you know he was there? Is Morgana there too and you simply haven't told me?"

Nimueh hissed. She actually hissed, like a cat with its tail pulled. "Don't be ridiculous, Arthur."

"Oh, so such a possibility is ridiculous to consider?"

"Yes, it is," she said with a sharp jerk of her head. "You honestly believe that I would not have gotten Emrys out of there before now had I known he was within the Facility's grasp? Even without him defeating me I am knowledgeable enough to know that his magical capabilities are too vast for me not to acquire. Morgana's too. They were undoubtedly two of the most powerful sorcerers Albion had ever seen."

"Acquire?" Arthur gritted his teeth. "To add to your collection, you mean?" He snorted and shook his head. "Tell me, Nimueh. You said you would have 'gotten him out of there' had you known he was there at all?"

"Of course," she replied chillingly.

"Then why have you not done the same for the rest of the sorcerers?"

That silenced her. It could have been due to the dual attention of both Gaius and Arthur himself trained upon her, but she actually looked mildly disconcerted. Even chided. Not guilty by any stretch, but Arthur felt he'd hit a sore point.

She tried to speak three times before managing. "I... the benefits did not outweigh the costs. I would not risk my identity, my true motive, and my cause being unveiled for negligible circumstances."

Beside Arthur, Gaius grunted as though stabbed. He rubbed at his chest, soothing what appeared an almost physical wound. Arthur didn't draw his stare from Nimueh. She'd straightened her back in resistance, as though to face a foe. "Not for anything 'lesser' as you deem it."

"Not in so many words," she said quietly. "But I must keep in mind the overall war rather than focusing upon the smaller battles. Surely you, as a war general, Arthur, understand such a sentiment."

Sadly, Arthur did. He did understand, as a king and strategist, that such measures, such sacrifices, had to be made to attain the greater goal. Unfortunately for Nimueh, however, Arthur was no longer a king. He was no longer bound by such restraints, such posturing formalities and necessary truths. He straightened his back just as resolutely as she did. "In sentiment I understand. I do. But know this, Nimueh," he spoke over the beginning of Gaius' protest, ignoring him completely. "I will not wait. Not in this case. You have your goals and I have mine: to find Merlin and Morgana. Well, I've found Merlin at least, and I assure you I have no intention of leaving him to be tortured into the same lifeless shell of Morgause. I'm getting him out of that 'treatment' Facility if it's the last thing I do." More than that, it'll be the first thing I do.

Nimueh sat forward abruptly in her seat. Her eyes widened and her hands caught on the knees of her skirt. It was the most emotion Arthur had seen her express since he'd stepped into her parlour, even accounting for the shattered pot plant. "Arthur, no. You will destroy everything if you –"
"I will destroy your everything," Arthur interrupted.

"You will erase every measure, every step, that we of the Confederation have taken so far in one thoughtless action. You cannot do this."

"Will you stop me?" Lifting his chin, Arthur tightened the fold of his arms. "From rescuing Merlin. Will you stop me?"

"I…" Nimueh trailed off. It was evident to Arthur, as it likely would have been to only a few, that she was waging an internal war with herself. "I…"

Gaius chose that moment to interrupt. "You said yourself, Nimueh, that Merlin was worth acting for. From what I can gather, he is in a… delicate state."

"Delicate?" Arthur spat.

Gaius ignored him, eyes trained on Nimueh. "I personally understand your sentiment. As does Arthur, I believe. But surely you must also see ours. We know not how long Merlin has been within the Facility. We similarly know not how much longer he will last."

"And withholding your attack until a more suitable time would be so inconceivable?" Nimueh asked, her words stinging. Both Arthur and Gaius remained silent and eventually she caved with a sigh. "You truly will go ahead with your intentions, won't you?"

"I will," Arthur agreed with a nod.

"And should I forcibly prevent you from doing so?"

"You could try," Gaius said with deceptive mildness. The unspoken "and you will fail" was heard by them all.

Nimueh nodded her head slowly. Her eyes trained on the glass surface of the coffee table for a moment before she replied. "Fine. Fine. Give me one month and I will create an opportunity."

"One month -?" Arthur began, starting forwards in his seat in protest.

Nimueh snapped up a silencing hand. "One month. Give me one month, Arthur, and I will afford you circumstances that will enable your endeavour."

Arthur was silent for a moment. In all seriousness he wanted nothing more than to charge back towards the Facility, plough through the barriers of reinforced iron gates rigged with electrical currents and break down the walls to retrieve his friend right now. But that infuriating, quiet voice of reason in his mind urged him not to disregard Nimueh's offer. He didn't want to leave Merlin in the Facility – Gods, a whole month? – but he knew he had to. He couldn't do it alone.

With a tightening of his jaw he gave a faint shake of his head. "One month, Nimueh. I'll wait one month."

One month was all he'd allow. Then he would be breaking into the Facility, with Nimueh's 'opportunity' or not. Somehow, he didn't know how, but he would.

From the expression on Nimueh's face, from her lack of protest, he suspected she knew his unspoken ultimatum.
Chapter 9

Silence was an almost constant companion in the Pits. Not complete silence, no, for that would be impossible. There was the almost inaudible hum from the seemingly globe-less fluorescent lights that illuminated the cell and hallways. There was the sound of breathing, a whisper of ragged gasps that Merlin at times forgot belonged to him. And there were the intermittent interruptions of the orderlies and their bodyguards. But even they were quiet.

Merlin didn't realise it at the time, but that ensuing, constant silence had probably become almost soothing. A balm to an otherwise horrendous situation of which no other medicine was provided. It was only when that silence was abruptly and brutally torn apart that he realised just how thoughtlessly he'd accepted its presence.

Then the sirens erupted.

The sirens that wailed like a banshee.

It was in the darkness of night that they sounded. Merlin wasn't asleep; he rarely slept anymore, finding his body too discomforted by the simple act of existing to fall into such oblivion. He dozed, though, and that state of listless dozing was torn from him like a blanket in the icy cold of winter with the puncturing sound of the wailing.

It rose in a steady, unbroken whine, ear-splittingly loud. Like an approaching screamer it ascended, hit its peak and descended once more. It didn't quieten with that descent, however. If anything it got louder.

And louder.

And louder with each rise.

Merlin felt his body stiffen as pained by the sound. Which, he felt, was almost accurate. It did almost hurt. The assault of the drawn out, unbroken "WHA-A-ARR" battered against his coddled eardrums. Coddled because Merlin abruptly realised he'd previously been largely spared of abuse to his auditory canals up until that point. Perhaps this was some other kind of treatment? Although, what kind of treatment took place in his cell without a Doctor?

Merlin could feel his eyes peeled wide. Could feel them, even if the darkness forbade him from seeing anything. Night's darkness was always as dark and unfathomable as the depths of a well. Lying on his side, as immobile as ever and quivering slightly as the added pressure of taut muscles increased the surface area of his body pressed against the stinging solidity of the ground, Merlin strained his eyes. Uselessly.

"Mer…lin?"

Freya's voice could barely be heard over the siren's wail. It was only chance that found Merlin alongside the thin section of wall, close enough to hear her; he certainly hadn't the energy to drag himself there in weeks. They hadn't spoken in… in Merlin didn't know how long. He hardly bothered anymore, could barely urge himself to try to move.

"Freya."

"What… what is it?"
Merlin swallowed down the constant dryness in his throat. He'd forgotten how taxing it was to speak, how much it ached the vocal chords. Or was that new? Was that a new pain? "I don't know."

"It sounds... it sounds familiar. Like from a Past memory or something. Those... do you remember those... those..."

"Air raid sirens?"

"Yeah, they're the ones. It sort of sounds like -"

Whatever Freya thought, however she might have extrapolated, was lost to Merlin's abrupt diversion of attention. For to his side, like the sun suddenly beaming through the ever-present cover of cloud, the radiance of artificial light flooded Merlin's cell. The door had hissed open without his notice. He was temporarily blinded.

Night was usually staggered back to daylight; a thin, ruddy glow would start, which would fade to orange then yellow then the white of full fluorescent light. Overall it took about an hour; Merlin had counted it when in one of his more motivated moods. Such staggering was not how his night was broken this time – the light was red but an entirely different, blinding kind and alternated with a vibrant blue. And abruptly not only his ears were exposed to abuse but his eyes too.

Uttering a whimper that hurt his throat more than anything, Merlin cringed into the floor. Had he been able to, he might have slapped his hands across his eyes. He wasn't able to, wasn't capable of moving but to curl into the ground. He fell inwards, ignoring the sound of Freya's voice, even the scuffing of figures entering the room to simply focus on easing the pain in his eyes. It didn't help in the slightest.

That inward focus was broken an instant later, however, when someone touched him. Not gently, no, but not with the procedural grasp of an orderly. His shoulder twinged at the touch, skin prickling painfully beneath the pressure. He bit back another whimper.

"... out of here, okay? Just bear with... a moment."

"Have to get... underneath the... take it off?"

"...know if... have the time..."

Two voices. Or perhaps three, Merlin wasn't sure. Their words were broken, half-heard as though muffled by thick masks as well as the weight of the siren that was abruptly louder with the opening of the door. Familiar? They could have been familiar. Merlin wasn't sure, couldn't tell. Orderlies or bodyguards or Doctors, the voices could belong to any of them. He didn't dare to open his eyes to check. He'd learnt to take his moments of reprieve where he could.

That resolution was broken, however, when he felt the tugging motions of unbuttoning and untying. His eyes blinked open painfully, watering, as he peered at two – no, three figures crouched around him. They were dressed in greys and blacks, and indeed their faces were covered in muffling masks. Not the masks of the Hunters with reflective visors and heavy armouring but of cloth and the same colour as their suits. They squatted on their haunches beside him, looming over him with the same intent study that the Doctors did, barely more than shadows in the harsh glow of light from the hallway. Fingers worked at the ties of his suit with gloved hands, efficient and swift.

These figures didn't have the watching stillness of the Doctors, however. Quite the opposite. Merlin realised with rising confusion, discomfort, with something bordering on fear of the uncertain rising within him. For though being free of the jumpsuit was hardly something that was unusual – the
humiliating 'bathing' process had rapidly become less humiliating and merely customary over the years – it had never happened in the privacy of Merlin's own cell.

Not that Merlin would fight it. Not that he could. He didn't know who the grey-black figures were whose voices he could barely make out through the ear-splitting siren. They weren't orderlies, nor bodyguards, and the couldn't have been doctors for the doctors never came into Merlin's cell on the odd occasions they came out of the treatment quarters. But even without knowing who they were, learned helplessness was a product of the Pits. Even had he been physically capable of doing so, Merlin doubted he would have had the motivation to resist.

The masked figures tugged painfully at the jumpsuit, scouring his hypersensitive skin enough to make him cringe from their fingers until he was left in nothing but the thin leggings and singlet beneath. As always, the feeling of his fingers and toes loosened, his skin exposed to the air, was as unnerving and slightly painful as the rest of the experience. Within moments he lay sprawled on the padded floor once more. His breath was panting heavily, almost gasping; he hadn't even realised it, hadn't heard it through the sound of the sirens. The watering in his eyes, both from the light and the rapidly increasing pain, made his vision even blurrier than it had been before.

They were tugging at his collar now. His collar and the thick bands that read his vitals about his wrists and ankles. Merlin didn't know what they were doing, didn't hugely care, except that whatever it was appeared to be causing them some disgruntlement. Or distress. Or anger, Merlin wasn't sure which.

"…get it off…"

"Think… chip taken out… back of the neck…"

"Don't think… take out… hurt…"

He didn't know what they were doing at first. Then he did, with the abrupt, almost too-loud snap of the collar around his neck, followed moments later by quartet of similar snaps further along his body. And, distracted from his thoughts, from the grogginess that had descended upon him with the twitches of pain, that assault of light and noise, Merlin caught his breath. What… were they doing?

He didn't have a chance to ask, even if he'd been able to force himself to speak. For an instant later everything shifted and the world seemed to move at a faster pace. Not Merlin himself, but everything around him. The trio of figures flowed swiftly to standing and two disappeared in the direction of the hallway with a brief murmur of words. The third, a man, Merlin hazarded from his size, paused only for a second to glance at the two and bark a reply. A second later he bent over Merlin once more. His masked face swung close enough for Merlin to smell him. He smelt… different. Clean yet sweaty, a hint of the distinctive scent that Merlin had always associated with warmth. More importantly, he didn't smell of chemicals or sterility at all.

If there was anything that could have urged Merlin to trust the man, it would have been that. He hadn't smelt anything so… so natural in what must have been years. He would have begged the man not to leave him to the unbroken static of white walls, fluorescent lights and cloyingly clean smells.

He didn't have to. For hanging over Merlin briefly, the man paused only long enough to utter a brief word. "Hang in, alright. I'll get you out of here."

It was familiar. The voice was familiar, but in that moment Merlin couldn't place it. And any inclination to identify it was swept away in the an instant when the masked man squatted once more, shifted in a smooth motion to slide his arms beneath Merlin's shoulders and knees, and hefted him as he stood.
It hurt. It hurt more than Merlin could have anticipated. The dual placement of pressure, his entire weight resting upon the point his shoulder blades and the sensitive skin behind his knees touched the man's arms, was incredibly painful, more even than it was to be wheeled on a gurney. The press of the man's chest against the length of his side as Merlin was held against him hurt just as much. His thin clothing offered little protection; it hardly could, for the simple touch of skin on synthetic cloth was what sent red hot sparks of pain dancing across Merlin's eyes.

He whimpered. It had to have been he who whimpered. The sound was barely audible over the continued wail of the sirens and he'd clamped his eyes tightly shut as the floor was swept out from underneath him. Merlin doubted that anyone else could make a sound so pathetic, however. He sounded like a sickly child whining for his mammy.

The man who held him, cradled him as though he were such a child, was moving. Merlin thought he was moving. Walking – no, running. Each jostle sent additional jolts of pain rippling across Merlin's skin, scrambling his mind so that he could hardly even think. He barely registered the man's chants of, "It's okay. I'll get you out of here. Just hold on a little longer. It's okay…"

They weren't as comforting as perhaps they should have been. As they may have been intended to be. Merlin tuned them out after a moment; it was too much effort to even listen. Instead, he simply bowed his head with a painful tuck of his neck, squeezed his eyes more tightly shut and clamped his teeth into his bottom lip hard enough to pierce and draw blood.

The brief sting of pain was a welcome relief from the pressured lances of agony. Merlin bit harder, and did the only thing he could; he didn't know who the man was didn't know where they were going, didn't know if he was being taken to a treatment that could elicit more pain than he'd ever experienced.

It hardly mattered where he went. Merlin just endured.

That damn siren.

Arthur cursed beneath his breath once more as he rounded a corner and beheld the effects their infiltration had provoked. Not only was the deafening wailing crescendo-ing ever louder with every moment but as soon as he'd hastened through from the patient's holding ward to the Facility at large the lights had become blinding. Not the fluorescent lights that constantly hung from the roof of every building Arthur had stepped into in recent years but a rapid-fire flashing of red to blue to red once more.

It was giving Arthur a headache. A headache atop the one that already throbbed through his temples and set his teeth on edge.

At the end of the hallway he raced down, breath heaving in steady, even pants, Arthur could see the shadowed figures of Keryn and Tia pressed against the wall. Unobtrusive they were not, despite the camouflage properties of their Kevlar suits. The flashing lights bereft them of any chance of hiding.

The pair peered in mirror images of one another around the wall. Both hefted a solid-bullet guns at head height, and the grounded tension in their bodies bespoke their preparedness to use them. They hadn't had to yet, and Arthur could be thankful of that fact at least; much as he would revel in the chance to pound several Facility staff members into a pulp for their inhumane nonchalance to their own torturous acts, he knew it would only waste valuable time. Time they needed to escape.

Nimueh had given them their opportunity. In a month, as Arthur had demanded, even as every passing day set his teeth on edge. She'd looked near to dropping from exhaustion when she'd
informed him the day before of her intentions. Or at least as near to dropping as someone so
decidedly unwavering could appear. She relayed in clipped words how she had orchestrated a board
meeting between the Confederation and the Initiative in an evening session. An ingenious act, it was,
and decidedly difficult to pull off, Arthur knew. The government party involved in the running of the
Facilities, spearheaded by the Doctors themselves, would no doubt pull a fair number of those
Doctors for attendance of the meeting itself. They couldn't afford not to, not when it came to the
Confederation. Even if Nimueh had stated that, for all she postured as to the necessity of the meeting,
she expected nothing to come of it. The usual: protest the aggressive imprisonment of sorcerers, opt
for a more moderated treatment of such individuals, and attempt to 'reconcile' or come to an
agreement with them. It had, reportedly, never made much of a difference before. Not that Nimueh
didn't try again and again, at such length that the official meetings stretched long into the night.

The real beauty of Nimueh's planning, however, had come in her coinciding it with the Libertarian
Public Holiday. One of only few annual instances, and restricted only to the upper-middle class
members of London, the effect lay in that only a skeleton crew were on duty at the Central Facility of
London.

Someone would notice the perfection of the opportunity, surely. Just as they wouldn't be able to miss
that such an opportunity was utilised to break a 'patient' from the prison of government walls. Arthur
would have wanted to free more, to take as many of the victims of the Facility's mistreatment that he
could carry, but the sirens waylaid his desires. And even had they not, it had taken long minutes to
break into Merlin's room, even with Tia's supreme infiltration abilities and their eventual use of magic
to break through the door. She could crack a code in record time, but the lock on the patient's room
were, she said, unlike any she'd ever seen.

It was Tia who glanced towards Arthur to beckon him hastily after them. A beckon that immediately
transformed into a halting gesture after Keryn ducked quickly behind the wall to avoid a thin,
lightning bolt of electricity. He in turn whipped around the corner to loose his own trio of fired
bullets. His nod of satisfaction assured Arthur his supposed accuracy was not carelessly afforded
him. With a clipped gesture, a curt nod of her head, Tia slipped around the corner and fell into step
beside Keryn as they started down the adjacent hallway. Arthur followed seconds later, hefting
Merlin slightly in his arms as he did so.

A mew, barely a whimper, drew his attention down towards him. The expression of pain that
wrinkled Merlin's brow, the ferocity with which he bit into his lip almost as though he sought to
shred it into pieces, was heartbreaking. Arthur didn't know what it was exactly that was wrong, but
he knew pain when he saw it. Something was causing Merlin distress and the sooner Arthur could
get him to Gaius, or perhaps to Alice, the better.

Perhaps it was a good thing that there was no one to waylay them. Arthur surely would have left any
potential resistance as a bloody pulp in his wake in his need for speed.

The Facility was like a rabbit warren, a network of high-ceilinged hallways and polished floors, each
stretch of wall identical to the last and dotted with doors only discernible by their thin frame and
gridded ID-pad where a handle should have been. Arthur prided himself on his level-headedness, on
his sense of direction, and had committed the map that one of Nimueh's moles had somehow
harvested from their knowledge stores. An old version, the man had called it, dated and lacking in
some of the newer structures about the Clinical Wing but better than nothing.

Still, with the muddle of turns and identical stretches of corridor, even Arthur's memory was being
stretched to its limit. A limit that was notably less extensive than he knew it to realistically be. He put
it down to the situation, to the anger that had been a constant companion to him over the past seven
days and erased what had once been his constant level-headedness in times of stress. That and his
lack of sleep over the past weeks, though that was most likely due to his anger too. He'd never been so full of rage in his entire life. It was simply a blessing that Tia had the directional sense of a homing pigeon, even without the GPS devices that were a constant companion to the people of the New World.

Rounding another corner at Tia and Keryn's fire and subsequent beckoning once more, they spilled from the burrow-like network of hallways into a vaguely familiar foyer. A large, empty room of little besides a reflective white desk, tall and half the length of the foyer's wall, cleared but for several neat stacks of book-like pads and a recharging booth of pagers. That and a tempting pair of double doors that stood across the room leading to potential 'outside'. They were resolutely shut and reinforced, Arthur knew. Probably mechanically as well as physically. The room echoed with their footsteps as they passed into the emptiness. Well, empty now. Keryn had terrified the life out of the young man who had been bowed over the desk not ten minutes beforehand. The man had fled and Keryn, being the forgiving individual that he was, had let him.

The sirens had started a minute later, before they'd even had a chance to locate which room Merlin was stashed in through book-pads Tia had cracked into. Arthur tried not to blame Keryn for that, but…

"Not that way, Keryn," Tia barked as they passed the desk. With her fluid, pounding steps, she led the way down the hallway opposite that Keryn had been about to take, her dark figure a black blot bathed alternatively in red and blue. Keryn spat a curse and followed her alongside Arthur.

Through the laundry chute they had come. Classic, Keryn had called it, and cliché Tia had said a moment later with a roll of her eyes. Arthur could fault the tactic. It had worked; they'd managed their infiltration, clambering up from the underground canal system and climbing the near vertical chute with the use of scaling magnets and magic. Another classic, Keryn called them, though Arthur had never seen the likes of it before. He likened it to rock climbing in a manner less strenuous than using picks, but other than that had spared little thought for their progress. It was the destination that mattered.

They didn't make it far down the hallway. Barely a dozen steps from the foyer, a spillage of figures flooded the other end of the corridor. All dressed in grey-blue washed darker by the light and hefting their own array of guns and what Arthur recognised as being electrically-tipped Prods. Over half carried guns similar to those that Tia and Keryn held aloft, and in an instant a spray of electrical bullets shot towards them.

Arthur ducked instinctively. He dropped to his knees and curled over Merlin's body to provide minimal protection he could. The crackle of the bullets fizzled through the air above him, through the narrow gaps between he and his fellows who had similarly fallen to the ground with the speed of those wounded. An instant later, in a reverse of procedure, cries of "Halt!" and "Drop your weapons!" echoed in a discordant ring through the siren's wail. Their onward rush slowed, knees bending in the distinctive bending crouch of preparation.

From his crouch, Arthur snapped his gaze over the half-dozen figures. He ran a split-second scan across their builds, their weapons status, their armoury, compiling a list of the most to least dangerous as he'd learnt to do since he'd first held a sword. He felt his body tense into the grounded readiness it naturally assumed under threat, despite his lack of weapon. Despite the fact that Tia and Keryn's very presence was to relinquish his need to defend himself at all. His hands tightened around Merlin cradled limply against his chest and… Limply? No, that wasn't good. That wasn't –

"Drop your weapons and lower the patient to the ground. Now!"

Arthur's attention jerked to the central grey figure in the wall of bodies abruptly erected across their
path. The dimness of the hallway, broken only by the headache-inducing red and blue flashing lights, shadowed his face, but Arthur had an ear for identifying that sort of thing.

Half turning his head towards Tia, he spoke in a murmur without moving his lips. "Third from the left is their captain. Take him down first."

"Then?" Keryn asked with similar muteness. He immediately bowed Arthur's higher knowledge. Tia too, from the tilt of her head. At another time, Arthur would have had his weapon-less state mollified by their submission.

He didn't even consider it in that moment. Right then, he couldn't care less if Tia – or even Keryn – acted against any express orders so long as it got them out of the snake pit as soon as possible. To the repeated order and shaking point of weapons from the grey-clad figures, he muttered a clipped reply. "End pair first – they've got the guns – then third from the right and second from the left; they were the shooters before so they'll have fewer bullets. Second from the right has a reinforced vest, so electrical bullets won't do anything. Leave him till last as –"

"He'll be slower," Tia finished. "Got it. Keryn?"

"Yup," Keryn affirmed. He didn't need to say any more. The pair knew each other well enough to ascertain their mode of attack.

All Arthur had to do was crouch low and watch.

Within seconds, the six attackers were felled with groans or eerie silence. Arthur, having swung himself to the side to avoid the potential spray of bullets fired in the process, swiftly regained his footing. He drew his concerned gaze from Merlin – he'd evidently lost consciousness, which was actually more concerning than his whimpers of pain had been – to his fellow infiltrators. They stood with continued readiness amidst the bodies of their fallen foes. Experts? To take down six with but a third of that number? Yes, they could be called as such.

"Let's go," Arthur barked, worry sharpening his tone. They needed out, as soon as possible. Each confrontation only delayed them further, chewing up valuable time. How long until a back-up team arrived at the Facility to oppose them?

His companions nodded in synchrony, and within seconds they'd left the body-strewn hallway behind them, charging around corners to the heavy thump of footsteps and the piercing wail of the siren.

Three turns later, Tia shouldered her way through a door identical to those on either side of it. The right door, of course, because Tia just knew that sort of thing. Arthur and Keryn burst after her, Arthur casting a glance over his shoulder as he went. Empty. But for how long?

Before Arthur even had a chance to gauge more than that in the dim room, Tia was urging him into the wall and from her path back to the closed door. Evidently she didn't want to take any chances, and with foresight that Arthur approved of paused in her headlong rush into the room to latch the door shut. Then snap the old-fashioned handle on the inside and blasted the ID-pad into a smoking, sparking charred mess that smelled strongly acrid. Tia nodded curtly to herself, satisfied, before turning back towards the empty room and heading off at a swift trot down the length of the laundry.

The long, narrow room reeked with the smell of warm dampness alongside that constant, niggling stench of what the Facility evidently deemed as 'cleanliness' but Gaius called 'sterility'. Arthur ignored the line of empty counters below each of the narrow constructs known informally as 'washers', striding in quick steps before Keryn and in Tia's wake. The sound of her footsteps was
louder now, the sirens wail muffled slightly by the closed door behind them. Evidently, given the
similar lack of flashing lights, it was deemed unnecessary for launderers to be informed of potential
whole-Facility hazards.

They stopped at the end of the room, before a metal door that looked like that of an oven front. Tia
tugged it open with a heave to reveal the dark chute, anything beyond a foot smothered in shadows.
Their entrance, and similarly their exit: through the channel of discards.

"Well, at least we won't have to do any more climbing," Keryn muttered from behind Arthur. Both
he and Tia ignored him.

"I'll do the honours," Tia offered. Or stated, more correctly, as, slipping her weapon into her belt, the
masked woman grasped the top of the shoot and heaved herself inside. And paused, perched on the
edge of the door. "Did you…?"

Arthur had. He'd heard it. His ears had been straining for that very sound of pursuit since they'd
infiltrated the Facility, and he'd been rewarded with his attentiveness on several instances whereby
they'd managed to avoid a confrontation. Even the audio detectors built into the ears of their masks
required a degree of attentiveness. It was no surprise that after their most recent conflict another
group of pursuers would be right upon their tail. With a glance over his shoulder, Arthur peered
towards the source of the cries, the angry shouts and frantic calls and, more importantly, the
resounding thumpthumpthump of a fist into the broken door of the laundry.

*Found.*

"Took 'em long enough," Keryn muttered. His words were casual, off-handed, but the slight
thickening of his northern accent suggested he was anything but. His own veiled gaze was turned
back along the narrow length of the room towards the door they'd come through.

"Are you complaining?" Tia grumbled. She didn't wait for a reply, turning her masked face sharply
towards Arthur instead. "Give me a full minute before following. To the second."

"We might not have that long," Keryn replied, but to the empty mouth of the shoot, for an instant
later Tia was gone. "I'll count it down."

Arthur nodded, casting a glance once more over his shoulder. Scared? No, he wasn't scared.
Apprehensive was a better description. Apprehensive and concerned, weighted by a sense of
urgency and need for speed that had settled upon Arthur's shoulders since they'd first hauled into the
Facility. And yet... it had been almost too easy, their infiltration. Too smooth. Perhaps it was simply
that no one had ever attempted such before, had never even considered breaking a sorcerer from the
Facility. Why would they?

It was doubtful that such negligence would remain a second time, however. Arthur regretted for the
second time that they could not have been more thorough with their 'rescue' in this first instance.

Yes, apprehension would be the perfect word to describe how Arthur felt. Except that it lacked the
intense feeling of anger that hadn't abandoned him, had only grown with every step he took carrying
Merlin from that glorified prison cell.

He dropped his gaze once more to his friend lying cradled in his arm. A frown crinkled his brow
further at the sight of him; even in unconsciousness, Merlin's gaunt face was drawn with pain, his
limbs trembling as though what little muscle remained to him was under intense strain. That in turn
pained Arthur simply to see; he'd made finding those of his long-forgotten world, those who still
remembered it, who'd known *Arthur*, his life's goal. For what else was there for him, really? To find
one feature of that goal pushed to the brink, dangling upon a precipice which he could so suddenly
and viciously be torn from Arthur's sight once more, was… it hurt.

And Arthur was not one to pander to his own feelings. He knew Merlin was in a bad state. Very bad.
And it wasn't just how achingly thin he was, how disturbingly easy it was for Arthur to heft him into
his arms. His face was a colourless grey save for the pale purple of lips and the darkness of his
eyelids, skin dry and papery as though he'd spent too long in the sun. His breath was shallow and
erratic, barely lifting his chest with each inhalation. The whole ensemble, of protruding bones
through thin skin, fingers spidery in their thinness and hanging limpness, was only emphasised in its
horror by the tubes embedded in his elbows, the longer, cord-like tube that hung from his nose like a
twisted impression of a leech. It turned Arthur's stomach that he'd been worn to such a level.

It was so different to the Merlin Arthur remembered. To the light-hearted, bubbly puppy of an idiot
who had been his friend, with his general clumsiness that Arthur swore must have been feigned at
times and a smile that sprung to life often far too easily. Even the occasional solemnity was so far
removed from what Arthur felt in the fragility of the Merlin in his arms. And compared to the sheer
strength, the utter confidence that Arthur had seen in those last days that he could remember, on their
stumbling flight towards Lake Avalon…

"Forty-five… forty-six…" Keryn took up his count verbally, nudging Arthur with his foot to gain his
attention. Arthur nodded his understanding, shaking himself from his distracting thoughts, and
stepped up to the shoot. The sound of the banging on the distant door demanded speed, but he
moved carefully enough to avoid jostling Merlin unduly. For some reason, that carefulness seemed
integral. More important than anything else.

He didn't slide Merlin into the chute, however. It was awkward, but Arthur managed to maintain his
hold upon him as he clambered with difficulty into the mouth of the chute. It was barely large
enough for one person to squeeze through. Burdened with the equivalent of a life-sized doll, Arthur
would be hard pushed to fit through. The metal ledge bit into the back of his legs even through the
thick Kevlar of his trousers, his elbows and the back of Merlin's feet grazing the matte silver interior.

"Fifty-seven… fifty-eight… whenever you're ready," Keryn muttered, barely loud enough to be
heard over the muffled sirens. He cast a frowning glance over his shoulder. An ominous splintering
crack drew Arthur's attention over his own. He felt foreboding resettle a frown upon his own brow.
That was not promising. "Perhaps I'd best not wait a minute," Keryn commented with more
nonchalance than his expression suggested.

"I think you'd be right," Arthur agreed. And with a nod, he pushed himself down the chute.

The sudden plunge into darkness made the experience both better and worse. It wasn't quite falling,
but the sensation wasn't far off. Arthur's stomach dropped to his toes before clambering rapidly to
settle in the back of his throat. The smooth hardness of the metal walls of the chute pressed against
his back, friction warming his skin. The echoing clatter of his passage resounded in the narrow
channel, replacing the wail of the alarm from the Facility overhead. The weight of Merlin pressed
against his chest was suddenly heavier – likely the press of the roof of the chute crushing down upon
them both. The thought urged Arthur to clutch him tighter to him, almost tight enough to inhibit
breathing.

The effect of their combined weights was a roaring speed. Rather than slowing their passage for
grazing the walls, Arthur found they moved even faster than he'd anticipated. It didn't last long – it
hardly took a breath of the time it had taken to scale with the magnet-picks.

In seconds that felt like minutes, of whizzing speed, bangs and clatters of passage and the rise and
fall of the chute's undulations as it undulated in an incredible slide, Arthur plunged from the opposite
opening. Then the sensation of falling became real. Arthur lost his stomach once more, barely kept his lips clamped to suppress a curse, and clutched Merlin to him even more tightly. He caught a glimpse of ambient green glow, of lapping, inky-black water, of slick, glistening brick walls and a boat too small to hold more than four or five people comfortably. Then he hit a horizontal wall, barely a foot from the water, with only a little less force than he would have had he been charging headlong into an actual wall.

Panting slightly, more from the unnerving experience of falling and crashing as a whole than from exertion, Arthur shifted into sitting. He'd managed to land beneath Merlin, but it had been a struggle. As much of a struggle as it was to heave himself up to sitting upon the transparent floor that held him aloft from the black water of the residue canal that flowed beneath him, seeping into the underground. Merlin hadn't made a noise, hadn't seemed affected by their chute-slide or their sudden stop. Glancing down at him, at his pained expression, Arthur wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or even more concerned.

He lifted his gaze to the little boat drifting not five feet away from him. Tia balanced with one foot on prow boat, both hands raised as though pressed against a flat surface like a mime. She was shadowed by more than her mask and dark clothing cast into a greenish glow, but the glimmer of luminescent yellow glowing from her eyes bespoke the use of magic as much as the presence of the transparent floor beneath Arthur.

She nodded acknowledgement of his presence as Arthur clambered to his feet. "Might want to move. I don't expect you'd fancy being crushed."

"Thanks… for that… Ti," he grumbled.

"Pleasure," Tia drawled.

Arthur ignored them both. Shuffling over the transparent floor, warily for he had never quite been able to shake his uncertainty about the stability of magical conjugation, he carried Merlin to the boat. With a jump that was more of a tumbling fall, he landed in the hull, wavering slightly as it rocked precariously. Tia cast him a yellow-eyed glance but didn't comment, lowering her hands and slipping onto the nearest bench as soon as Keryn had touched his boots to the rusted metal of the boat.

Arthur ignored both of his companions as he made his way to another bench. He barely noticed as Keryn took up an oar in each hand, as Tia made her way to the prow and poked at the infrared scanner and anti-detection mechanism. He didn't glance up as the hum of an obscurity-shield thrummed through the boat like a grumble, nor as they began to make steady passage down the sewage canal. He was only distantly aware of the distinct silence that replaced the howl of the Facility's sirens, as jarringly contrasting as the dark green-black of the underground was to the alternately red and blue flashing lights of frantic alarm.

Instead, his attention turned back to Merlin. To his friend, who had once been nothing more than an incompetent manservant, and who had come to mean so much to him. More, even, as he remained one of only few links to the life and the world that Arthur knew and so loved. He gently lowered Merlin onto the waiting pile of blankets, setting about wrapping him in a cocooning swaddle that left nothing but his face bare. There was little else that he could do, not without Gaius' or Alice's aid.

All that he could do was sink into the blankets beside his friend, wrap his arms around him, and
ensure that he kept breathing. Arthur didn't know what he would do if Merlin chanced to cease as such, but…

As they drifted to the slap of Keryn's rowing through the echoing silence of the underground, the urgency of flight and escape was replaced with an entirely different kind of need. Any triumph at their success, however hazy, dangerous and likely destructive its outcomes could be, were drowned in the rising fear. They'd moved as fast as they could, but was it fast enough?

Only time could tell.
Chapter 10

Something wasn't right.

It was that realisation more than anything that shook Merlin from his sleepy stupor. He couldn't pinpoint in the gogginess of his mind what was wrong exactly, only that he could feel it in every inch of his body. As always, it was the smell that registered first; for want of a better description, it smelled warm. The airborne scents that tickled his nose were devoid of the sickly sterility, the chemical tang that he had become all too familiar with, so familiar that it was normal. And yet neither was it the similarly familiar thickness, the grittiness and heady, overwhelming assault of muck and filth that pervaded the slums.

Clean. It was truly clean, in a way that Merlin could not remember experiencing in the entirety of his most recent life. Not ever.

With a struggle, he pried open eyes that felt glued shut and weighted with stones. Several blinks and Merlin discerned that it was not simply his sleepy eyes that made it difficult to see but the room itself; contrasting to the fluorescent illumination he'd expected it was… dark. But not dark dark, not the absolute blackness of the nights he experienced in his cell. He could make out faint shapes around him, some shadows slightly darker than others, a distant wall of pale colouration, a post of the bed –

A bed. Merlin blinked once more, squinting from where he lay on his side in the darkness. Yes, it… it was definitely a bed. He was in a bed. In a bed, he registered, as awareness flooded past two-dimensional vision and slowly extended throughout his body. His head rested upon a pillow, a soft pillow, and he was cradled by a mattress of equal softness, impossible softness, more than he could ever recall experiencing in all of his twenty-six years. And that was to say nothing of the blankets, smooth and warm that tucked gently against his skin –

Merlin's thoughts, his sensory extension, puttered to a halt as the realisation hit him. The blankets, their silken smoothness, rested against his skin and… and it didn't hurt. It didn't… they didn't…

The idea was so foreign that it didn't fully register to Merlin. And yet at the same time, with tentative stretching and an overall sense of awe, he mentally reached through his body, prodding at muscles and limbs, feeling along his not-hurting skin and…

Nothing. Nothing hurt. He couldn't, for the first time in years, detect even the faintest trace of pain.

That was wrong. Or right. Right in such a vastly hitherto unprecedented way that Merlin couldn't quite comprehend it. How?

That was when the memories came rushing forth. The distant echo of a remembered siren, of the hallways starkly illuminated with a foreign clash of red and blue, of the three masked figures who'd appeared in Merlin's cell, the one's who'd… they'd…

Did they… take me somewhere? Merlin blinked his rapidly clearing eyes, turning a frown towards a pale ceiling that was at least twice as high as that of his cell. Where?

Slowly, tentatively, fearing the rebirth of familiar aches and pains, the constant assault upon sensitised nerves, Merlin propped himself onto his elbows. They sunk deeply into the mattress, making his progress all the harder. Not that it wasn't hard already; his arms barely felt able to hold him, as though his muscles were made of water. How long had it been since he'd even used his arms? Since he'd used his hands?
The thought caused him to tug one hand from beneath the thick quilt of blankets. With squinting eyes, Merlin could just make out the familiar lengths of his own fingers in the darkness. Curling his forefinger, then his thumb, then the rest of them, he drew a shaking breath. And stared.

Merlin didn't know how long he stared at his hands, barely visible in the darkness. How long had it been since he'd had the liberty to sit silently and simply wrap his fingers into fists, to press his hands together without the constant sparking of pain that set his teeth on edge? Most of the time, hidden as they were by the mittens sewn into the end of his sleeves, Merlin hadn't even been able to see his hands. Now…

He felt an upwelling of emotion rise in the back of his throat, clogging it in something that wasn't quite painful but wasn't far off. It warred with an almost overwhelming sense of relief. Of profound relief. Merlin was alone, it was silent, without even the familiar, constant buzz of overhead lighting, and it was dark but not too dark. Not the horrible black-dark, unbroken even by the pinpricks of stars that none in the past century had seen a hint of. His fingers were free and… and he didn't hurt. It was truly… this must be what peace felt like, to be rested upon an impossibly soft bed with soft sheets and free of demands. This was…

Was he dead?

The thought hung with Merlin for all of perhaps a minute or two before his newfound peace was interrupted. Not jarringly, as the orderlies had interrupted the quiet of his cell, but barely noticeably. Had the quiet not been so profound, Merlin likely wouldn't have even noticed the distinctive whoosh of a door sliding open on mechanical rungs, the faint scuff of footsteps on the floor. He turned his head unconsciously towards the source of the sound.

"Good morning, Merlin. How do you feel?"

The voice was unfamiliar in more ways that one. Firstly, Merlin was certain he'd never heard it before. He usually had a good memory for voices, for faces, so could be certain in his deduction. And secondly, the voice was soft. Gentle. Almost kindly, if such a sentiment could be attached to barely half a dozen words.

Before he could answer – if he'd even been capable of doing so – a faint light grew from an ambient source. Merlin felt himself twitch at the familiar shade of red, so deep it was almost indiscernible from the shadows of the room at first but brightened slowly, gradually, with enough hesitancy that abuse of the eyes was minimal at most. It was too familiar to the Pits, to his cell and the even slower climb into artificial brightness that he'd experienced every day for years on end.

It was only the distraction of the other figure in the room that drew Merlin from his descent into withdrawal, into a familiar melancholy that the novelty of his surroundings had briefly shaken. And it was the novelty of that figure, gradually illuminated by the red-to-orange-to-yellow-to-white light that sparked his curiosity.

She was a small woman, short and homely in her sturdy frame, and perhaps in her late thirties. A short crop of black hair capped her head, only a shade or too darker than her skin, and only seemed to brighten the pale brown of her eyes. Smiling eyes, Merlin saw, to accompany her gentle smiling lips, their curl soft and comforting rather than mirthful. She was outfitted in garments of long, loose sleeves that covered her hands and long, loose trousers that looked like skirts. The bodice of her modest shirt fit her frame perfectly, free of ties or buttons and merging seamlessly into her trousers. The umber colouration only accentuated the colour of her eyes, which, even half a room away, seemed to glow with an inner radiance.

"Still a little sleep-muddled?" She asked. The tilt of her head suggested the patience of a long-
practiced waiter and it was then that Merlin realised he hadn't answered.

His throat was tight, dry in a way he had come to accept as usual yet not so dry as to be parched. He swallowed and attempted a reply. "I… I'm…" The sounds were feeble, barely a croak. Clearing his throat and attempting once more made no difference.

The woman's smile widened, but it was free of malice or sadism, or even the medical curiosity of the Doctors. Sympathy was the only impression that Merlin was given. "Here, I'll get you a glass of water," she said, and in a bustle made her way across the room. Merlin's attention was shaken from her foreign presence to the room at large, taking in the previously shadowed details.

It was a large room, at least four times the size of his cell. The walls were indeed pale, of a soft, cool green that Merlin didn't think he'd ever seen before. Not in this life, anyway. It was absent of windows, but then that was hardly unexpected; for privacy's sake, and to avoid the dangers of the glaring summer sun's radiation, most residences and establishments that could afford an effective filtering and air-current system lacked them. The slums, as it happened, was largely devoid of windowless walls in general. The Pits, however, had not been.

The room itself was largely bare but for the bed he was reclined upon, heaped in thick blankets and pillows of a pale white and of a sturdy posted frame of some dark faux-wood. A sparse clutter of desk, chairs and cabinets dotted the rest of the room. The woman made her way across towards the cabinets – towards a tap, it appeared, from the cabinet she opened and the sound of rushing water that ensued from her half-hidden motions – before returning across the room to Merlin's side with a mug. Her footsteps were barely audible upon the polished of the floors.

Merlin could only stare at the mug when she held it out to him. He knew it was meant for him – obviously – but it had been long, so long, since he'd even taken a sip of water. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd done so. Pushing himself up further from his elbows and shaking his head at the woman in dissent at her proffered assistance, Merlin levered himself up into a semblance of sitting and rested against the plump pillows behind him. With tentative hands, he accepted the cup in fingers trembling. The glossy crockery seemed heavier than it should have in his grasp, as though weighted. Surely it wasn't *that* heavy?

But the thought was banished when Merlin raised the mug to his lips. Drinking was… it was a forgotten gift, a liberty that so many took for granted. Not even the water itself but the very act of drinking. Merlin vowed that he would never overlook the offering of autonomy, the cool swirl of liquid on his tongue or the trickle of that liquid as it drew down his throat. For a moment, it was almost as though he'd forgotten how to swallow. The thought was both mortifying and baffling. How did anyone forget how to swallow?

When he finished, he couldn't drop the mug from his lips. His fingers wouldn't move, arms wouldn't drop, and it wasn't for want of more to drink. His own foolishness made Merlin shake his head, and yet his body refused to return that simple cup for the symbol it provided. Freedom in a cup? Perhaps. In a way.

The woman didn't seem terribly flustered by his disinclination to return her mug. With a tilt of her head, another soft smile, she folded her hands before her. "Better?"

Merlin nodded. Then, because he felt the sudden need to, he attempted to speak once more. "Better." His voice was still a croak, barely louder than a whisper. He pursed his lips, frowning. What was –?

"Don't be troubled by it," the woman said, raising a placating hand in the air as though to physically soothe him. As though she'd heard Merlin's thoughts. "You've been resting for a long time. It would be no surprise if you took a little while to recover."
Slowly, with more deliberate intent than it should have taken, Merlin lowered the mug to rest in his lap. His eyes trained on his fingers once more; he'd always had long, slender fingers, but in the brief moment he'd glimpsed them in the Pits, especially in the later years of his imprisonment, they'd looked near skeletal. Was it his imagination that they seemed less so? He glanced sidelong at the woman. "How long..." he swallowed, an attempt to rid his voice of its croak that he knew was useless. "How long have I been...?"

The woman tilted her head like a bird in that way that she seemed prone to doing. "Perhaps if I explain a little?" At Merlin's hesitant nod, she continued, her tone becoming professionally clinical. "Since the members of our faction relieved you from the... care of the Facility, you have been instead within our care. For about three months, it nears. You have been in an induced coma for this period due to your critical state, and we have been monitoring your progress to ensure your health and wellbeing is both restored and maintained in this time."

Merlin blinked at the woman blankly. The overload of information hit him like a tsunami. A faction? Someone had... had extricated himself from the Facility's 'care'? And three months? "What?"

"I'm sure it's a lot to take in," the woman soothed. "But rest assured, you are in good hands. My name is Alice and I've been helping Gaius to take care of you."

In an instant, Merlin's whole attention shifted and trained upon the single, uttered word. "Gaius? Gaius is... is looking after me?"

The woman – Alice – nodded, offering another smile. "He and I have been doing our utmost to ensure your health is restored. You underwent significant physiological damage while in the hands of the Facility and it has been a battle to repair that damage." Her voice hardened, eyes flattening chillingly. For a moment Merlin was disconcerted by the abrupt shift in demeanour, but an instant later she defrosted and offered another small smile. "You were in a bad way, Merlin."

Nodding slowly, Merlin turned unseeing eyes towards his hands. Gaius? Gaius was here? Had been caring for him? The thought was ground breaking. Merlin had met Gaius only twice before outside of his life in Albion, and both of those times had been brief and before he had been aware of who the man was; once when his family had briefly joined a caravan passing through Wales and another time when Merlin had been a scholars apprentice under his Laird Dubhach in northern Scotland. Only the latter of the two instances could Merlin recall as being particularly exceptional, for the second instance Gaius had – Merlin realised through the spectacles of hindsight – known who Merlin was. It had been saddening when, two years after the bookish guest had left his laird's halls, Merlin had recalled who he was and realised the opportunity he had missed.

Still, it was better than the first time. Mutual members of a gypsy caravan, they'd broken bread as travel partners for nearly two years with neither the wiser as to the friendship they'd once shared.

That Gaius had found Merlin in this life – more than that, that he had essentially healed him of injuries Merlin had largely accepted would be with him until he died – was... was astounding. Flooring, in a way that Merlin hadn't experienced in many a lifetime. And that he'd been successful, at least for the most part, was even more astounding. For Merlin slowly realised, his fingertips brushing painlessly across the pads of his hands, his toes curling onto the sheets, that he was healed. As much as he could tell, anyway. The constant ache in his muscles had dissipated, leaving only a phantom echo of what he expected should be there. The ever-present and painful pounding in his temples had all but disappeared, and the tightness in his chest that accompanied each breath was... it was gone. Even the muffled blurriness of his hearing that he'd experienced for the past year was cleared like water drained from his ear canal.

He was fixed. His body, his broken body that had all but resigned itself to its fate, was healed. True,
it had taken three months – *three months?!* – but healed? That was a gift that Merlin had never expected. Had never even hoped for.

"I…" Merlin turned his attention back towards Alice. She was regarding him with a mild intensity that somehow managed to avoid making him uneasy. "Thank you for helping me. For caring me. For…" He raised a hand awkwardly to the back of his head and nearly started at the thick coat of hair that met his touch. That was new. "For fixing me."

Alice's smile became entirely genuine in that moment, devoid of even a hint of her professional air. "You're most welcome. And now that you've woken yourself up, your mend can take a turn for the better. Or at least for the faster. I've taken to stimulating your muscles with an SMO so that you won't collapse at the slightest attempt to stand or," she gestured towards the mug in Merlin's lap, "pick something up, but there's only so much I can do with an unresponsive patient." Her casual tone, that ever-present smile, took any sting out of her words.

Merlin nodded in a fervent jerk of his head. He wasn't familiar with the acronym Alice used, or particularly o-fey with medical terms in general, but he appreciated what she said from what he did understand. He didn't fancy waverling around like a newborn colt as soon as he attempted to stand. And attempt he would very much like to. Suddenly, the prospect of walking – of *actually walking* – became a possibility and Merlin was desperate to try. When was the last time he'd actually walked? "Just tell me what I should do."

Alice nodded her head sharply and clapped her hands together suddenly enough that Merlin startled. If she noticed, she pretended she didn't. "Wonderful. I love a compliant patient. First and foremost, however, I must implore you not to move too quickly."

"In terms of…?"

"Everything," Alice clarified. "At least for this first week, you'll pretty much have to have accompaniment every second. Even more closely if you're out of your bed."

Merlin frowned. That didn't sound particularly pleasant but then… "But I will be able to get out of bed?"

"Oh, yes, most certainly. I don't think lazing around like a layabout has ever done any recovering patient any good. Besides the ones with the broken limbs, you understand," Alice said. She spoke quickly, not loudly but rapidly enough that Merlin fathomed should he have any inclination to interrupt her he may find it difficult. "Just be sure to ask if you want to try anything, or feel you can push yourself a little further."

Nodding, Merlin shifted slightly to draw himself further up in his seat. "Alright. Where do I start, then?"

Alice beamed. Another one of those genuine smiles, though this one seemed enriched with maternal approval. "Eager patients are my favourite after the compliant ones. You're ticking all the boxes, Merlin."

"I'm not sure if Gaius would ever refer to me as 'compliant'," Merlin muttered, pursing his lips.

Alice laughed, and it was like music to Merlin's ears. When was the last time he'd heard someone laugh? "Yes, that is true. Well, then, we'll have to prove him wrong, won't we?"

Merlin nodded hesitantly, as much because there was a faint competitive resonance in Alice's tone that he wasn't entirely certain he wanted to become involved in as because he didn't want to sign
himself up for anything drastic. "Where do I start, then? What do I do?"

"Do? You do as little as possible unless Gaius or I tell you to," Alice said. "Just because I'm keen to get you on your feet doesn't mean I've an inclination to hasten you along so fast that we undo all of our hard work. First thing's first, though, how about we get rid of this tube for you, hm?"

For a moment Merlin wasn't sure what she spoke of. His mind drew down to his arms, to the cannula's that had punctured his elbows since the first days of his 'treatment' in the Pits. A tentative touch with one hand confirmed that, much to his unease, they still remained embedded in his arms.

Alice must have noticed the motion. "No, not those. Not yet." She adopted an apologetic expression that seemed entirely sincere. "I'm sorry, Merlin, but we thought it best to simply leave them largely untouched for the moment and change them only when we needed to. Just so we can keep an eye on what you're blood's are doing, you understand, if for some ungodly reason we should need to assess as much in an invasive fashion." She shook her head, rolling her eyes as though ridiculing the sentiment. "Honestly, how old fashioned are those Facility-Doctors that they take their tests that way?"

At her words, Merlin felt himself ease. It was true, he had wondered at their means; there were machines that could measure blood composition without extraction these days, though some few still um-ed and ah-ed about their accuracy. He'd never understood why there was such a need to pump vials of blood from his veins every week. That Alice evidently felt the same was comforting.

Alice continued with a gesture towards his face. "I meant the nasogastric tube, actually. Also terribly archaic, but it does do its job, I'm afraid."

With a compulsive start, Merlin reached up towards his nose. Yes, the tube was still there. Still protruding from his nose like a tubular growth that had remained a constant and unwanted companion for years. He'd long since shaken his discontent over its presence, but abruptly, in a context so different to the Pits, he wanted it gone. "Can you- can you take it out? P-please?" His voice warbled slightly, embarrassingly, but he hardly noticed.

Alice nodded. "Of course. Hardly a need for it when you can feed yourself now, is there?" And leaning forwards she reached for Merlin's face.

She evidently did not expect the response that her touch elicited, however. Not even Merlin could have predicted that. It was likely the suddenness of her approach coupled with his abrupt ability to act, to move his body with a degree of autonomy, that had him flinching so violently from the woman that he lurched bodily from the bed. In a crash that jarred his body like a struck bell, Merlin tumbled to the floor.

"Oh! Oh goodness, are you alright?" In a scurry, Alice skirted the bed and dropped to her knees beside Merlin. She didn't touch him, thankfully, for as he drew heavy, shaking breaths, blinking rapidly to rid his vision of the dancing sparks that clouded his downward facing eyes, he realised that was what it was that had urged his body into flight mode. Realised that it wouldn't have been a good idea had she tried to.

He breathed heavily. Panic blurred on the edges of his attention. Actual fear. Every instance he'd experienced even the barest touch over the past years, that touch was accompanied by a volt of pain from hypersensitive nerve endings. At every instance, Merlin had flinched, attempted to withdraw from the procedural lifting and manoeuvring of orderlies, the prodding of Doctors and even the brush of his own limbs against one another. But that had been the extent of his capabilities. Now, however, even with admittedly minimal strength back in his body that was greater than Merlin had experienced since he'd been on the streets, flight was once more an option presented to him. And quite without
his conscious consent, his body charged along that route with the slightest provocation.

Squeezing his eyes closed, Merlin propped himself up gingerly to kneeling. His arms trembled with the effort of holding himself upright. With a wince, he turned an apologetic gaze upon Alice, who peered at him worriedly from her crouch with hands raised as though to steady him. Blessedly, she didn't try. "Sorry," Merlin mumbled. "I think, just when you touched…"

Alice appeared to understand the situation instantly. Comprehension dawned in her eyes and though worry still remained the tension relaxed from his shoulders slightly. "I see. Well, not to worry. Such a reflexive response is entirely understandable. I should have anticipated it, actually." She sounded faintly self-reprimanding more than anything. "Shall we perhaps get you back up into bed and try again?"

At Merlin's pause and eventual nod, they did just that. At first, it seemed like they weren't going to manage it at all. Alice refrained from touching him, but after minutes of shaking limbs and another collapse when Merlin eventually made it to his feet, she swooped in to help. Another sequence of flinching, in which Merlin had to nearly chew a hole in his bottom lip to keep from throwing himself from Alice's touch, they managed.

"Well," Alice huffed, sighing as she propped her hands on her hips. "That was an epic effort." She tilted her head, regarding Merlin with a slight twist to her lips. "Shall we try with this tube, then? Get it over with? Or would you like a break first, perhaps?"

Merlin trembled in his seat, legs curled to one side and shoulders hunched. He felt nothing if not pathetic for the past moments of struggle, and yet despite his self-deprecation felt a rise of foreboding well up within him at the thought of Alice's gentle hands touching him even in the barest sense. He knew it didn't hurt – it didn't even hurt anymore – so why the flinching? What was the point of it?

In direct objection to his body's withdrawal, to the physical screams of don't touch me! and just leave me alone!, Merlin struggled to nod. He truly did want the tube out, anyway. "Could you? Please?"

"Most certainly." Alice nodded obligingly, and with slow, almost soothing motions, raised her hands to Merlin's face.

It wasn't so bad the second time, he reasoned. Or perhaps that sentiment was simply enhanced by the other discomforts of the situation. For the tube threaded through his nostril had been unnoticed when untouched but as Alice slowly drew it out, with gentle urges of "Tilt your head back a little further" and "Nearly there", every brain cell seemed to focus upon the inside of his nose. Upon the scratching scrape of the tube as it drew up the back of his throat, at the slippery, tickling that was by no means pleasant and wreaked havoc on his gagging reflex. The urge to sneeze never reached fruition, and when Alice took a step back from him with a satisfied sigh it was to leave him rapidly blinking and pressing a palm to his nose.

"There. All done," Alice informed him redundantly as she made her way across the room to the cabinets and desk, tube hanging like a limp snake from her hand.

"Thank you," Merlin mumbled.

"You're very welcome. Nasty things, these tubes, though, as I said, necessary at the time, I suppose." She clattered about in the makeshift medical kitchen with the sound of opening and closing cupboards and running water. "Food will always be better for you, though. How about I give Gaius a call and he can come over and join us for breakfast?"

"For… for breakfast?" Merlin asked. The very thought send a mixture of anticipation, almost fear
and rising eagerness through him. He hadn't eaten for just as long as he hadn't drunk. The prospect was only too tempting, almost miraculous.

Alice half-turned towards him from where she had been washing her hands. A basin of sorts, wedged in one of the cupboards, steamed warm water. "Gaius largely forgets to feed himself. I swear, he'd starve if I didn't remind him to fill his belly every day." Despite her chiding words, there was a definite note of fondness in Alice's tone.

And suddenly it clicked into place exactly who she was. "You're Gaius' Alice? His wife Alice?" Merlin's hoarse voice gave an embarrassing squeak that he barely noticed. He was too surprised, wonder flooding through him. How hadn't he even realised? How had he forgotten?

Except that, for all of Merlin's sudden enthusiasm, Alice only offered a sad little smile. It was a shadow of every other she had given him that morning. "Not his wife, no. But yes, I have been. At times."

There was enough regret in her tone that Merlin felt his natural inclination to question the situation die. Tact was something acquired alongside knowledge, though often disregarded by those that held such wisdom. He held his tongue, and Alice, with a grateful little smile that suggested she knew he was doing so and appreciated the effort, she raised her hand to her ear and tapped it. Or tapped the earpiece hooked around it, Merlin realised, for a moment later she muttered a barely audible "Gaius Clover". She turned away once more as she lowered her voice to speak.

Merlin slumped back onto his pillows, sagging slightly. His mind was awash with information, overloaded with all that had been impressed upon him in what would surely have to be less than half an hour. That he was no longer in the Pits. That he'd been comatose for three months. That in that time his body had been mended like a broken doll with its pieces glued seamlessly back together. That Gaius and Alice – that they were not together? Why? – had been the ones to fix him, and that fixed it did appear he was. Merlin couldn't stop the compulsive touching of fingers to fingers, to wrists and arms, to his face. Each brush left him awed with the wonder that doing so didn't hurt.

It was almost too good to believe. Too good, far too good. How did that even happen? How had he been rescued? Who would even have wanted to rescue a sorcerer, even if they were another sorcerer? Had they perhaps considered him one of the scarce few other criminals that were held in the Pits? But no, because Alice knew who he was, had said that Gaius knew him. Was it because he was 'Emrys'? In some lives – in most lives – that meant something.

Even with that knowledge it seemed too good to be true. Merlin was left staring at his own thin fingers once more, shaking his head uncomprehendingly. He was only distantly aware of the chiding conversation that Alice appeared to be having across the other side of the room, the words too quiet to hear.

"There," she huffed upon her return to Merlin's bedside. She looked to have shaken herself free of her temporary sombre mood like a dog ridding itself of water. "Gaius will be on his way shortly. He was in the City Castle, unfortunately, so it may take some time for him to arrive, but I believe he will inform Arthur of your awakening as soon as possible. Which will likely mean that Arthur will be joining him."

Merlin stared. And blinked. And stared. Because Alice seemed to revel in dropping bombshells upon him in quick succession, all under the guise of motherly kindness. "A-Arthur? Arthur is… Arthur is here?"

Alice's smile widened, and Merlin didn't think it was his imagination that for the first time it actually looked amused. "Of course. Who else do you think would be so adamant about saving you?"
"Your argument is invalid, Lady Nine. The fact that she was under the legal age of eighteen does not detract from the fact that she used magic in a terrorist act!"

Fighting the urge to glare at the spokesman across the wide expanse of circular table, Arthur pressed his lips together and glanced instead towards Nimueh. As always, she held herself cool and composed, her posture impeccable and not a twitch in her expression to suggest the words of the Initiative Party member irked her in the slightest.

Blinking with the deliberate slowness of one who would be sipping tea to extend the silence if only there was tea available, Nimueh shook her head slightly. "Indeed, magic was used, but that is neither here nor there when it comes to the punishment due to those of an underage status."

"How is it not? It has everything to do with it." The spokesman – some nameless face as so many members of the Initiative were – curled his lip in distaste. He was a weedy man, elderly with the jowls to speak for it and thinning hair atop his crown. As for every upper class citizen of London, he wore the ridiculous wide sleeved and skirt-trousers that was of high fashion at present. The tightness of the outfit about his torso only enhanced the strain his girth loaded upon the seams of his garments.

It was juvenile, Arthur knew, but he found himself picking the man apart, noting every flaw he could detect and mentally throwing it against him. It was fuelled by his anger at the man's irrational hatred of sorcerers, he knew, at his hatred and aggressive fear of magic itself, but that knowledge of his own thoughts, of his own impression, did nothing to alleviate Arthur's scanning study. The man wouldn't be able to pick up a shield to save himself, let alone a sword. He wouldn't know how to track a fleeing criminal – a real criminal – through a forest even in broad daylight, even should footprints be impressed upon the path. He would complain after a day in the saddle, whine at the shortage of rations in hard times, bemoan the wait for bathwater as it boiled to optimal temperature rather than drawing it readily from a tap.

The people of this New World were so soft. It was almost embarrassing.

Each of them was the same, Arthur knew. There were seven members of the Initiative, the party that currently sat in government and spearheaded the 'fight against magic'. They mirrored the seven members of the Confederation, Nimueh at their head with Arthur at her right hand. As it should be, he knew, even if he had only been a part of the party for a little over three months. In the thick of politics, putting his opinion forward and directing the foolhardy ignorance of others was where Arthur was supposed to be. He hadn't been raised as a prince, hadn't been a king for years, to have nothing to show for it.

Only, it was a struggle to hold his tongue. As was the way of such political meets in this New World, the spokesperson for each party would be the only ones who conversed across the space of the ironically round table. Nimueh spoke for the Confederation, the weedy man for the Initiative. The members of each party relayed their input to their spokesperson to be conferred upon relevance, if at all. It irked Arthur to no end, especially when he wanted nothing more than to run rings around the little man's stupidity. Around the stupidity of all of them, including the members from his own party. Sebille sat at his side, silent and watching with hawk eyes, but she rarely spoke, even to Nimueh. The rest of them held little enough participation too; apparently, at least in the conference room, Nimueh's superiority was universally acknowledged by her own party.

It didn't sit well with Arthur. It didn't sit well with him to a very pronounced degree. He could hardly protest, however, the fact that Nimueh was doing a relatively good job of quelling the weedy man,
even if she had been unable to turn his opinion – as was customary of such meets, Arthur knew. She said everything that Arthur would have said, lacking only in that she didn't override her opponent when he spoke the absolutely ridiculous.

Such as accusing a ten year old of terrorism and sending them to the Facility.

"Tell me, Lord Wevil," she replied in the wake of his last dispute. Yes, Wevil his name was. Arthur discarded the knowledge from his consideration a moment later; it was irrelevant as there would likely be a different spokesperson next time anyway. "Should a ten year old acquire a firearm and happen act destructively with it, would a similar life sentence be assigned?"

Wevil frowned. "We are not talking about firearms, Lady Nine," he began, but Nimueh interrupted him. Thank the Gods, she actually interrupted him, even if not actually overriding his words.

"Perhaps not, but that is as much of an issue as the situation of this 'act of terrorism' itself."

"How so?" Wevil replied, his eyes narrowing with a note of accusation.

"Quite simply, the discrepancy between the sentences afforded to magical and non-magical crimes is becoming more and more pronounced. Not only is it undue, but the heightened prejudice it induces –"

"Undue? Undue?" Wevil shook his head, snorting and only pausing before speaking as the thin, pale woman at his side leant into his ear and muttered inaudibly. He shook his head once more before turning back to Nimueh. "As my colleague reminds me, we are not here to discuss the perception of sorcerers and magic as a whole today, my Lady. You yourself urged this conference to dispute the treatment of Haddie Wild."

"A treatment of which the overall prejudices towards sorcerers is interwoven," Nimueh fought to impress.

Wevil continued as though she hadn't spoken, however. "And as such I would request that we remain focused upon the topic at hand. We are not directly connected to the judicial system that will be involved in Haddie Wild's case –"

Arthur snorted, loud enough that Wevil actually paused and flickered a startled glance towards him. The eyes of every other Initiative member were similarly startled before shifting into frowns of disapproval.

Arthur didn't care. He couldn't stand the indulgent spiel of the weedy little man a moment longer, simply had to stall it. Not directly connected to the case? In what world did the man believe that any of their opposing party believed that? True, technically and publically the governmental party was distinctly separate from the court system. But it was a technicality only. Everyone with an ounce of sense knew that where the Initiative stuck its nose, people jumped to attention and fell to their orders like a dog to heel.

It was disgusting. Not so much because the citizens and officials at large followed their orders but because they followed such skewed orders. Unquestioningly. Disgustingly.

Ignoring Sibelle's kick under the table, Arthur turned towards Nimueh. And met her gaze, for of course she would have turned her attention upon him at his open objection. Arthur raised an eyebrow in a silent comment of "are you truly going to let this slide?" Nimueh's scarlet lips pursed slightly, but only slightly, and she did bow her head.

Good. At least Arthur wasn't alone in his sentiment.
Wevil had recovered from his bout of surprise, however, and continued his spiel with a distinctive note of affront in his tone. "Haddie Wild is, admittedly, an unfortunate case. It is always regretful that one so young can be so strongly overwhelmed by the magic as to lash out in a destructive fashion." Arthur rolled his eyes once more, not even bothering to hide it. Overwhelmed by magic? The man made it sound like a plague. Ridiculous. He took a sharp sense of satisfaction from the fact that at least two of the Initiative member's jaws tightened slightly at his dismissal. "But destructive it was, a magical contribution cannot be denied. As such, Haddie Wild she must be treated according to the severity of her crime. The people who have lost their material possessions, who were impaired by his actions…"

The man continued talking, but Arthur deliberately shuttered his ears to the words. They were the same as he'd said at least three times before that morning, since the crack of dawn hour they had begun their conference. Arthur didn't want to hear it, not again. He didn't want to hear the condemnation of a child – a child – who had caved to the open use of magic in a time of need. A near drowning, it had been, in the slums of the South-East-West sector of the slums. Reportedly she had fallen into the canal in an area of the slums that was so clogged with toxic muck that not even the slum-dwellers dared inhabit it. By her words, in a fit of panic she had ejected the entire surrounds of that canal onto the streets and buildings in a torrential downpour. A destructive area of nearly a half-squared kilometre had been severely impacted.

Or it would have been, had there been much except broken shacks and slurry-like roads to be impacted. Arthur had been in the slums once – once, and very briefly only to pass through to the Inner City – and knew there was not truly all that much to be destroyed. And the public outcry? No, there would not have been public outcry for the destruction. Fear, most definitely, but objection? Demands for compensation? The slum-dwellers didn't demand anything of their upper class government representatives and not because they didn't want to. It was simply that nothing would be done even if they did.

Funny, Arthur reflected, how when it suited them the Initiative government would respond with such concern to the 'damaged party'.

Arthur turned his gaze instead to the image of Haddie Wild that stood in a hologram upon the podium at the other end of the room. Aside from the unnecessarily large, wooden table – so large that Arthur had to wonder how it had even been drawn into the modest, windowless room – the podium was the only other noteworthy article. An electronic device, Arthur knew, though had to admit that even after years in the New World he could claim to know little else about the functioning of the projecting mechanism. The image displayed was life-sized, faintly washed out of colour and just slightly transparent but otherwise identical to that of what Arthur would have anticipated had the little girl truly been there.

Little didn't even begin to cover it. She was a toothpick of a girl, limbs like twigs and eyes so wide beneath the stringy mess of her mousy fringe that Arthur was left with the distinct impression of a rabbit captured in the sights of a snake. Pity was the only emotion that arose within him, pity and sympathy for the very obvious distress she bared, even as a mere hologram. How anyone could label her a criminal, one so young and so evidently helpless, was a mystery to him.

Times certainly had changed. Arthur could hardly even recall the mindset he'd once assumed when his father had been similarly objectionable towards sorcerers. Surely he hadn't been so blind himself?

His attention was distracted from Haddie's image, from the conference meeting at large, by a faint chiming sound. A sound that no one else could hear, Arthur knew from both the distinctive familiarity of that sound and the fact that not a one of the listeners or speakers noticed. With a touch of his fingers to his ear, another to the strap on his wrist, Arthur tapped the Comm-piece into life. A
thin, translucent screen, one that Arthur knew would be all but invisible to anyone further than a foot from him, snapped around his eyes like a visor. The image of Gaius appeared, his face pale on the faint blue-white screen.

Arthur frowned but didn’t speak. The little red, flashing 'Recording' light indicated the image was a message rather than interactive. "Arthur," Gaius, his face springing into visibility, began without ceremony, direct and blunt as always. "I have just received a message from Alice; she has requested my attendance at Lady Nine's estate promptly. There is no urgency, nothing is wrong. Rather, it is very right." A smile quivered upon Gaius' thin lips. "Merlin has awoken. Alice was saying…"

Arthur was on his feet, his ears deaf to the words that followed. To the raised eyebrow of Sebille and the frowns of Wevil and his Initiative party, he spun on his heel and strode towards the unobtrusive door embedded in the corner of the room. The broken "says he's well, remarkably well" and "come to pick you up at once" barely registered, except to invoke a distracted relief and satisfaction. Merlin was awake. Merlin was awake. Finally, after months of recovery, after weeks of being in a state, Gaius had claimed, of being able to awaken, he had finally… Arthur's hand was already impressed on the ID-pad upon the door when Nimueh finally spoke to his departure.

"An urgent matter, Mr Montague?"

Arthur paused as the door hissed open, glancing over his shoulder. "Certainly, Lady Nine. I would never assume to depart should the matter be anything but." He met her eyes with a meaningful widening of his own.

Whether Nimueh understood exactly what he was referring to or simply figured it easier not to argue he didn't know. Most likely it was the latter; they had come to an agreement the two of them. Arthur would not publically counteract Nimueh, would support her and even use his oratory skills when directed – skills that Nimueh professed were swaying to say the least – and in turn, should Arthur have a suggestion or circumstances necessitate he act of his own accord to meet his own goals in private, she would allow it. One of those goals – his primary goal – involved putting Merlin and Morgana, should the situation warrant it, at the foremost of his concerns.

Merlin awakening? Arthur considered that such a situation certainly warranted his immediate attention. Definitely more than the Conference that everyone, Confederation and Initiative members both, knew would end in the same way it always did: with the Initiative getting there way. Arthur wasn't going to remain in the room a moment longer to hear the vilifying of a girl who had done no more than save herself in a public manner. If only he knew where the girl was kept he would be chaffing at the draw her from the clutches of the authorities himself.

He'd done it once, with Merlin. Why not again? The backlash of that, the suspicion and accusation towards the Confederation after his rescue had only lasted… three months. And counting. Not that anything could be proved, but speculation ran rampant.

Arthur strode, nearly running down the wide hallway of the City Castle of Government. It was a ridiculous name for the central house of parliament given that the government was no longer a monarchy nor that the building resembled a castle not in the slightest. All high ceilings of windowless pastel walls, coloured in such a way as to reflect the artificial lighting overhead, with synthetic rugs only partially covering glossy, reflective floors that stung the eyes with their sheen. Randomly dotted chairs lined the walls, tables with glass vases and fake flowers sprinkled with an artificial scent and the odd, frameless print of a landscape or persona that no longer existed adorned every other wall. They seemed to compensate for the lack of vibrancy, of relief, that a window would afford.

Arthur hated it, couldn't stand the sensation of fallacy that he felt whenever he stepped through the
grand, excessively tall front doors of the Castle, and not only because it was so vastly different to the
castle he recalled so fondly that it practically spat his memory in the eye. Despite the openness of the
halls, the surplus of interconnecting passageways that hinted at even greater coverage than the wide
corridors would otherwise suggest, it was different. Closeted. Suffocating. A rabbit warren, just like
the Facility had been. Arthur had to wonder if the people of the New World knew how to build in
any other way.

Stepping through the front door between the quartet of heavily clad and helmeted guards standing
stoically tall, Arthur immediately raised a hand to shade his eyes from the glare. It was always
glaringly bright outside, which was one of the reasons that none of the buildings in the Inner or
Middle City of London had windows. The white light, beaming through clouds and abusive even on
stormy days, was painful to behold. Literally, Arthur had been told. Exposure for more than an hour
or so without the appropriate medication, without proper protection, could apparently significantly
damage the skin, the eyes, and drastically increase the contraction of the medically diagnosed
'cancer'. Arthur didn't know what had happened to make the sun so aggressive, but he was cautious
enough to believe the unanimous word of everyone.

The plaza before the Castle, down a flight of wide stairs and spilling onto the equally glaring
sandstone that stretched a half kilometre towards the distant iron-welded and electrically pulsing
gates, was largely empty. Permits were required, chauffeurs logging their details – fingerprints,
passcodes, average vitals range – before entry. It was all so grounded in security, more even than it
had been in Arthur's time, that it was disconcerting. Arthur didn't like that either.

Luckily for him, one of Nimueh's chauffeurs – the one she had assigned to Gaius – was already
drawing up towards the double doors of the Castle. The vehicle – Skimmers, they were called –
hummed as it skated on its own air current a foot from the ground, the box like structure of metals
and plastics drifting to a halt at the base of the stairs. The windows were blotted black, of course –
there was always the sun to consider – but Arthur was familiar enough with the sleek, purring
vehicle to recognise it as one of Nimueh's. Even before Gaius slid open the side door and poked his
head out.

"Arthur," he called a little redundantly, gesturing towards him with a wave. Arthur didn't need to be
told twice and hastened down the steps to slide himself into the Skimmer. The eternally silent
chauffeur, Mascus, barely waited for the door to draw shut before tapping the screen at the front of
the Skimmer and urging it towards their next destination. A purring hum of subservience met his
directions and they sped away from the Castle across the sandstone yard.

Arthur couldn't even attempt to make himself comfortable on the padded seats. He perched on the
edge, leaning towards Gaius across the distance between them and dropped his elbows onto his
knees. It was only slightly larger than that of the interior of a carriage but for once Arthur didn't
protest the size. "Tell me, Gaius."

Gaius leant back in his own seat, his hands folded loosely in his lap. Arthur wasn't fooled, however.
Even in a different body, the little quirks that Arthur could recall from his childhood remained; the
distinctive tension in his shoulders, the slight quiver to the stillness of his usually expressive
eyebrows and the thinning of his lips. Gaius was almost as jittery as Arthur was.

"There's not all that much to tell," Gaius said, his voice low and mild, but betraying his tension
further in the faint tightness of his words. "Alice called me not ten minutes ago to tell me that Merlin
had awoken, that he was physically stable and conscious of his whereabouts, lucid enough to speak.
And that she considered you and I may wish to visit him at our earliest convenience."

There was a moment of pause, of expectancy between them in which Arthur fully expected Gaius to
drop the dreaded "but". It never came, however, and after a minute of silence he released a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. A shuddering sigh, of relief, of releasing tension that had been sitting with Arthur for… for he didn't even know how long. Since he'd rescued Merlin? No, it was before that. Since he'd learned of the existence of sorcerers that retained their memories of his own time? No, it was before then, even.

Since he'd first awoken, on the shores of the Lake of Avalon.

Dropping his chin to a hand, Arthur briefly closing his eyes and let the lingering tension flow from him. With the momentary darkness, he felt himself deflate. Maintaining such closed-eyes, he let his tongue spill forth the words that battered against the inside of his head and demanded to be spoken. "Alice says he's stable?" He was not terribly familiar with medical terms, but enough exposure to Gaius and Alice both had acquainted him with the rudiments.

Gaius nodded. "More than that, he appears to be quite responsive. A little unnerved, perhaps, but that's to be expected."

Arthur opened his eyes, his frown returning. "Unnerved how?"

"Consider, Arthur. He's been through a terrible ordeal and while his body may be progressing remarkably along the road to recovery, his mind had not yet had the chance to do so."

"So he's…?"

Gaius sighed heavily. For a moment that tension in his shoulders eased into something akin to sadness. To regret. "Hesitant, was how Alice described it. Touch aversive, which, given the beating his nervous system has undertaken, would be expected. Withdrawn at first, and wary – which is similarly to be expected – but Alice seems to think that so long as he is not overwhelmed he should be fine."

Slowly, Arthur nodded. He wasn't particularly well acquainted with what it took to care for the injured, the ill, the worn and the distressed. In the past, that role had always fallen to Gaius, to Merlin himself even. In the New World, Gaius similarly filled that role, his innate doctoring inclination arising once more as, he had claimed, it always did. Alice was the same. They were simply born to be healers.

Arthur wasn't. He didn't have that. He couldn't look at an expression, gauge a response, and instantly know the mental ravaging that was wreaking havoc upon the mind. He couldn't gauge at an open wound and immediately identify how long since its delivery, its severity, and detect any trace of infection. He didn't know more than how to splint a sprained or broken limb, knew only vaguely the herbs that would assist in quelling a fever – even if such herb lore was redundant in these times.

Arthur had felt helpless over the past three months. It was an even greater helplessness than he'd felt in the past, when he had been at the beside of his father, of his friends, of Merlin himself as occasion had arisen, each struggling against the illness or injury, the poison or force that threatened to overwhelm them. At least in such times he could race at Gaius' beck and call, heave water from the well, order the servants to prepare linens, ensure that the room was well aired and that the blankets were thick enough. He could even, as had been necessary, throw himself upon the course of retrieval for a specific cure.

In Nimueh's estate, there was no need for such assistance. Water pumped immediately from a tap on hand, hot or cold. The temperature was always moderated by air conditioning systems with barely a need for blankets to provide warm or cover. Arthur couldn't even get his hands dirty with digging through herbs, with shovelling soil and watering saplings to ensure the medicines needed would be
readily available. Medicines were all synthetically made these days and Arthur was useless.

He’d found that doing nothing was far worse than trying to do something and yet finding his efforts fruitless. There was a trial in waiting, one that was unprecedented and unavoidable.

Silence followed Gaius' words. The waiting as they drove through the wide, empty streets of Inner City, between towering, rectangular buildings visible through the protective film of shaded glass, along roads unnaturally flattened for carriage wheels that were no longer used, was achingly slow. Even knowing as Arthur did that the Skimmer was fast, that the time it would take to reach the estate was little more than half an hour. It seemed to take so much longer.

Gaius seemed content to remain silent. He only spoke briefly, sporadically, in the reminders that he had enforced upon Arthur so many times that he could recite the words and exact tone in his sleep. "Remember, Arthur, we must take things slowly. No excessive questioning, no hassling, no sharp movement or – actually, I think it would be best to keep a distance between the two of you for a time. At least until we can ascertain his level of comfort with contact and proximity. The abuse of the Facility will have certainly left its mark."

"Yes, Gaius," Arthur intoned, as he always did. Honestly, it was exactly the same, down to the correction to 'keep a distance'. Every time.

Gaius barely acknowledged him. "If you speak of the Past, do so sparingly, of the positive, and allow Merlin to direct the conversation. Tread carefully."

"Yes, Gaius," Arthur repeated. It sounded as though Gaius were coaching him on how to court a potential lover rather than welcome the awakened recovery of a long-lost friend.

"And do not – do not – mention the war. The Battle of Camlann or anything regarding the heightened severity of the war status in your final months. We know not to which point Merlin remembers as of yet and it is highly unlikely that he recalls your… death."

Arthur nodded once more, in more fervent agreement this time. It wasn't only because he agreed with Gaius' sentiment, that doing so may cause Merlin some distress. Gaius had spoken of an incident he'd experienced himself in which he'd met someone from his past – no, his Past. When he'd encountered someone who referred to shared experiences that he could not yet recall. Gaius had claimed it was disconcerting at times, unnerving to say the least, to hear of memories and experiences that one could no longer remember.

But just as much, Arthur knew he would hold his tongue because of the discomfort it caused himself. He didn't like to think about the battle, even if it had been triumphant. The memory of a sharp blade puncturing his chest, of the piercing agony that had arrived only moments afterwards and drawn him into unconsciousness. There was after that even…the faint haziness or something… but no, Arthur didn't like to think about that either. It was too confusing.

The only light to deter the potentially pervasive blackness of his death – for it had been his death, Arthur knew, as nauseating as that was to contemplate – was that Merlin had been there with him the entire time. Merlin, his friend, his dearest friend, someone truly closer than a friend. In spite of the revelation of his magic, the revelations that followed thick and fast in their slogging flight to the Lake in hopes of seeking sanctuary that left Arthur seeing Merlin in an distinctly new light. It was more than that; it had been comforting that the person he relied upon the most in the world, in a different and at times even more profound manner than he had even with Guinevere, had been with him the entire way.

Arthur reflected upon those days in the privacy of his own head. Reflected and reminisced,
considered and brooded, though never aloud. He would be more than happy to keep it that way, lost
as he was in coming to terms with them himself, and even more so if Merlin didn't even remember
them happening. That thought in itself was unnerving, for Arthur had only ever really conversed
about the past with those who had outlived their lives in Albion. It was a different situation entirely,
considering one who couldn't even recall the moments that were so profound, so deep, and had
meant so much to Arthur.

He couldn't deny that, even without the revelation of his magic, Arthur saw Merlin in a very
distinctly different light after the Battle of Camlann.

When they pulled up outside of Nimueh's estate, Arthur was out of the Skimmer almost before it had
stopped. The familiar grounds were walled in the customary electrical fencing of the wealthy and
upper class. Nimueh's residence looked more like a castle than the Castle did, with its old, pale grey
slabs of brick in fitted stone and the semblance of windows that didn't penetrate the walls dotting the
exterior, but only just. Arthur barely heeded it, didn't spare Mascus a glance as the chauffeur bid
them a nod of good day, didn't pause as Gaius called his name after him, either to slow him or urge
him onwards with more speed. He was nearly running up the steps towards the front door, slowing
only as required to key his ID into the door's reader before darting inside. He raced down long
corridors of tasteful décor, more so than that of the Castle despite the overwhelming impression of
'artificial' that pervaded every building. At least it wasn't so monochromatically pastel; Nimueh
exhibited a modicum of taste in contrasting the synthetic carpeting of the faux-timber panelling.

Arthur knew the layout of Nimueh's estate by heart. He'd been living within its walls for three
months, had been assigned his own suite with a cordial smile by the owner herself, a smile that
suggested Nimueh knew that she could afford Arthur all the luxuries she desired and could take them
away just as easily. But even if Arthur hadn't been able to paint a map of the building, of each of its
extensive four floors, he would have made certain he knew where the infirmary. The Hospital, Gaius
and Alice called it, expressions a little wistful, a little nostalgic. That was where Merlin was kept, and
was where Arthur spent hours each day.

Despite his headlong flight, however, a stride that had gastened into an alternating jog-walk-jog
every half dozen steps, when Arthur reached the Hospital he paused outside of the doors. Not
because they were remarkable, no more so in their plainness than any of the other doors he had
passed. And not because it was locked either, for closed it may be it was never barred entry to him.
He doubted the ID-pad pulsing in muted light at the centre of the door even had a locking
mechanism; he'd not seen engaged if it did.

He paused because he felt a moment of apprehension. A moment of anxiety bordering on fear of the
unknown, of what he would find. Arthur was prepared to face any challenge, pit himself against any
foe in a heartbeat, but this… How much would Merlin even remember? He would remember Arthur,
wouldn't he? Gaius had said something about the haziness of a sorcerer's Past memories, that at times
those that had a lesser impact, that were deemed less important, were not as clearly remembered. But
Merlin, for the life that he'd shared with Arthur and the journey's they'd experienced, the trials they'd
faced together in a much more profound way than Arthur had ever realised at the time, as comrades
in battle even… surely Merlin would remember that.

Wouldn't he?

The sound of Gaius' approach shook Arthur from his nervous stupor. The elderly man was
remarkably sprightlier than he had been in the Past. Arthur had even chanced to see him run at times
when the need dictated. When it was absolutely necessary, as it had been precious few times over the
course of the last half a year. Arthur put it down to the seemingly longer legs of people in the New
World; it wasn't overly notable, not excessively so, but he'd noticed that people seemed to be just a
little… taller than they had been in his own time. It was strange. Disconcerting.

With a deep, steadying breath, Arthur set his jaw resolutely and tapped a finger to the ID-pad, urging the door to open. The hiss of the mechanical pulley system accompanied the smooth slide of the opening door. As he stepped into the room, Arthur's eyes swept the familiar room, the cool, calming colours and minimalistic furnishings, and fell immediately on Alice's dark head, drew to her permanently fixed smile. An instant later his attention snapped to the bed she stood beside and for the first time in years, Arthur really got a chance to see Merlin.

There were differences in each incarnation, both physically and psychologically. Arthur had noticed them in Gaius just as he noticed them in his simple observations of Merlin in his sleep. Such features as his hair – a shade darker than it had been – and the shape of his face, ever so slightly more pointed than Arthur recalled in the way that seemed as common in the people of this world as did their slightly greater height. There were the other aspects – that he was far too skinny and far paler than he had been – that were immediately recognised as the effects of mistreatment or illness. All in all, the little differences made up a respectable list, and yet even with such differences Arthur could recognise Merlin. He would have been able to identify him within a heartbeat.

When Merlin was awake, though, when he sat holding himself upright, legs crossed beneath the blankets and his own attention turning towards Arthur, those little changes were immediately thrown on the backburner. Because his eyes, opening impossibly wider with each passing second, were familiar. So achingly familiar that Arthur felt his throat thicken with emotion.

This was his friend. His most trusted friend, the one he cared about more than anyone in this New World. One of the few who had shared the past – the Past – with him and knew. Because Arthur realised, with the instantaneous awareness of certainty, that Merlin remembered. And that was even before he spoke.

"Ar…thur."

His voice was hoarse, barely more than a whispered croak, but so loaded with emotion that Arthur barely heard it. In an instant he had crossed the room, and quite without conscious direction found himself dropping to his knees at Merlin's bedside. He couldn't break his gaze from where it was locked on Merlin's, couldn't even blink because… because…

This was what he'd needed. This was what he'd been searching for through the years since he'd awoken on the lakeside. Like a drowning man clutching at a lifeline, he'd clung to the notion that Merlin was still alive, that Morgana existed in this world, and it had been his primary motivator. His only motivator. It was the only thing that kept him going. And now that Merlin was here? That he was awake, that he was alright, that he so obviously remembered Arthur…

For the first time, Arthur felt as though solid ground had been paved beneath his frantically scrambling feet. Like he could properly breathe again. Quite without his say-so, without his direction and, he was sure, to his future regret, Arthur found himself smiling broadly.

"About time you woke up, Merlin. I was beginning to think that you truly were as helplessly lazy as the impression you'd always led me to believe." He raised his eyebrows with deliberate casualness, struggling to shift his smile into a smirk. It was that or risk falling prey to the weight of his overwhelming emotions.

Merlin gave a huffing choke of breath. It could have been a sob just as easily as it could have been laughter. Arthur wasn't sure which it was and Merlin's expression didn't give any indication either. His continued widened, unblinking eyes, coupled with the gauntness of his cheeks and angular features, gave him a remarkably childlike impression. Yet despite it all, despite the hoarseness of his
voice, when he replied it was in such a Merlin-like fashion that Arthur immediately felt his smirk drift back towards a smile. "Me lazy? You're one to talk. You do realise I was actually up before you every morning, don't you?"

Had the true sun finally broken through the clouds and beamed its glorious radiance directly upon Arthur he could not have felt a greater flooding warmth of relief. Merlin remembered. Not only that, but he appeared to remember the little things. The little things that were almost more important than the big ones. Leaning forwards to prop an elbow on the edge of the bed, to drop his chin onto his hand, Arthur snorted. "That's because you did so little in a day that you hardly required sleep. Layabout."

"You have no idea, do you?" Merlin said, his stunned expression dying slightly to be replaced by a softening of… fondness? Possibly. Hopefully.

"About what?"

"Have you ever spent a day in your lives polishing armour, of dusting rugs, or running errands that hold no greater purpose than to convey a simple joke or two to an acquaintance half a mile away?"

"Of course not," Arthur smirked. "I was a king. And before that a prince. My time's far too important to –"

"To spend it on commenting on the weather to Lady Joseline whenever she came to court?" Merlin interrupted coarsely, barely more than a mumble. It was rude, unbecoming of a servant, and Arthur loved every word of it.

"Well, what else would you talk to her about? She's a harpy who would take exceptional delight in monopolising my time had I given her the opportunity to talk about anything else."

"True. Very true," Merlin agreed, nodding. And thought he didn't smile – something that Arthur wondered about but disregarded for the moment – there was very definite warmth to his whispered words.

Arthur's attention was drawn towards Gaius as the older man stepped up beside him and placed a hand upon his shoulder. Merlin's attention too diverted, for the first time shaking from his unblinking stare at Arthur and turning towards his former mentor. A new wave of fondness touched his features and he gave another one of those huffing sighs. "Gaius."

Arthur didn't need to glance towards Gaius himself to know he smiled warmly in return. It was as clear as still water, resonating through his voice. "Merlin, my boy. Welcome back to us. I am so pleased to see that you are well enough to join the land of the living once more."

Merlin's expression softened further in an almost-but-not-quite smile. "Not as pleased as I am, I can assure you."

"How are you feeling?" Gaius asked as Arthur, suddenly realising he was still on his knees in a most indecorous manner, quickly regained his feet.

Merlin shrugged one shoulder in an entirely Merlin-like manner. The gesture tightened something in Arthur's chest. "Never better."

"I doubt that," Arthur muttered, shaking his head.

"Do you?"
Something in Merlin's tone caught Arthur's attention. Something that suggested the question held more weight than a simple rhetorical question. Arthur frowned. What did that…?

"He's actually remarkably healthy for having just woken up. More lucid than I had anticipated," Alice was saying, and Arthur turned his attention towards her instead. Her ever-smiling face held a satisfied edge to it. "Vitals are all well, though you're still a little peaky for my taste."

"More lucid?" Arthur asked.

Merlin, his attention turned similarly towards Alice, raised an eyebrow. "Is that a compliment or a back-handed criticism?"

"Maybe a bit of both," Alice said, smiling down at the blankets tucked around Merlin and adjusting them slightly. Arthur didn't miss that Merlin shifted just ever so slightly away from her fiddling.

_Gaius is probably right, then. About the touch thing._ Arthur wasn't sure he wanted to know how bad it was. Merlin seemed well – remarkably so, all things considered – but Arthur had seen enough patients under Gaius' care to know it was likely the falsely calm surface above a turbulent current of chaos. Fall beneath that calm and the problems truly arose. He wasn't sure he was prepared for that yet.

"Well, there's one way we can start to set aright some of this 'peakiness'," Gaius said, his voice somewhat louder than it should have been. Perhaps he too had noticed Merlin's flinch, was similarly pointedly ignoring it and attempting to divert the attention? "Alice, perhaps some breakfast?"

"Here I thought you'd never ask," Alice grinned up at Gaius. "What's this? You've never thought to remember for yourself. Not once."

"He eats with his patients," Merlin muttered, flashing another softened glance towards Gaius. "It's his reminder of sorts. Was the only way I could get him to remember at times."

"Ah, then great minds think alike," Alice exclaimed, sharing a knowing glance with Merlin as he turned back to her. "You've likely battled with his stubbornness and air-headedness in the past, too."

"More than you know," Merlin sighed.

"Merlin," Gaius frowned, though it wasn't really a frown. "If there was one of the two of us who was 'air-headed', it most certainly wasn't me."

"That I can wholly agree with," Arthur nodded. Merlin cast him a faintly accusing glare, but it carried no heat to it. "But breakfast sounds wonderful. Shall I call for someone, Alice?"

"Ever the King, getting the servants to do the legwork," Merlin murmured, almost too quiet to be heard. Gaius and Alice chuckled in tandem.

"They're servants, Merlin. It's what they're paid to do," Arthur clicked his tongue, rolling his eyes at the sentiment. Trust Merlin to rise to the defence of those whose duty it was to fulfil his needs. That serving bone had never existed in Merlin, though; Arthur should have expected it. "Shall we head to the dining room? I'd not fancy picnicking an egg and bacon sandwich on the floor."

"Oh, climb down from your high horse, Arthur," Alice scolded as she made her way across the room to the Comm-pad, a positioned mirror of the ID-pad on the flip side of door into the room. "Merlin's hardly capable of any kind of movement like that so soon after awakening." She shook her head as she leant into the Comm and muttered a string of requests into the speaker.
Arthur felt a pang of guilt at her reminder. Ah. Yes, there was that. He'd been so caught up in relief that the basics of the situation were overlooked. He glanced back towards Merlin, on the verge of apology but was cut off by Gaius' words. "Speaking of, how is your locomotion, Merlin? Can you wriggle your toes, your fingers, lift your arm?"

Merlin glanced distractedly at Gaius before turning his attention back to Arthur. Unexpectedly, almost as though he were talking to him rather than to Gaius in his reply. "Yes, I… my fingers? Yes, they're fine. A little stiff maybe but… Actually better than fine, better than – than before…" He trailed off, frowning slightly and flickering a glance down to the fingers curling in his lap. He studied them silently for a moment, with such intensity that he seemed to have momentarily forgotten the presence of everyone else in the room until he visibly shook himself from his thoughts. There. That's what I was expecting. It was like he completely tuned out for a moment. I wonder…

Merlin's wide gaze snapped to Arthur once more. "I'm sorry, did you say eggs and bacon?"

Arthur rolled his eyes, striving for casualness once more to rid himself of his discontent. "Trust you to jump to the most 'important' part of the conversation."

Merlin gave his huff-laugh, which was what Arthur believed it to be even without the presence of an accompanying smile, and shook his head. "No, I… I mean, it just surprised me. I didn't even know they made egg-and-bacon mimics."

"What?" Arthur's eyebrows rose incredulously. "You mean you've never -?"

"I've never had eggs and bacon before." Merlin appeared faintly wistful at the thought, eyes drifting back to his hands. He muttered something that sounded like, "can even remember how to eat" beneath his breath, giving another little huff of not-quite-laughter.

Arthur blinked. He'd put his foot in it again, he realised, but he hardly even considered that. Gaius' warnings arose once more in his mind, the plethora of those that he'd ground into Arthur again and again, even more extensive than the ones mentioned in the Skimmer trip. That the upper class of London were privileged and that most didn't have access to the basic resources that were on hand for the wealthy. 'Mimics' were what Merlin had called the food – for mimics they truly were; there was a distinct otherness to the meals that reeked of artificiality – but Arthur had heard tell that they were above and beyond the rations that most residents of London were afforded. Far beyond.

Clearing his throat and deliberately putting the revelation to the side, Arthur crossed his arms casually over his chest. At his side, Gaius muttered something under his breath about "for the fingers" and bustled over towards what Arthur knew to be the medicine on the other side of the room, in cabinets behind locked doors. "Well, it's not exactly Camelot fare, but it does the trick."

Merlin blinked up at Arthur before slowly raising an eyebrow. "Always a critic, aren't you?" He said, though there was more fond exasperation than annoyance in his tone.

Arthur shrugged. "How can I not want for better when I can remember better?" He glanced over his shoulder at Alice, still chatting through the Comm. She seemed partial to excessively conversing with just about everyone, even when simply relaying a request to a servant. "Although, if there was such a thing as choicest pieces, Alice would be the one to scavenge them. She has an art for that kind of thing."

"Maybe she's just a nice person and people unconsciously reward her for it?" Merlin suggested, pausing for a moment to cough in an evidently unsuccessful attempt to clear his throat. "I always found that a simple thank you went a long way."
"What, you plied your 'goodly nature' and gained me treats, did you?" Arthur asked lightly. Merlin shrugged his one-shouldered shrug, disregarding the question. "A little gratitude goes a long way."

"You never knew, Arthur, but Merlin was something of the beloved son in Camelot's castle kitchens." Gaius cast a glance across the room, his expression more amused than reprimanding. He appeared to be loading his arms with an excessive amount of phials and sealed containers. "I believe the cook had a soft spot for you."

"Is that so?" Arthur asked, cracking a smile. He raised his own eyebrow at Merlin, who pursed his lips innocently. "Perhaps you should take over from Alice, then? Or maybe resume your manservant duties, hm?"

It was meant to be said in jest. Arthur had intended it to be a joke, nothing but a passing comment shared between friends with the superior air that he had always assumed. Except from the earnest expression on Merlin's face, he realised that Merlin himself had interpreted it far differently. His voice was even quieter than a hoarse croak when he replied with downcast eyes. "I would want for nothing more than that, I can assure you. Although… I doubt me now would have quite the same appeal to your kitchen cooks."

There was a note of sadness in his words, on that drew a frown from Arthur and, he noted in his periphery, the attention of both Gaius and Alice as the simultaneously paused in their motions. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Merlin, eyes still dropped to his fingers, shrugged once more. "Only that I guess I'm not the same person as I was. I'm different in this life, as I'm sure everyone is. Maybe not so nice." His lips tugged in a downward quirk and he flickered his gaze up to meet Arthurs. "Things changed after you died, Arthur."

That single comment hit the room like a shockwave. Several things happened at once and Arthur wasn't quite sure which occurred fastest.

For Arthur, it was as though he was hit by a sudden bout of vertigo. The floor seemed to tilt in sheer confused stupefaction. He jerked a step backwards as a rush of memories at the mere verbal mention of his 'death' hit him.

Alice gasped a splutter from across the room and nearly slipped as she spun towards them. Across the room, Gaius appeared to have fallen into the medicine cabinet. The clatter of vials and a yelp of surprise was accompanied by a thump as he then stepped backwards and nearly tumbled into the table behind him. A clatter of plastic containers slapped onto the floor.

And Merlin. Merlin seemed blown away by the response of his fellows. As Arthur righted himself, thrust aside the memories that always resurfaced with a careless mention of his last days in Albion, his attention snapped towards Merlin once more. Merlin, whose eyes were blown wide like a startled rabbit and shoulders hunched, lurched forwards halfway down his bed. He had an arm outstretched, towards Gaius of all of them, as though attempting to reach for his old mentor as he juggled the medicines.

Except he wasn't. Gaius didn't struggle to hold that which he nearly dropped, nor was he hastening away from a spilling stain of medicines oozing across the floor in a chemical mix. Holding himself up on the edge of the bench, his attention turned slowly towards Merlin. Just as Arthur's did when he caught sight of the handful of glass phials hanging suspended in the air. And he noticed – though he
didn't quite know how he'd missed it in the first place – the golden radiance illuminating Merlin's eyes.

Magic. That was it. Merlin did have magic. Of course Arthur knew that, and yet… seeing it for himself was something else. It drove even the lingering memories of Arthur's death from his mind, the hysterical thought of, "well, I guess we know what he remembers up to now!" from his mind. Because Merlin did have magic. A magic that was holding up the delicate phials of medicine to rescue them from smashing across the ground.

Shaking his head, Arthur rubbed a shaky hand over his brow. He strove once more for that casualness that they had all been straining for since entering the room. "Really, Merlin, when you drop a statement like that, could you perhaps give us a little warning. I don't think…" He trailed off, however, as his gaze settled once more upon Merlin. Upon the gold illuminating his eyes, eyes that were still blown wide but now swum with the beginning of tears. His chin trembled almost as much as the hand held aloft to direct his magic. "Merlin? What-?"

"Oh, my dear boy…" Gaius sighed, gently plucking the vials from the air. Alice murmured something comforting and unintelligible as she hastened across the room to his bedside once more. "Are you alright?"

Merlin didn't cry. He didn't let those tears fall, but seemed to hold them back by sheer willpower alone. Sinking his teeth with what looked to be an almost painful bite into his lip, he nodded. His voice was huskier, laced with heavy emotion, more than it had been since Arthur had first heard him speak his name. "It's… my magic…"

Arthur didn't know what to say, could only stand silent and watchful as Alice comforted Merlin with gentle words and urged him back onto his propped pillows. He could only watch as Gaius swept across the room with his medicines and, with a soft smile that suggested he suspected if not exactly knew at least a little of what Merlin was feeling, quietly directed him on what medicines he wished Merlin to take. Arthur stood upon the outskirts, not really comprehending, not really understanding, but witnessing all the same. And when Merlin finally spared a wavering glance towards Arthur once more, almost surprised, as though he'd forgotten he was even there, Arthur made a concerted effort to pretend the situation had never happened. That, just like Gaius and Alice, he thought he recognised Merlin's emotional upheaval and wouldn't comment upon it.

It was easily done, for really, what could Arthur say? For the first time in perhaps years Merlin had used his magic. Arthur knew that much, if not what it felt like. Just like he knew, from Gaius' words, that to live without the ability to use one's magic was to be without sight, without hearing or voice, unable to feel.

What could Arthur possibly even say to that?
Inner City London was vastly different to anything that Merlin had seen in his current life. As different as the Camelot had been to London at the turn of the second millennium, or the first millennium to the post-World War Three disaster. It was as different from the slums as could possibly be, as though they truly were worlds apart rather than separated by a mere network of canals and the barricade of Middle City.

Where the streets of the slums were narrow, clogged with thick sludge and congested with too many stinking bodies, those of Inner City were wide, pristinely clean, built of smooth, grey-black stone and starkly empty of people. Where the buildings of the slums were drunken and leaning, built of scrap metal, off-cuts of archaic plastics and synthetic tarps to ward off the often vicious elements, Inner City boasted immaculately precise structures of identical make, varying only in colour and height and all composed of sharp, straight lines and scrubbed stone bricks of enormous size seamlessly welded. They lacked windows but for the false kind that didn't even penetrate the walls, while the houses in the slums were so riddled with punctures and holes as to often seem more like fishing nets than a protective wall or roof.

But most profoundly to Merlin was the feel of Inner City. The lack of sound, the atmosphere of aggression, of temporary hysterical joviality or mocking amusement, of weariness and sadness and fear and demand. Neither positive nor negative, the City felt… empty. The silence that radiated along the length of the wide, open roads rung like a struck bell, as glaring as the grey-whiteness of the buildings lying beneath the blinding radiance of the cloud filtered sky. Merlin had never liked the slums – hated them, in fact – but the sheer nervous artificiality, the sense of waiting and the looming condescension of Inner City's very air was in many ways far worse.

That, and the smell. Merlin hated the smell, even more than he did the cloying pungency of sewerage, the acrid acidity of the canals, or the thick, abusive tang of mingling unwashed bodies. As soon as he stepped outside, Merlin could smell it: the crisp, cool, detached sharpness, devoid of any hint of life, and just the faintest sting of chemical sterility that tightened his throat and triggered his gagging reflexes. He doubted he would ever be comfortable with that smell, not after the Pits.

"Merlin? Shall we?"

Gaius' voice drew Merlin's attention from his unblinking scan of the streets of Inner City. With a start, he realised he'd drifted from the front steps of the residence he'd been closeted in for the last few days – no, the last few months, though he hadn't been aware for most of it – and towards the iron-wrought fence surrounding the estate. It was with a flinch and a start backwards that he did so, turning wary eyes up at the pointed spears atop the gate. They thrummed with electrical energy that could fell a man with a single brushing touch. He knew this, with an unwavering certainty that wasn't dampened by the fact that he'd never experienced such a shock from the protective gates himself. Everyone knew what those familiar, twisted fences entailed, as the lesser cousins ringed the Middle City: pain and an inhibition of magic. He could almost taste the pulsing energy rippling through it.

Turning, Merlin kept his eyes trained warily upon the fence, some triggered prey instinct urging him from the proximity of electricity. With a barely suppressed shudder, he tugged at the thrice-looped scarf hugging his neck, sinking into the thick coat that warded off the worst of the early spring chill. He sidled back towards where Gaius stood alongside Arthur and a woman named Sebille who, though Arthur claimed otherwise, Gaius seemed to suggest was something of Arthur's 'handler'. Never to Arthur, of course – Gaius likely wanted to spare his eardrums of the abuse they'd receive.
from Arthur's lecturing on his misguided suspicions – but from what Merlin had seen it appeared a fairly accurate assumption.

He trotted towards their small party idling beside the sleek, puttering Skimmer, barely feeling the remnants of aches in his legs that had all but disappeared in the past days. Towards his friends, both present and Past. Gods but it was good to be amongst them – he still could hardly believe it – and good to be awake. He had to credit Gaius and Alice's treatment; after lying abed for months, Merlin would have expected his physical rehabilitation to take far longer. But within the day he had been on his feet. Within two, he could walk, and three days of mobility had been far too tempting to prevent him from at least attempting to move faster. Even if Gaius did raise a pointed eyebrow at him whenever he walked at faster than a wary shamble. But Gaius appeared to have been afflicted by the same honeymoon period that had fallen upon Merlin; his old mentor just seemed sort of… fuzzy. Almost fluffy. Merlin doubted he would have been able to even frown in his direction.

Arthur frowned however, as Merlin approached them. Arthur – Gods, it really was him; Merlin still could hardly believe it, even after days – with his arms folded across his chest in a gesture Merlin was all too familiar with. It meant he was thinking. "You've never seen this part of London before, have you?"

Merlin shook his head, dragging his gaze from Arthur to cast a glance over his shoulder. He cleared his throat in an attempt to rid it of the muffling hoarseness that still quietened his tone a little, even after days of use. "No. Never much been a day out of the slums, actually. Not before I… you know…"

No one commented on the mention of the Pits in much the same way that the elephant in the room was pointedly ignored. Merlin was thankful for the fact; it served to dampen whatever lightness of mood might have briefly possessed him. Arthur nodded slowly. "I admit I haven't seen all that much of the slums, myself. It's much different?"

Merlin closed his eyes briefly, shaking his head to clear it of the comparative images, the starkly different impressions of both vastly different worlds. Arthur's question wasn't really a question at all; everyone knew of the degradation of the slums. "You have no idea."

"Less hygienic?" Sebille asked. Genuine curiosity rung in her voice, the interest of someone who viewed such curiosities from a distance without dirtying their feet. Merlin recognised it immediately as being the perspective of one who had likely lived either in the micro-cities outside of London or in Middle City or grander their entire life. Not that he couldn't have picked it anyway from the simple visage Sebille presented. She was a quiet, hard woman, her ash-blonde hair raked back into a tight bun and standing with such rigidity that the loose folds of her garments seemed almost uncomfortably flat along her frame. And yet there was ignorance in her perspective that reeked as profoundly as a sharp scent; she knew nothing of scraping for survival, of lasting days on end with barely a mouthful to fill the belly. Though far from being a large woman, her frame itself indicated as much; there was none of the long, sinewy thinness of a slum-dweller, the thinness that seemed to suggest limbs had been stretched in extension rather than grown naturally.

Merlin found himself frowning before he could help himself. Hygienic? Most people in the slums don't even know what hygiene is. He made an effort to school his features. "I suppose that all depends on your definition of cleanliness. Myself, I see nothing wrong with maintaining a healthy layer of road scum and days-old sweat. Good for the immune system, you know?" Hecocked his head and raised his eyebrows mildly, adopting an expression of sincerity. Sebille might have even believed it had Arthur not snorted and visibly fought back a smirk.

Pursing her lips, Sebille pointedly averted her gaze. "There's no need for such condescension,
Emrys," she muttered. Shaking her head she turned deliberately towards the Skimmer, touching lightly upon the door to urge it open. "Shall we?" She said without glancing over her shoulder. "I personally am not one inclined to leave the Lady waiting. Even less so when it was she who saw fit to see us upon request."

Merlin fought not to roll his eyes. Shaking his head and ignoring Sebille as much as she did him – though her from a place of polite distraction, even something almost disconcertingly respectful – he followed her to the Skimmer. It was after only a moment of hesitation that he climbed inside the air conditioned interior, the arrangement of smooth, spongy seating and shaded windows more like a claustrophobically small sitting area than any sort of vehicle that Merlin had before encountered in his current life.

Which wasn't exactly saying much. Merlin had rarely used anything but his own two feet in this life. The Skimmer was like everything else in Inner City; polished and clean, with a faintly chemical smell that was instantly aversive. It lacked even the barest hint of wear and tear. Merlin had to marvel that the upper class managed to maintain such immaculate conditions. Did they simply have a constant supply of replacements?

Gaius slid in beside Merlin, Arthur directly after and slouching easily in the seat across from him. The door had only just slid shut with the sighing hiss of all electronic doors before the Skimmer eased into motion under the keyed coordinates of the chauffeur, Mascus. Such a redundant job, Merlin had considered with faint incredulity after Arthur had, in an entirely off-handed manner, introduced the tall, heavy-browed and quiet man to him. The chauffeur had the sole duty of accompanying his passengers to their destination, with his only role being to input the coordinates of said destination and ensure that such an endpoint was indeed where they found themselves. No other responsibility was asked of him, and he needed a licence to do simply that. Merlin couldn't help but compare the role of a Skimmer driver to that of his own gondola paddling; Mascus barely had to lift a finger, let alone struggle to wade through the thick slurry of the canals by hand. How different their two worlds were.

Since he'd awoken, Merlin's life had been a riot of new experiences. Most were simple curiosities, elements of upper class life that he had simply never encountered before, nothing but his memories of the Past even vaguely resembling it. But some… some were disconcerting. Like the sheer cleanliness of everything that, despite his words towards Sebille, he found far too unnervingly familiar to the Pits not to find objection to. Or the medication – orally rather than intravenously as Alice had blessedly spared him that – which too was far too reminiscent of his years of captivity to sit with even a modicum of comfort with him.

But more than that was his freedom.

Gaius, in his kindly yet factual manner, had commented on the fact that Merlin appeared to be doing remarkably well. That his body was physically recovering with exceptional speed, as most sorcerers did, and that all things considered his mental state was similarly less unhinged than it could have been. Coming from anyone else, Merlin might have been indignant, even angered by such a clinical take on his state of mind, but Gaius was different. Gaius had always been different. Merlin revelled enough in the simple fact of being alongside his age-old mentor that such a potential irritant barely swayed him.

Neither of them spoke of the fact that, in actuality, Merlin likely appeared so 'well' because he fought every moment of his waking day to make it seem so. That he woke with nightmares at least once a night in a cold sweat and convulsions and more often than not couldn't find his way back into sleep. That he instinctively flinched from the touch of another even when he knew it wouldn't hurt him now, or that he at times lost his sense of reality and drifted from the present entirely, escaping to
memories of the Past old and new to simply Drift. No, none of them commented on that, nor Gaius nor the kindly Alice, and not Arthur though, quite against his wishes, Merlin suspected that Arthur too was aware of the fact that he struggled more than he admitted or let himself show. He was trying to keep Arthur as ignorant of the depths of that struggle as he could.

Merlin couldn't help but feel his gaze drawn to Arthur once more as the Skimmer swayed slightly around a wide corner, and had to deliberately urge himself to redirect it through the shaded window once more. His attention was drawn almost constantly in such a way in almost every moment that he was in Arthur's presence, and not only because he couldn't help but feel an upwelling of fond amusement for the fact that, in spite of the necessity to adhere to current fashions, Arthur still dressed himself in clothes more befitting Arthurian times than that of modern London.

No, he looked, he stared, because this was Arthur.

Merlin's discovery that he could use magic once more had initially overwhelmed the reality of Arthur's existence. His magic had been so long repressed, so long untouched, that he had oftentimes in his captivity believed that it was disappeared entirely. That the Doctors had in fact managed to rid him of that which was as integral to him as his own blood as they seemed to be striving to do. That Merlin had been able to use it, that it had barely ached to do so and that the reaction to fling the ribbons of power in an act of levitation had come so naturally… he could have sung with delight if he had not been on the verge of dissolving into tears of heartfelt relief. It was only barely that he had managed to suppress them.

But when the headiness of that discovery had – finally – lessened in intensity, his disbelief at Arthur's presence had resurfaced with a vengeance. Because not only was it Arthur than stood beside his bed like a bodyguard of sorts but it was Arthur. The real Arthur, in body as well as mind. It had taken an long, confusing explanation to fully understand that.

"You mean you… you're really… you?" Merlin, his voice nearly inaudible for more than its feebleness of misuse, had stared wide-eyed up at Arthur in incredulity.

Despite of the fact that Arthur raised an eyebrow, attempted casualness and even sighed as though he were truly exasperated by Merlin's words, discomfort had definitely aroused from the question. As Gaius and Alice afforded them a respectful distance, chattering with obvious, pointed distraction from the other side of the room, Arthur had finally settled himself in the seat alongside Merlin's bed. He dropped his elbows to his knees and leant forwards, hands clasped and gaze intense. As it always was – Merlin could lose himself in the trust perceived by that gaze every time. "If you're trying to ask if I'm in my, ah… original body, as Gaius calls it, then yes. I am." He nodded with that same false casualness, but Merlin saw the tightness in his neck that had indicated otherwise.

He noticed that just as he noticed everything else. He saw the straight, strong features of the King he had once served with his everything, the golden blonde locks that were chopped shorter than he recalled them ever being but still reminiscent, the pale intensity of an unblinking gaze that had always captured him as forcibly as it had his people. His eyes ran over wide shoulders that had once been draped in royal red, buried beneath polished armour as often as the embroidered fabrics of his station. They drew to the clasped hands that had always been adorned with only his mother's ring when not hidden beneath glove and gauntlet and hefting a sword, long, thick fingers, wide hands with calloused palms. Still calloused, as though he'd worked at making them so. It was all so achingly familiar that it sent a lance of pain through Merlin's chest.

Because Arthur was the same. Exactly the same. In everyone else – in Balinor, in Mordred, Edwin and Gaius and even himself – there were elements of past incarnations that made themselves apparent. Whether it was in the colour of hair, the cut of a jawline, the thickness of a brow or the
sharpness of a nose, even the tone of voice or the lilt of an accent, there was always something. But never, never, was there anything so exactly identical as the compilation of features in the figure that Arthur presented. Merlin could very much believe that he was indeed the same person. Exactly the same person.

"How? How is that even possible?"

Arthur shook his head, the casualness fading slightly from his expression. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"But… but…" Merlin struggled for the words. "But you're the same. Exactly the same. How can that even be, when you died?"

Arthur flinched in a visible spasm at that, and Merlin realised the error of his words that he hadn't fully perceived the first time he'd spoken them. That first time he'd been distracted by the recovery of his magic, had barely seen anything but the floating phials Gaius had dropped and felt nothing but the confusing and overwhelming tide of emotions – pain, longing, confusion, surprise, relief, sheer delight – that had ripped through him. But this time he saw.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, barely a whisper. "It… talking about it… I'm sorry, I didn't mean to –"

Arthur shook his head sharply and took a firming breath. His expression became resolute and he even attempted something of a forgiving smile. "It's alright. Gaius has explained it to me, that sorcerers don't have as much pain surrounding their Past deaths."

Merlin peered at him warily, fingers rubbing across one another in unconscious stroking motions. He nodded slowly. "Yeah, it doesn't really hurt to remember dying. Not always. It's sort of like…"


"Yeah. Sort of." Merlin quirked his lips; explaining the reality of his Past Memories was always difficult. How could he possibly convey to someone, to anyone who hadn't experienced it for themselves, what it was like? How he could remember at times with overwhelming clarity the actions he'd once lived through but that they were mostly just that; acts. That he could remember the emotions that accompanied them, but that they only accompanied, without resounding painfully in his conscious mind. Or at least usually not felt emotionally.

He could remember drinking poisoned wine for his Lady six centuries past and yet could still partake of such beverages without more than a passing, chiding recollection of that memory. He could recall being gunned down with a bullet through the gut by the enemy in the First World War but feel no lingering resentment, had even picked up a handgun in several instances in hi lives since. He could consider Freya and her death with memorable sadness but discard that sadness as something other to what concerned both of them in this life. He heard the emotions but didn't feel them. There were precious few memories that truly clung to every life, resounding with bone-deep clarity, and the deaths that he could remember at his age, that he'd fallen to at younger than he was now, were not among them.

Arthur was evidently different. It hit Merlin suddenly as he spoke the words that while Arthur was different to sorcerers and their reincarnation he was different in other ways too. He felt his death and continued to feel it, no matter that it hadn't been lasting. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I can't imagine what that must feel like."

Arthur frowned, more confused than pained by the resurfacing of memories. "You don't have to apologise for that. It's not like you knew, Merlin."
Merlin bit his lip, turning his attention to his fingers. He would have almost preferred Arthur to rebuke him. "I know. But I should have realised that you were… you know."

"Exactly the same as I was when you last saw me?"

Shrugging one shoulder, Merlin fought to stem the flood of guilt that trickled through him. Arthur was right and it was irrational but that didn't make him feel it any less. He glanced at Arthur with his chin still lowered. "Well, not exactly the same."

"Oh really? And what, may I ask, is so different?" For all the faint reprimand of his tone, Arthur sounded genuinely curious to know.

"You're older," Merlin murmured, not because it was so much a noticeable change – because it wasn't, not at all, really – but because he knew it would irk Arthur to hear him say it. "Got a couple of extra years under your belt."

The jest wasn't lost on Arthur. "Oh really?" He repeated, eyelids hooding slightly.

"Mm." Merlin nodded, adopting a thoughtful expression. "You must be a fair bit older than me, I'd think. Practically an old man."

"Merlin," Arthur began, rebuke finally flooding his tone with more than a hint of amusement. "If you think that such underhanded criticisms will get to me –"

"They're not exactly criticisms," Merlin interrupted him. His voice was hardly loud enough to easily override anyone, but Arthur silenced immediately. Merlin tilted his head to consider him shrewdly. "I think it makes you look far more regal. The touch of grey at your temples suits you well."

As Merlin had considered it might, Arthur's hand snapped to his head in an instant before he could catch himself. He scowled as Merlin maintained an innocent expression following his fallacy, glaring as much to him as to Gaius and Alice who, chuckling, had evidently heard their conversation from the other side of the room. "I'm hardly old enough to start going grey, Merlin."

"Can't be far off," Merlin replied with a shrug. "How do I know how old you are?"

"You don't," Arthur said, and it wasn't a question. As he dropped his hand from his head, locking his fingers once more, his expression became thoughtful again. "But how much do you remember?"

Merlin blinked at him, surprised. "What?"

"What was the last thing you remember? Obviously you don't remember me… dying –" Arthur sounded physically pained to speak the word itself and Merlin didn't miss the obvious fidgeting of Gaius and Alice from across the room "- so what do you remember."

Regarding Arthur for a moment, a brief flicker of worry surfacing as he considered the phenomena that was so distressing towards his friend – his King – Merlin turned his thoughts inwards. What did he last recall? "Um…," he closed his eyes, frowning for a moment. It was strange, really. He could speak casually of his own deaths, yet verbalising anything aloud with deeper thought, embracing those memories – it felt awkward. Just slightly uncomfortable. Merlin shrugged off the nigglng unease. "I remember… the last thing I remember was what happened in Ismere. With Gwaine and… they disappeared?" He opened his eyes and peered at Arthur once more. "I don't really know what it really involved but I'm assuming we worked it out?"

Arthur nodded. He appeared satisfied with the explanation. "Would you like me to tell you?"
Shaking his head almost before Arthur got the question fully voiced, Merlin declined. "No. No thank you, I... I'd rather not." He didn't want to know, not before his time. Not before he'd remembered for it himself. While memories didn't hold quite the same emotional effect that they may have when they actually occurred, there was still a certain sanctity to them. And more than that, Merlin had come to understand throughout his lives that it was nothing if not unnerving to be told of actions that he'd committed in the Past yet couldn't yet remember for himself. Balinor had dropped several such references throughout the course of their lives together. By accident, of course, and had done so increasingly less over the centuries. The effect resounded strongly enough that Merlin knew it wasn't one he wished to repeat, however. It was like being informed of an aspect of his own personality that he was entirely unaware of.

Thankfully, Arthur nodded readily enough. "That's fine. It will come to you." He seemed to genuinely understand Merlin's desire to remain ignorant, and Merlin suspected he'd spoken to someone – Gaius? – of it before. "Just let me know, will you? So that I just..."

"So that you know?" Merlin finished for him, nodding. He could understand Arthur wanted to know when he remembered aspects of the life they'd shared. "I will. You'll be the first to know." Merlin meant it wholeheartedly. He'd tell Arthur before he would tell anyone, would talk to him of everything he could as though it were a compulsion. Because Arthur was the one he longed to speak to the most, even if it at times felt uncomfortable to speak of the Past. Merlin wanted to share it with him more than anyone, even Gaius.

In the days since they had done just that. There was reminiscing, as Merlin had done with Freya, with Mordred and Edwin and even Balinor at times, and Merlin found himself flung back into the times of Camelot, into the memories of life he so loved even after all this time once more. Sometimes he drifted, and sometimes he shied away from confronting particular thoughts of simply from speaking them aloud, but largely it was almost like a balm. Albion always had been.

Arthur seemed to revel in the opportunity to do the same. He appeared reluctant at first, as though unsure of what kind of exchange Merlin was comfortable with, as though he was indeed tentative in his approach to the topics available for discussion. But when the floodgates were opened, when Merlin shrugged and said he actually found reminiscing about that particular Past life soothing, it was like Arthur couldn't talk enough.

Merlin realised something, something more than the fact that Arthur was so obviously exactly the person he could recall. And that was that Arthur, for all of his composure, all of his reluctance at first to speak, was desperate for any dwelling upon the long-forgotten world of Albion. Just as much as Merlin, despite the worlds, the kingdoms, the lives he'd lived and the times he'd experienced, did too. That he missed it sorely, missed the people just as much if not more, and like an unhealed wound left to fester when untouched it became only more painful. Merlin felt much like the medic, the physician's assistant that he'd been upon numerous occasions; he felt like he was puncturing the rot-filled wound and allowing it to breathe and seep clean of its debilitating filth.

It felt... wonderful, really, that he could help Arthur in even such a small way. That he could listen and understand, that he would nod in fond memory rather than simply request an explanation of events long past. Evidently not even Gaius had been one much to exchange tales with Arthur, something that Merlin had been made aware in his exchanges with his old mentor that he did not entirely approve of. Not that Gaius seemed to care for his unspoken disapproval, and not that they dwelled upon the topic for long; there was far too much to speak of between they two as well to spare breath for reprimands.

But with Arthur's presence, Merlin felt something within him change. Throughout his lives, the first king that he had served with his wholehearted devotion had been the closest kept loyalty he'd every
felt for a sovereign. From what he could recall, what he could gauge, Albion may have been even the oldest life he could recall. The oldest kingdom and the oldest king.

A friend too, for Merlin knew upon seeing Arthur that he truly did perceive him as such as much if not more than he did his a superior. The impression was heightened by the fact that Arthur treated him just a little differently to how he should have. A little less commanding, a little less like the often curtly exasperated king he had been. As if something had changed, something other than the world around them and everything that so drastically changed their circumstances.

Something had changed between them and Merlin didn't quite understand it. He wondered, in the privacy of his own mind, if it had something to do with his magic, whether the fact that he had magic somehow changed him in Arthur's eyes. For though he didn't appear wary or guarded, distrustful or betrayed whenever Merlin – quite frequently – chose to use his magic for the most menial of tasks, he certainly looked at him differently. Thoughtfully. Wonderingly?

Merlin wondered when Arthur had found him out. He wondered how he had responded when he did. He was almost scared to know.

"What?"

Blinking, Merlin realised his gaze had drifted back to Arthur once more. Quite without his consent, too, as he so often found himself doing because… because for some reason he just felt drawn to doing so. Shaking himself from his thoughts, Merlin shrugged and glanced out the window, ignoring the questioning gaze that Arthur still settled upon him. Gaius had finished his discussion with Sebille, unfortunately, meaning that their attention immediately turned towards him at Arthur's question. "Nothing."

"You 'nothing' at me quite often lately," Arthur said, but his tone was more curious than accusatory. There wasn't a subsequent question either, for which Merlin was grateful. Especially when his attention was grabbed by another passing vehicle zipping by the shaded window of their Skimmer. He felt his eyebrows snap upwards as the blaring roar of the carrier whizzed by, the engine at least thrice as loud as the one that powered their own vehicle.

"What?" Arthur asked again.

Drawing his attention from the disappearing corner the carrier had vanished around, Merlin shook his head. "Nothing. Just that I didn't know they even made them anymore."

"Made what?" Arthur's asked quizzically. As he had been so often of late, Merlin found him quite different to his usual stance of 'I know everything and will never deign to request information directly'. Arthur seemed more than prepared to project a rapid-fire of questions at every opportunity. Merlin was left with the distinct impression that, though Arthur claimed he'd been 'awake' for several years already, he was still very much on the path of discovery. Merlin couldn't blame him. As riddled with divisions as the world was, he found himself at times a little incredulous as to some of the surfacing of some aspects he had not hitherto encountered. Like now.

"You mean the motorbike?" Sebille asked. Or stated, Merlin wasn't quite sure. He didn't dislike the woman exactly, but he was a little averse to her narrow-mindedness. She seemed perfectly set in her own opinions, like a horse wearing blinders.

"Motorbike?"

Sebille glanced towards Arthur and, as Merlin had witnessed upon numerous occasions in the short span of time he'd known her, he saw her afford him faint condescension of her own. "The carrier that
"Weren't contact vehicles outlawed over a century ago?" Merlin asked their group at large. From the time hovering transports were introduced, wheeled vehicles had gradually dwindled in number. More rapidly when the discovery of heightened reaction times for the wheel-less machines was developed. 'For safety' was the reason that the authorities gave for banning the archaic cars, buses, trains and motorbikes. Merlin could still remember the revolution of sorts, as he could the forbiddance of so many aspects of society over the years.

"They were," Gaius replied. He nodded his head gravely. "Unfortunately, some individuals consider themselves above certain laws."

"No one reprimands their behaviour?" Arthur asked, a frown drawing upon his brow. Discarded was his ignorance of the vehicles themselves – with remarkable ease, Merlin considered, leaving him with the suspicion that such was a common response of Arthur's – and in its place was an uprising of the morals Merlin recalled from his times as a king. Rule-breaking, apparently, still sat strongly with him as a 'bad behaviour'. Or at least in some cases, anyway.

"I'm sure they would," Merlin muttered, eyes still glued to the window. Another Skimmer had passed by moments before, and he couldn't help but watch its passage. They didn't have Skimmers in the slums, so he'd never seen one in motion before. "If it was the right sort of rule-breaker."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that it was probably someone with high enough status to use an Relict without fear of consequence."

Arthur's frown deepened. "That's hardly fair. The double-standards –"

"Does that surprise you?" Merlin turned briefly towards Arthur. "Is it really so unexpected that someone with higher status, someone who is afforded more ration tickets in a day than most people in the slums get in a fortnight, would be allowed such liberties."

Mouth still sitting open in protest, Merlin thought for a moment that Arthur would continue to object. His jaw slowly closed, however, and though Merlin could still see objection in his eyes it didn't seem directed towards him.

"Some things just can't be helped," Sebille murmured, drawing the dual attention of Merlin and Arthur towards her. She too gazed out the window with a restrained sympathy that Merlin recognised. It was an effort not to snort.

An effort that, apparently, Arthur felt was not worth attempting. The sound he made drew Sebille's attention sharply. "You sound so regretful for the matter."

"I'm hardly satisfied with the state of affairs."

"No, of course not. Not when you adhere to the morals of the Confederation. How could you be?"

Sebille's gaze turned icy. "I resent what you are insinuating, Arthur."

"And what am I insinuating? I am simply paying my respects for your ethical viewpoint."

"Don't belittle me with the belief that I am unaware of your sarcasm."

"Just as you belittle me for my lack of knowledge and yet fail to explain that which I remain ignorant"
of?"

"You once more attempt to revisit this topic, Arthur, and I repeat: if you have a question, simply ask it of me."

"And receive nothing but a demeaning retort? Maybe you could see how I would be reluctant to do so."

"If you are reluctant than I can hardly –"

"Both of you, please," Gaius finally interrupted. His voice cut across their exchange like a scythe through wheat and silenced them abruptly. As Arthur folded his arms across his chest and Sebille crossed once leg over the other stiffly, Merlin couldn't suppress an upwelling of amusement. He dropped his chin so that Arthur – who would most likely object to such a display – couldn't see evidence of it, but not before he caught similarly thinly veiled amusement on Gaius' face. And, surprisingly, from Mascus as he glanced briefly over his shoulder towards the passenger seats. The feeling was only intensified by the glance, the glare, that Arthur and Sebille exchanged; Merlin could almost hear the accusatory "they started it!" restrained upon both of their tongues.

Clearing his throats, Merlin slipped back into the conversation. "Are there many people that use Relicts?" He asked of Gaius, referring to the old technologies long since discarded for newer products. "I used to use an old kerosene heater in one place I was at, and I know a couple of people that also used some outlawed heating appliances. An acquaintance of mine once had a torch, too. One of those old battery-powered ones, you know?"

Gaius shook his head. "Your guess would be as good as mine, my boy. I know that at Lady Nine's estate every appliance is of regulated manufacture, of renewable energy and minimalistic pollution. I doubt even that the motorbike would have used the petrels of the past."

"Well, he didn't have a smog cloud spewing out behind him so I'd guess you're right," Merlin nodded.

"Petrols produced from the coals?" Arthur asked, though it sounded more of a statement than a question. "The ones that caused such damage to the earth?"

"And burned the sky, yes," Merlin nodded detachedly. No one liked to recall the phenomena that had resulted in the permanent masking of the sun.

"What foolishness possibly possessed the governments to use such damaging substances," Arthur frowned deeply, shaking his head in something resembling horror. "Surely the destruction should have been evident at the time. Gaius, you said the emissions were visible."

"They were," Merlin replied, speaking for Gaius. "Doesn't mean anyone felt particularly obliged to do anything about it." From the way Arthur snorted once more and shook his head, Merlin was given with the impression that the destruction wrought by those in the past was a topic long since identified and discussed.

"People were foolish in their ignorance," Sebille murmured, and though she sounded a genuine participant of the conversation Merlin couldn't help but think she referred at least in part to Arthur. He could have anticipated almost the words exactly that Arthur replied with.

"Very subtle of you, Sebille. You wit and verbal dexterity do you credit. It is but a shame that your intelligence is so lacking in other areas."

"I wasn't talking to you, Arthur. You didn't even cross my mind." Sebille turned her attention
towards Merlin, deliberately disregarding Arthur. "I have always wondered, however; tell me, Emrys, what precautions do the slum-dwellers take against solar radiation? In Inner City it is steadfastly enforced that individuals not spend more than ten minutes in direct sunlight.

Merlin's annoyance at Sebille's use of the name Emrys – which she had persisted with despite of his request otherwise – was only exacerbated by her question. He knew he could hardly hold it against her, for as she herself had stated, people were often foolish in their ignorance, but it left him disgruntled nonetheless. "What, for the radiation poisoning?"

"Cancerous, yes. I've never been to the slums to simply observe. Are there perhaps rotations? Do you minimise exposure by ceasing outdoor activities during the height day?"

Most frustratingly, the woman seemed genuinely curious, as though she actually thought such was a possibility. For all of her formality of countenance, she was evidently nothing if not oblivious to the careless cruelty of her words. Slowly, Merlin shook his head. "No. There isn't any of that."

Sebille's expression became faintly incredulous. "No rotations? Do you perhaps use a chemical screening for your skin? It is considered quite old-fashioned, but I suppose –"

"No, not that either," Merlin replied shortly. His words were perhaps a little clipped, a little hoarse for reasons other than the strain of his vocal cords, but he could hardly help himself.

"Then…" Sebille didn't seem to register his disgruntlement. Unlike Gaius, who frowned and shifted uncomfortably in his seat, or Arthur who seemed on the verge of interrupting with a frown so deeply furrowing his brow it looked like it would become a permanent fixture. Merlin ignored them both as Sebille continued. "Then how do you ensure you aren't damaged? Overexposure to the sun can cause –"

"We don't. It's not like anyone could afford protection, or to spend half the day in the shade. People have to work or they don't eat. Simple as that." Dropping his eyes to his fingers, Merlin fell to tugging them loosely, focusing upon the still-unfamiliar and painless brush of skin on skin. His annoyance thumped in a heartbeat in his ears, a loud pulse.

Sebille was indeed 'foolish in her ignorance'.

The silence stretched statically, with only the purring hum of the Skimmer to interrupt it. Merlin ignored Sebille' awkward shift as she abruptly realised the error of her words, just as he ignored the stare that he could physically feel spearing him from Arthur's direction. It wasn't as though he felt particularly defensive of the slums or the slum-dwellers as a people; there wasn't any sense of community amongst them, had never been and never could be given that a neighbour was just as likely to take a swipe with a knife as offer a smile or wave of fondness. He kept his eyes upon his fingers.

Finally, clearing his throat with unnecessary loudness, Gaius broke the silence. "Perhaps we can discuss that which we will find upon reaching our destination, Merlin? So that you are prepared?"

Slowly, Merlin lifted his gaze from the plucking of his fingers. He drew his gaze towards Gaius but couldn't miss that yes, Arthur's eyes were locked upon him with unblinking intensity. He pointedly looked away from him, something he'd become rather good at over the last few days of being the subject of such a stare. "Prepared?"

Gaius nodded. "Perhaps it would be best to avoid an incident like yesterday, yes?"

Yesterday. Yesterday was… Merlin gave a huff of humourless laughter. "Don't worry, Gaius, that
won't happen again. I was just… surprised. And maybe a little put out.”

Raising his eyebrow at the word 'little', Gaius stared at Merlin unblinkingingly for a moment before slowly pursing his lips. "Even so, such surprise and disgruntlement is likely to arise once more. Given the circumstances –"

"Gaius, unless there is something that I too am unaware of, I don't think Merlin will be faced with too much that is terribly unexpected," Arthur interrupted. Merlin felt the moment the heat of his gaze turned upon Gaius instead. He felt the ghost of a smile touch his lips, as much that he had a companion in sentiment as for the fact that it was Arthur who had spoken for him.

Merlin couldn't help but agree with his words, though somewhat less vehemently than did Arthur. Yesterday he had been confronted with another wave of unexpectedness, another arousal of surprise that had provoked a markedly more pronounced response from him than even Merlin had anticipated. And it came from the moment that he first voiced his thoughts on Freya. Or more correctly it, arose when he realised Freya was still in the Pits. That contrary to Merlin's initial assumption that his escape had been a choreographed rescue mission for all of the sorcerers under the Doctor's 'care', it was just him. Just Merlin.

A cascade of memories assaulted him. Restraints strapping around wrists, a flare of burning pain spearing into his head, tears of agony welling in his eyes and the convulsions that had gripped his body. Darkness as artificial night descended and he was left to his hurts. The suffocating feel of the first time he had truly realised that his magic was smothered, was impossible to touch. And Freya's voice, her feeble warble as she uttered both words of mourning, of despondency, and of comfort through the wall.

Freya… oh God, Freya, you're still in there… you're still… they still have you…

It was only when a pair of hands fell in a clamp upon both of his shoulders that Merlin returned to himself. He was abruptly torn from the depths of his memories and the blankness of his vision, a blankness he hadn't even realised had arisen, slowly faded. The white-yellow light of Gaius and Alice's hospital flooded back into haziness. A room that looked like it had been turned upside down and shaken like a child disrupting a junk box.

Slowly, Merlin blinked. As the sparks and blackness finally faded, he realised that the hands that grasped his shoulders belonged to Arthur. Arthur, who leant across his bed and had practically fallen into his lap in an attempt to shake some sense into him. His pale eyes were fixed upon Merlin's and their intensity faded only slightly as clarity returned to the room. He breathed out a sigh, dropped his chin for a moment and closed his eyes briefly. His hands, however, remained on Merlin's shoulders, uncomfortable for their simple contact but not unbearable.

Blinking away the last of his disjointedness, Merlin drew his gaze more slowly around the room. He flinched slightly at what he saw, as he became aware that the upheaval, that the quake that appeared to have struck the room, had rippled from himself as its epicentre. He still felt the writhing coils of his magic lashing in response to the roiling emotion that had snapped almost painfully into numbness when Arthur shook him from his thoughts. He turned guilty eyes upon Gaius and Alice, who had been standing at the other side of the room. Both had fallen to the floor as though their knees had been knocked from beneath them. Neither made a motion to attempt to regain their footing, however, and simply stared with a confusing mixture of wariness and sympathy towards him.

Slowly, biting back on the guilt as it was overwhelmed by the true topic at hand, Merlin turned his gaze back up to Arthur. He spoke the only words that seemed capable of being so spoken. "What do you mean she's still in there? The other sorcerers, are they…?"
Just as slow to respond, Arthur pried his fingers from Merlin's shoulders. Merlin attempted not to flinch, fought to suppress his urge to shrink and withdraw from the shifting touch – it was slightly easier, slightly less painful even after only a few days, but he still found it discomforting. With assumed casualness, Arthur drew back slightly and seated himself upon the edge of Merlin's bed. He folded his arms across his chest, but it was more of a guarded gesture than thoughtful. He seemed almost apologetic when he replied. "They are."

"But… but why? You… how could you… are they…?" With something approaching fury, Merlin struggled to maintain his composure. "How could you just leave them there?"

In hindsight, later, Merlin would feel guilty for his words. He would reflect that he should have simply appreciated that he had been saved from that which would have surely killed him. But in the moment, when he glanced towards Gaius and saw nothing but regret, when his attention switched to Alice to behold the same, he felt nothing but anger course through him. How could they have left her?! How could they have left any of them behind?! Those people, my people, the people who have the magic and the memories and who remember Albion. How could they…?

It was Arthur's words that drew him from his seething, that disipated the growing redness of his vision and dissipated it. And it was as much his tone as the words themselves. There was something of an echo of what Merlin felt simmering just short of exploding in his voice. "It was not by choice, believe me. Had we – had I been able to, I would have torn the Facility down with my bare hands."

Merlin's attention settled upon Arthur, actually seeing him, and what he saw was enough to quell his anger further. The writhing snake-like ribbons of his magic grumbled but lowered their heads obligingly, because on Arthur's face, hardening his expression to sculpture-like stoniness, was a very real anger, a very determined resolution. He met Merlin's gaze and spoke everything that Merlin himself was thinking. That and more in such short, simple words.

Arthur believed entirely what he said. And if anyone could make good their word, could fulfil their objection, it would be him. No one wore determination quite like Arthur did. If Arthur said he would climb into the sky and drag the moon to the earth, Merlin wholeheartedly believed that, somehow, he would manage it.

It was that more than anything that put a dampener on the heat of Merlin's fury. Locking his fingers together, he took a deep, steadying breath, closing his eyes briefly before replying. "I believe you, Arthur. I know you would." Then he paused for a moment as confusion nigged at him. Confusion that suddenly urged an entirely different thought process. "But… but why?"

From his periphery, Merlin could see Gaius and Alice slowly rising to their feet. Neither appeared the worse for wear – though the state of the medicine cabinet was another story – but then Merlin hardly spared them a portion of his attention. He was focused instead upon Arthur, upon the play of expressions that danced across his face. Satisfaction was one, he could make that out, but everything else… irritation? Perhaps a hint of disapproval? The spark of anger still definitely remained, but it was deeply embedded in a sea of other drifting emotions. A frown twitched onto his brow at Merlin's words. "What do you mean, why? Isn't it obvious? Sorcerers are being unjustly treated – they're being killed – for no other reason than that they possess magic. Even before they have acted in a way that would in any manner suggest them to be dangerous." He visibly clenched his jaw, the own anger swimming to the surface once more.

Merlin, surprise and incomprehension and something more… just a little bit of hope, overrode his clamouring thoughts. His fury seemed pale in the face of Arthur's. It always had. Pale and… and confused. "But they're sorcerers, Arthur."

"And?"
"And you're opposed to magic. You always have been." It was something that Merlin had deliberately avoided discussing for fear of the discord it would provoke. He was content, had been almost happy with the current state of things. Arthur seemed to accept that he had magic – Merlin didn't know when he'd discovered but to ask would have raised other questions that he wished to avoid – but even so Merlin didn't know just how far that leniency extended. He didn't want to bait the bull. But now… the question had finally surfaced of its own accord. "Why would you want to help us?"

Merlin grouped himself in with the rest of the sorcerers quite without meaning to but the slip was disregarded as he was captivated by the play of expressions upon Arthur's face once more. Maybe it was just because it was so interesting to behold but mostly Merlin knew it was because of the familiarity. Because this was Arthur. Merlin had always been just a little captivated by him.

"I may have had something of a change of perspective encouraged from me. In regards to magic," Arthur said slowly. "Suffice it to say that I am firmly seated in the position to, ah, reassess my prior prejudices."

Merlin's eyebrows climbed up his brow. "You? Reassess your prejudices?"

"Don't sound so sceptical, Merlin."

"I'm entitled to scepticism if it has a basis," Merlin muttered, even as that flickering flame of hope gradually grew. Arthur was… he was backing Merlin's perspective. He was backing his cause of a sort, even if no true cause really existed. "What brought this upon? Was it… was it since you were awakened or was it…?"

Arthur's unwavering stare answered his question, even if it didn't entirely explain the trigger exactly. He answered anyway, however. "My impression has rapidly changed in the last years but the catalyst? It definitely came from the Past."

Merlin was silent for a moment, considering. He hadn't discarded his revelation of Freya – of any of the sorcerers still in captivity – but the heat of the moment had died with the writhing force of his magic. In a quiet voice – not that he wasn't always quiet with his strained voice, but more so than usual – Merlin spoke with eyes downcast. "You'll do something, won't you then, Arthur? You're not just going to sit by and wait for every sorcerer to be hunted down and destroyed?" He knew it was selfish, cruel even, for speak as such. But Merlin couldn't help himself. He didn't even know where the idea had come from but he wanted it fiercely. He wanted to rescue the sorcerers, wanted to revive the dying fragments of Albion, the kingdom that even throughout so many lives Merlin still cherished so dearly.

He was rewarded with the immediate reply, Arthur speaking almost before Merlin had finished. "Of course I am. My only issue is that the rest of the world won't let me act as of yet."

Though he kept his head still bowed, Merlin raised his gaze, affixing Arthur with a curious stare. "The rest of the world being the government? The authorities and the Hunters?"

Arthur nodded. "Them and others."

"Others?"

"The Confederation has decided that any attempts take a less active role in the past months," Gaius said. Merlin hadn't realised until that moment that he'd approached the bed, Alice following silently a step behind him. "The infiltration of the London Facility was indeed a reason for this, and suspicion was directed our way at times aggressively. It was either remain passive or risk destroying that which
Merlin slowly turned his attention towards Gaius. "The Confederation?" Everyone knew of the Confederation for the Moderated Treatment of Magical Peoples. For a sorcerer, it was the only glimmer of light in a future of darkness, the only lifeline that was offered to their drowning flails. It was the one and only collection of diminutive parties that fought for the rights of any with magic, that struggled against the overwhelming dismissal of the government that promoted the Elimination of magic users and magical beings. It was likely the only thing that had ensured sorcerers had survived for as long as they had.

But they were just a political party. And though they struggled to protect the victims of hatred, those that were the objects of fear and vehement aggression, though they rose to the defence of those convicted and accused of crimes that most often they didn't commit, there was precious little they could do. Other than insist that everyone, sorcerer or otherwise, must be afforded a trial upon conviction – even a feeble, biased and largely pointless trial – and other than minimising the frequency of screening to once annually to preserve what little privacy civilians were afforded, other than other similarly minimal changes and perseverance… There was little that they could do.

Merlin had always wondered that they bothered. He'd heard from the OGAs that they continued, time and time again with little success, to strive towards a favourable conclusion. But they were the minority. The vast minority. Why would anyone wish for those who endangered them to be afforded leniency? For as far as the public were concerned, Merlin knew, sorcerers were dangerous. They were rabid animals who couldn't contain their destructive tendencies. It was a foolish, irrational sentiment by and large; precious few sorcerers had ever acted out to intentionally hurt someone, and accidents that happened were usually enacted by those who were little more than children and held minimal control of their power. No one else dared to try to use magic openly.

If Merlin had his way, if he could just speak up from an perspective of understanding, he would tell the authorities the truth of the matter. That if they truly wished to combat the 'terrorism' of sorcerers then the best thing they could do would be to educate those with magic, to teach them somehow of how to wield it so as to not endanger those around them. It made perfect sense to Merlin, but evidently not to the government. Not to the senators who held all the power, who were convinced that the most apt approach to containing the 'threat of magic' was to eradicate it entirely.

Merlin suspected that such decisions were driven as much by fear as they were by the undying need to control the public; fear was a pronounced feeling when it came to magic, even of the goodly kind. Merlin would always remember the OGA that had arrived when he was fourteen announcing the execution of the sorcerer Jovis Star. He'd been a healer, had been caught out for performing magic in a ramshackle cottage that he'd converted into a hospital of sorts. He treated everyone who would abide the touch of magic to cure their ailments. Apparently, one such patient had leaked his actions. Jovis was killed on sight.

It was unjust. It was horribly unfair. And yet the public would always be fearful of anything resembling magic, always, unless there was a display profound enough to convince them otherwise. Merlin had no idea what such a display could possibly entail. Was it even possible to convince a world who didn't want to be convinced?

So why would the Confederation care? Why would they strive so hard to achieve freedom and safety for sorcerers? Wouldn't they too perceive magic as a threat? Unless one possessed magic, or was of the precious few like Arthur who truly appeared to understand, to care, then why?

Merlin's own understanding suddenly dawned. He turned an incredulous gaze upon Gaius. "The Confederation. It's made up of sorcerers?"
Something akin to approval touched Gaius' features. He nodded his head. "They are indeed. And such knowledge is largely unknown to the majority of the world." A quiver of Gaius' lips suggested he found the situation nothing if not faintly amusing.

Shaking his head, stunned, Merlin struggled to speak. "Surely someone would know. They couldn't possibly have maintained their secrecy for so long."

Alice stepped up to Gaius' side, a smile of her own touching her lips. "Of course there are some. Some in the opposing parties, of the authorities. But that is the beauty of the Confederation. Or, more correctly, of the status symbol attached to membership. It affords a degree of protection."

"How is that even possible?"

"I do believe that by and large the success of the Confederation can be attributed to one person in particular." Oddly enough, Gaius turned a meaningful glance towards Arthur. Arthur in turn seemed on the verge of rolling his eyes but withheld from doing so and simply nodded his agreement.

Merlin glanced between them. "Who?"

There was silence for a moment. A wary silence, Merlin realised, as though quite without realising it they had found themselves in the midst of an awkward situation. An situation that Merlin did not as of yet comprehend. He frowned, glancing between Arthur and Gaius once more, towards Alice when they remained silent. "What are you not telling me?"

When Gaius spoke it was not to Merlin. His attention was fixed upon Arthur. "It won't be such a problem, Arthur. I sincerely doubt that Merlin will harbour quite the same resentment of her person as you did. Do."

Curiosity now buzzing, overwhelming the remnants of his anger, Merlin leant forwards in his seat. He was barely aware of the disapproving mew and suppressing hand Alice held aloft just before him, as though urging him to sit back. "Who?"

Arthur and Gaius maintained their silent staring at one another for a moment longer until, finally, Arthur nodded. Grudgingly. Gaius turned his attention back towards Merlin. "The Confederation was founded and is now headed by Lady Nineve Nine. You would be more familiar with the identity she had in Albion, however." He paused for another moment, clearing his throat. "Nimueh holds as much power as she did centuries past."

Merlin blinked, rendered speechless. Only for a handful of seconds, however, after which he breathed a huff of incredulous laughter. Dropping his eyes down to his fingers once more, running thumbs over nails in sweeping strokes, he shook his head. "I should have known. It would be someone as powerful as Nimueh."

"You're no objecting to her very existence?" Arthur's voice sounded faintly objectionable itself, an impression Merlin noted was mirrored by his frowning expression as he lifted his gaze once more.

He shook his head. Object? No, Merlin didn't object. He may hold a distant anger, an almost forgotten resentment towards Nimueh for the actions she had committed in the past – she'd nearly killed Arthur after all – but by and large... no, Merlin did not object. He turned his attention back towards Gaius. "Nimueh is leading the Confederation?"

"Yes," Gaius nodded.

"And she is the one who directs their actions? The one who suppresses action when an active response should occur?"
Gaius nodded once more, slower this time. "She is." He sounded wary once more and Merlin suspected he knew what he was leading up to.

Sitting up straighter in his bed, Merlin nodded his chin curtly. "Alright, then. If that's how it is, then she'd be the one who I'd talk to about rescuing Freya. And all of the other sorcerers."

Gaius sighed heavily, not in surprise but in the resignation that Merlin had suspected he'd assume. He would have known what Merlin was hinting at after all. "She would. But I have to warn you, Merlin, she has resisted both Arthur's and my own suggestions to pursue further action entirely in recent months. I doubt you could convince –"

"We won't know unless we try, Gaius," Merlin interrupted him. He pressed his lips together, fingers locking tightly, and nodded curtly once more. This was good. This was a plan of attack – or at least the start of one – that he could work with. "Can I see her?"

Gaius sighed once more. "I don't know if that would be wise, Merlin."

"Yes, well, wisdom aside, am I able to see her? Or maybe more specifically, would she see me?"

Gaius exchanged a glance with Alice. He was left with the impression that it was Alice giving him permission to respond rather than seeking supportive advice. Finally, after a long moment of intent staring, he turned his gaze back towards Merlin. "Yes, Merlin. I believe we could arrange that."

Merlin had felt a tide of relief and satisfaction flood through him. He'd finally been able to settle himself into a modicum of comfort, to ease from his painful tension, as he hadn't been able to since he'd heard of Freya's continued captivity. And leaning back into his pillows once more, Merlin hadn't missed the brief and inadequately concealed smirk of satisfaction drawn across Arthur's face. Well, at least someone approved of his proactivity.

Which was how, less than a week later, Merlin found himself heading towards the Castle of the Confederation in the Skimmer alongside Arthur, Gaius and Sebille. He felt nothing if not determined, eager if not entirely mentally prepared to face Nimueh. It would be an experience, to be sure.

Merlin didn't feel any particular sentiment when it came to his Past deaths. Nor did he feel a significant degree of resentment towards those that had 'killed' him or otherwise opposed him. He didn't hate Edwin despite the discord they'd shared, nor Uther for the hatred that he'd harboured towards any who possessed the spark of magic, though with Uther at least he was still a little aversive given his reflection to modern day suppressors.

Mostly, he considered them all with mild curiosity and a flicker of nostalgia. Not really hatred at all. Any anger, any loathing, was reserved entirely for the authorities. For the government, the Hunters. For the Pits and the Doctors.

Nimueh? No, Merlin did not feel as though he would be shaken into acting out once more. Into lashing out in a fit of surprise as he had done the day before, whereby he'd been torn as much by horror at the reality of nothing being done as anything else. As he had with all of those who had taken a place in his Past, he felt more… curious. Eager. Almost enthusiastic, had it not been for the lollygagging of the Confederation so far. He looked forward to meeting Nimueh and getting something done.

Just so long as she didn't try to kill him this time.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arthur and Nimueh's encounters had always been explosive.

Since they'd first met, each exchange had been a battle of verbal warfare, a duel of back and forth blows that slice and barbed and left the opponent grumbling as they licked their wounds. Never anything fatal, though, and never debilitating enough to inhibit a continuation of that combat when next they met.

Realistically, Arthur should have anticipated that when he, Merlin, Gaius and Sebille entered the Castle of the Confederation that there would be discord at some point. What he hadn't anticipated was that it would arise not from him nor from Nimueh but from a source entirely unexpected.

As Arthur pressed his back against the wall of the cavernous foyer, the cold hardness of the plaster wall behind him grown chillingly so with the pulsing ice-magic that whipped around him, he reached four very swift conclusions.

One, Gaius had been hiding something. Though grim faced as he too hunkered beside Arthur and cringed from the assault of the magic snapping its teeth in the air, he did not seem surprised. He had most likely known that the attack would occur the instant the doors to the Castle had slid shut behind them.

Two, contrary to Arthur's own words, they – he and Merlin – were not prepared. Not in the slightest. Arthur couldn't have predicted that the Confederation would attack. Not in the slightest.

Thirdly, Arthur didn't understand magic at all. He had thought that, from his conversations with Gaius, from that which he'd viewed minimally from the Confederation sorcerers, from what Nimueh had hinted at, that he had some grasp of what could be wrought with sheer, raw power. He did not. At all.

And finally… Merlin didn't need his protection. Not when he had access to his magic. He didn't appear to need it at all.

From the moment Arthur had laid eyes upon Merlin, lying near dead upon the gurney in the London Facility, he had been drawn breathless with the desperate need to protect him. It wasn't only that Merlin was one of his few links to Camelot, to Albion. Seeing him so hurt, so tortured, had stabbed Arthur in the gut and twisted painfully with a gloating wrench. It was all Arthur could do not to strangle every Doctor in sight with his bare hands.

Arthur had always been prone to such arousals in protectiveness. It was a weakness as much as it was a strength. He hated to see his people hurt, to see them threatened. To witness his friends so endangered only exacerbated the effect with the added binding of personal investment. With his friends, with those he shared an even deeper bond with… utter fury welled in an almost blinding curtain of hatred.

There had been few times that Arthur had seen Merlin so jeopardised. Those times had enforced each time just how much his friend meant to him. When he saw Merlin in the Facility, that realisation had welled starkly once more and he was exposed to the sheer depth of his care for his friend. For someone who was, truly, more than his friend.
In the months following his rescue, Arthur had remained by Merlin's side at every possible chance. He was left with the unshakeable fear that, should he take his eyes from him, that Merlin would disappear and another link, another person so integral to his past and who he was, would vanish with it. It was only frustrating chance that had caused him to be absent from Merlin's bedside when he'd finally awoken, chance that had left him cursing Nimueh's suggestion that he once more become involved in the conferences of the Confederation as "people responded to him and his voice". That he was "a benefit". Arthur wouldn't have minded so much if it didn't sound so completely as though Nimueh was twisting her arm and writhing in pain to simply enunciate those words.

Since Merlin had awoken, Arthur had left his side only to sleep. That fear that he would disappear, or the tantamount fear that he would fall back into an unreachable oblivion, clung to Arthur and shortened the time he spent from Merlin's room further. And witnessing Merlin's apparent fragility, his thinness, the way he flinched from contact, that at times he would seem to fall into himself in deep, glassy-eyed reminiscence or with pain and sadness as he did when he stared out of the window of the Skimmer… it only made the dragon of Arthur's protectiveness rear its head once more.

There was no way in the world that Arthur would abandon Merlin to face the Confederation by himself. Even with the accompaniment of Gaius, Arthur would not leave him. It wasn't that he was suspicious of them exactly, but he doubted he would ever trust them. Never completely.

He matched his step to Merlin's as they both slid out of the Skimmer and fell behind Gaius and Sebille's lead, pausing as Merlin stuttered to a halt before the front door and stared upwards at the towering building. The Confederation's central estate resembled a Castle more than did the Castle of Government, but only slightly. By and large, it was the same as every other building in Inner City; tall, square, with smooth walls of pale colouration and a looming fence thrumming with electrical deterrence to act as a moat from the silent, empty streets beyond. The front doors were impressive, steel and polished and elaborately decorated with metallic workings, absent of handle or even a central ID-pad. Because Castle's didn't have ID-pads. Of course they didn't. Visitors entered by the inclination of those inside only.

Surprisingly enough, that inclination arose immediately. Their modest party had barely paused beneath the shadow of the building sharply juxtaposing the fluorescent lighting beaming down from directly above the door when a telling buzz and following hiss slid the doors open like curtains drawn by invisible hands. A familiar face, though one that Arthur had never been formally introduced to, peered out at them with an expressionless gaze. The man's eyes flickered from Gaius to Sebille to Arthur and finally rested upon Merlin. Arthur didn't like the touch of… something that sparked in his gaze, but he didn't comment. The members of the Confederation were close-lipped at best and each danced to their own tune in an agenda that Arthur was unsure even Nimueh was entirely aware of.

The man, nearly as old as Gaius yet showing his years more pronouncedly, inclined his head a moment later. "Please enter." And without further word he slid to the side of the door and ushered them inside.

The foyer was as impressive as the great hall of Camelot. Arthur still had to shake his head at the extravagance of it upon of his arrivals; there was truly no need for such grandeur, such high ceilings, the redundant pillars of marble stretching intermittently towards the roof overhead and the rich, synthetic carpet of deep burgundy that wasn't quite silk or chenille but felt just as soft beneath booted feet. The carpet ran in a rippling river up the wide stairwell that branched into two disappearing corridors at its head.

Wide mirrors stretched along one wall to give an impression of even greater space, while the opposite was adorned in a minimalistic mural of intricate swirls hiding shadowed figures. It was a
masterpiece in its simplistic self. And as always, the entire space was bereft of shadows by the glaring illumination of artificial, ambient lighting.

Surprisingly, the porter – as Arthur dubbed him for his likely temporary role – was not the only individual in the room. Far from it, as rapid scan coupled by his sixth sense immediately alerted Arthur to the presence of one, two, four, five, seven other onlookers. Strategically placed in what would have been casual idling if not for the fact that no one ever idled in the Castle.

As the doors hissed shut behind them, the porter slid from his sidelong stance to stand before them. That spark of something in his eye returned once more, but was accompanied by something else. Something that almost bespoke apology. His gaze was trained directly upon Merlin when he spoke. "I apologise in advance for this. But it is necessary."

And then he attacked.

It all happened so fast that Arthur was hardly even aware of how it happened. The porter raised his hand, his eyes flashing orange-yellow and immediately a visible wind smacked into him. Into all of them. Arthur was forced back into the wall beside the door, Gaius and Merlin on either side of him. His breath rushed from his chest like a punch to the gut and, though it wasn't quite painful, his knees buckled and he slid to the ground.

An instant later, and every other idler in the room had snapped to attention. Eyes flashed in an array of colours – yellow, amber, orange, some almost red – and like a tide of warriors springing into action they flowed towards the front door. To ring around Arthur and Merlin, Gaius and… no, not Sebille. Sebille, damn her, had sprung from the line of fire to press herself along the adjacent wall. She had known.

"We do apologise for this, Emrys," another woman said, her eyes a swirling amber. Arthur thought her name was Edythe, but in that moment didn't really care. "It is merely standard procedure."

And though there was respect and sincere apology in her voice she too raised her arm and her eyes flashed brighter with magical attack.

Arthur would have lurched to his feet. He would have thrown himself at the woman, tossing her to the ground. He would have swung punches, thrown kicks, ducked and weaved and dodged and attacked the instant he pushed himself from the ground. He would have, except before he could even wedge a hand beneath himself the sorcerers abruptly vanished.

No, they didn't vanish. With a force like a catapult lobbing missiles with a fierce swing, they were thrown from their feet. Cast like ragdolls onto the carpet before the steps, all eight of them – Sebille included – were expelled from the immediate vicinity. And when Arthur finally tore his incredulous gaze from their crumpled figures, stringless puppets struggling to regain their feet once more, it was to see that Merlin had already found his own.

His eyes flared wide and golden. With that, his magic exploded.

The Confederation sorcerers, scrambling and lurching to their feet, fired pure magic at Merlin. And Merlin deflected and blasted his own straight back. A blonde woman flung a handball of fire towards him and Merlin batted it away with a swipe of his arm and sent it ploughing through one of the pillars. A man with a full beard and narrow eyes – Josef? – zapped a shard of lightning their way but Merlin simply held his hands aloft, caught the pure energy and somehow seemed to absorb it. If possible, it made his eyes glow even brighter. Edythe whipped up a hurricane that howled when redirected by Merlin towards the roof, another man slapped his hand to a wall in a release of magic that urged a quake to rock the room dizzyingly, only to have it quelled when Merlin darted a dozen paces forwards and slammed his own hand to the ground as though stabilising it by pure willpower.
The room shuddered to stillness.

All of that before Merlin launched his own offensive magic. When it finally happened, Arthur was lost to sheer awe and just a little fear of absolute power once more.

Fire lanced through the air like flaming arrows.

Deafening smacks of invisible giants’ fists struck the walls and pillars, drawing plumes of dust and fragmented pieces into the air.

A mirror shattered as a stout woman, making a break across the room with single-minded determination, abruptly lost her footing and flew in cartwheels when diverted.

Nail-biting chill stung Arthur's eyes in icy spears before it was replaced moments later by a sweat-inducing heat. Visible projectiles of white wind and roaring fire and crackling energy launched towards him only to be halted in their tracks and turned back upon their firer. Shouts of words, the language of magic that Arthur knew only by sound, added to the wailing of the winds, the rumbling of the room, the cries of surprise and frustration.

In the middle of it all, somehow placing himself directly central in the room, was Merlin. Merlin, who deflected and retaliated, who caught the magic loosed at him as though they were ribbons fluttering in the air and sweeping them from his path. Who spun and twisted, ducked and dived and rolled as often as he loosed his own magic in return. It was a dance, a twisting, writhing dance of offence and defence, and Merlin was the eye of the storm. An echoing storm seemed to roil and snarl in his golden eyes, even as his angular face remained stoically blank. Almost too blank.

Arthur could only watch. He could only press himself to the wall beside Gaius and stare wide-eyed, unblinkingly, at the magical battle ensuing. Even as flares of sudden white light momentarily blinded him, or source-less wind tore at his eyes and demanded he avert his gaze, he couldn't look away. Far be it from the fragile, trembling figure who had lain bedridden but a week past, the young man who had flinched under a gentle touch and whose voice wavered from both lack of use and unsteadiness, Merlin was strong. He was something other. And Arthur was immediately confronted with reality, finally understood what Nimueh had insinuated when she spoke of Emrys and the power he wielded. Of it's importance to magic itself. Merlin was something other.

Maybe it isn't he who needs protection after all. Arthur shook his head incredulously. He'd had an inkling in the last days of his life in Albion that Merlin had hidden his true self from him. That suspicion have manifested before Nimueh's words, Gaius' stories, even Sebille's quiet murmurs of respect. Now he finally knew. Far be it from even struggling with the seven fighting sorcerers, Merlin seemed to be beating them. Three were already prone upon the ground, not dead but visibly dazed and incapacitated. Those that remained seemed to be struggling to avoid his magic more than they did launched their own.

Merlin would win. Arthur could see, knew immediately that, even tender and newly returned as Merlin's magic was, it was vastly superior. He certainly would have won too had it not been for the abruptness of the battle's cessation.

"Enough."

Nimueh's voice rung clear and piercing through the foyer. Beneath its echo, like a squad abruptly called to attention by their commanding officer, each of the sorcerers still standing ceased their magic. Or at least their offense. Shimmering shields of translucent magic hung suspended before each of them, a protection from the attacks that Merlin was not also demanded to cease.
Except that he did. Barely a second behind the rest of the sorcerers, Merlin abruptly quelled his striking, paused his assault of fire against ice, of wind against wavering shields and blinding light upon shadowed gazes. With arms still raised before him, panting just slightly, he turned towards the stairs, towards the voice, and raised his gaze. Arthur noted with a flare of satisfaction that, wearied as he may appear, it was nothing compared to the surrounding sorcerers. Even in a state of recovery as he was, Merlin was hardly exhausted, looked almost hail by comparison. Most of those still standing in the room looked barely capable of retaining their feet and it had been, what, but a handful of minutes?

Nimueh stood straight and regal at the head of the stairs. Her long, flowing garments, the ridiculous wide trousers that were just as likely to be skirts, rippled slightly around her legs in the aftermath of motion. Or perhaps of the dying winds that had captured the room beneath her. She was steady and grounded, her chin slightly raised and vivid lips thinned to a gash across her chin. At least until they slowly drew into a smile, a smile that was thoroughly disconcerting for the predatory gleam to her eyes that Arthur didn't like in the slightest.

"Emrys. We meet at last."

Merlin didn't reply but to slowly lower his arms. Arthur, watching as they both stared at one another unblinkingingly, finally managed to haul himself to his feet. A glance towards Gaius struggling to his own – a very childish, indignant part of Arthur wanted nothing more than to withhold his assistance with the suspicion that Gaius had known the attack would occur - he biting back a grumble of frustration and helped him to standing too. A moment later and he was crossing the room to stand at Merlin's side, folding his arms across his chest and turning his gaze in an identical stare up towards Nimueh.

To his surprise, when Merlin finally spoke in reply, his voice, that enduring quietness that seemed to be a characteristic of his current self as much as a product of his mistreatment, was devoid of anger. His face was similarly wiped clean of it to be replaced by a mixture of curiosity, suspicion and determination. "Lady Nine," he replied, and tipped his head slightly. "Or would you prefer Nimueh?" He tilted his head like a curious bird. "I'm sure I'm not the only one to receive such a warm welcoming?"

Nimueh's smile stretched further across her face and Arthur thought for a moment that he witnessed a flicker of genuine amusement in her gaze. "Whichever term of address you would prefer would be more than adequate, I'm sure, Emrys. And indeed, it is but standard procedure. A test if you would."

"A test for what?" Arthur growled, unable to maintain his silence any longer. Merlin's anger might be absented but his own only mounted. Yes, Merlin had been capable of combatting the sorcerers, had been more than capable, but how had they known that? What if they'd truly hurt him? He'd barely been awake for a week!

"Not so much a test for merit," Nimueh replied, though her gaze didn't waver from Merlin. "It is a more of a gentle… discovery."

"A test for what?" Arthur repeated. He narrowed his eyes at Nimueh – she still hadn't glanced towards him from Merlin – before casting his glance at the sorcerers who had attacked their entering party. Well, technically attacked their party, but Arthur knew without doubt that it was Merlin who had been the primary target. The sole target. That much was obvious. "I am curious to see what your
definition of aggression is, Nimueh."

"You do not wish to know."

"I do."

"No, you do not."

"Don't presume to tell me what I –"

"Arthur."

As usual, it was Gaius who cut him off. Arthur didn't spare him a glance, however, despite knowing he stepped up to his side. Gaius had known, or at least suspected, the set up that they had walked into. He'd suspected and not breathed a word of it to Arthur or Merlin, which sat him firmly in Arthur's bad books at present. Yet even so, Arthur held his tongue, though admittedly it was as much because of the arousal of amusement on Merlin's face as any reprimand. The impression Arthur got was nothing so much as an adult fondly observing the antics of a child, and nothing could have quelled Arthur's pursuit of objection faster than being silently viewed as petulant. Definitely not by Merlin.

Nimueh still hadn't drawn her glance from Merlin, nor Merlin from her. Arthur got the distinct impression that he was missing some deeper conversation and felt nothing if not put out for the fact. Before he could speak once more, however, Nimueh broke her silence. "Master Main, if you would be so kind as to assist your fellows downstairs to see Lillian. Have her heal any injuries that may have been acquired."

"I don't think that will really be necessary, my Lady," the elderly porter who must have been Main replied from his immobile station at the foot of the stairs. He cast a cursory glance around at his comrades who each nodded shortly, even those still visibly shaken. "Nothing more than bumps and bruises."

"Still, I would prefer that such 'bumps and bruises' be repaired," Nimueh said. "If you would."

Main paused for a moment, eyes affixed on Nimueh before glancing towards Arthur, Merlin and Gaius once more. No, he corrected himself; just to Merlin, really. And when he inclined his head once more, Arthur considered it to be as much a respectful tilt of his chin as it was in agreement with Nimueh. "As you wish, my Lady." He paused for a moment longer, however, as before even taking a step he inclined his head once more towards Merlin. "Emrys. It was an honour to meet you." Then he turned, gestured towards his fellow sorcerers, and quickly departed through a doorway across the room that Arthur had barely noticed.

Arthur followed their passage with his gaze. Then he turned back to Merlin. Merlin, who watched them leave too with a faintly discomforted expression touching his face. When he noticed Arthur's attention fixed upon him, his shoulders hunched slightly and he seemed to grow even more discomforted.

Arthur knew that 'Emrys' was Merlin. He also knew, from Nimueh's brief words on the matter, that Emrys was exceptionally powerful. He knew that sorcerers at large, those who had ties to Albion, who had lived or who knew of those who had lived in times of Camelot's existence, knew of him and respected him. But it was different to behold it expressly. It was different to see it for himself, to witness the respect that had once been afforded him and other nobles offered to one who had largely – though admittedly sometimes mulishly – accepted his role as a servant. It was unhinging. Or would have been had Merlin not been so obviously uncomfortable with the situation too.
Before Arthur could comment, however, before he could question Merlin's stance on the turn of events, Nimueh spoke once more. "Sebille, if you would, I'd request your most recent reports be taken to the archives."

Arthur glanced over his shoulder. He'd almost forgotten the blonde woman's presence entirely. Sebille, eyes only for Nimueh, inclined her head. "Of course, my Lady. Shall I draft up a report for my observations of today as well?"

Biting back a snort, Arthur turned away from her. She didn't even hide it any longer that she was keeping a hawkish eye upon Arthur and, in more recent days, Merlin. Once she and Nimueh had tiptoed around her true role as his accompaniment, as his 'assistant' to help guide him through the intricacies of the modern world and its politics, but not anymore. Sebille was his babysitter and watcher; it was humiliating to realise, but no less true for that realisation.

Nimueh's gaze flickered to Sebille for a moment. "That would be appreciated. Thank you."

"Of course, my Lady," Sebille intoned formally, nodding her head. Then she too hastened from the room, flowing through the door the other sorcerers had exited moments before. The room was left with only the four of them after her departure, Arthur, Merlin and Gaius standing in the midst of charred carpet, crumbling pillars and punctured walls while Nimueh stared down upon them. She seemed quite satisfied with her exalted positioning, but maintained it for only a moment as into the silence of Sebille's departure she spoke.

"Perhaps we could find a more comfortable setting for our discussion?"

She didn't wait for their reply but spun in a swish of skirts – or trousers, or whatever they were – and strode down the left corridor at the head of the stairs. Arthur, Merlin and Gaius were left to hasten in her wake, Arthur clenching his jaw in indignation at Nimueh's presumptuousness once more. He could swear that she did it on purpose, deliberately pushing his buttons to trigger further discontent between them.

The Castle of the Confederation was as grand in the rest of its now mangled foyer had been. The rich red carpets faded into royal blue, then to purple with seamless increments. The high ceilings ensued, with the almost blinding illumination of artificial light guiding their way had not Nimueh's distant footsteps done so. Arthur barely spared a glance for the odd placement of an empty table, of a low couch or an abstract painting on the wall just as he did the Comm-pads intermittently spaced to call for service or the hanging globes in every other corner that he knew to be cameras. Instead, he turned his attention towards Merlin, even as he kept his eyes forward facing. He spoke the words that had been pestering him to be voiced for years.

"So. You are strong in magic."

Merlin faltered slightly in step alongside him. When he replied, however, it was with a nod and a muted "Yes."

"And you're also Emrys."

Again, Merlin paused for a moment, falling behind Arthur slightly before replying. "Yes."

Arthur nodded slowly. He'd known it all from Nimueh's minimalistic descriptions, from Gaius' clinical relaying of information and even Alice's gentle contributions on the matter. But it was different hearing it from Merlin. Even with years to come to terms with it, it was still at times difficult to see his friend as being the powerful sorcerer – or warlock as Gaius sometimes referred to him as – rather than the laughing, clumsy, happy-go-lucky friend and manservant that he'd always thought
him to be. "This will take a bit to get used to."

Merlin was quiet for a moment, walking still a step behind Arthur. Arthur didn't glance towards him, allowing him to speak in his own time. When Merlin finally replied in a near whisper. "I'm sorry, Arthur. I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Arthur opened his mouth to reply before pausing. He wanted to brush aside the apology and claim how he had in fact told him eventually, how he had been angry at first, less angry for a long time, but that his anger had died to be replaced by something akin to awe and confused fascination. *His* Merlin was a sorcerer? And not just any sorcerer but one of the strongest sorcerers to have ever lived? That Merlin had used his magic for Arthur and only for Arthur?

How could he possibly stay angry with him for that? Even with the betrayal of his silence.

"I'm not angry at you, Merlin. You don't need to apologise." Arthur finally glanced towards him. The disconsolate expression, brows drawn in worry and lips pressed together tightly with his gaze downcast, gave him nothing if not the impression of a kicked puppy. It was almost unnerving to attribute *this* Merlin with the 'Emrys' who had wielded magical power so easily and with such overwhelming power but minutes before. Arthur would have to keep such a discrepancy in mind.

He fell back into step beside Merlin, barely acknowledging that Gaius made way for him to do so, as Merlin mumbled once more. "You'd be within well within your rights to be. I should have told you."


"I… actually told you?"

Arthur opened his mouth to reply before snapping it shut, realising his error. Merlin didn't remember doing that, and the redoubled tension in the hold of his body, the guardedness to his eyes, reminded of Gaius' words on the subject. Of how hearing of that which they had done in the Past and yet could not yet remember was at times disconcerting. Arthur couldn't even imagine it himself; sorcerers seemed to have a strange relationship with their Past selves.

Shaking his head, Arthur turned his gaze towards Nimueh, finally halted at the end of the corridor before a single door. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told you that."

"It's alright," Merlin murmured with a one-shouldered shrug. "It happens. People forget all the time."

"Still, I'll strive to remember in future." He silenced himself as they fell into place beside Nimueh, but was rewarded with something that wasn't quite a smile on Merlin's face. Not quite but almost.

Nimueh led them into a modest suite of pastel blues and – unsurprisingly – high ceilings. What was surprising was the wall of water that stretched across the entire length of one side of the room. Or the tank, as Arthur realised it was. An empty tank, for he could see nothing much inside except for a scattering of rocks across the sandy floor.

Merlin raised an eyebrow as he too noticed it – though admittedly it would be difficult not to notice. "You have a fish tank?"

"Of a sort," Nimueh replied but didn't elaborate. She eased herself into one of several chairs cast in a loose ring around a low glass table. "Please, take a seat. Refreshments will arrive shortly and we can begin with the discussion of the cause for your visit."
As they made themselves comfortable – or as comfortable as they could be before Nimueh – a white-clad waiter appeared as though summoned by her words. Placing a tray of flower-shaped morsels onto the glass table, he served beverages of what Nimueh called 'chaa', Gaius referred to as 'tisane' and Merlin, with a roll of his eyes three days before when Arthur had first shared the a cup with him, had said most people just called tea. With not another word the waiter swept silently from the room once more. There was a moment of silence as they each sipped at what to Arthur thought tasted of nothing if not dirty water before Nimueh finally broke the silence once more.

"First and foremost, I must apologise once more for the perhaps… unseemly welcome you received upon entering. It was, quite simply, a test."

Before Arthur could growl his dispute – what kind of a test endangered someone's life so violently? And worse, tested someone who was barely upon his feet yet? – Merlin spoke. With a casual wave of his hand he brushed the apology aside. "I don't care."

"You are not offended?"

"No, not really."

"May I ask why?"

Merlin blinked blankly for a moment before replying. "I could almost think you wanted me to be offended, Nimueh."

Nimueh gave a small smile. "Want? Certainly not. I am merely curious that, while you appeared aggressive enough in the heat of the moment when you cast magic, you seem anything but at present. Were you not angry?"

A slow, thoughtful frown settled upon Merlin's face. "I was. I am, maybe a little, but…" He shrugged. "I can see it as the test that it was. And I can't exactly say that I haven't experienced that sort of method of 'testing' before, if not exactly for magic. You were attempting to gauge my magical capacity, weren't you?"

Nimueh smiles like an approving mentor. Almost like a doting mother, except that Arthur sincerely doubted she could ever successfully assume a 'doting' demeanour. "Quite right. And to discern if you truly are Emrys."

Merlin flinched slightly, as though Nimueh's words carried a weighted barb. "And were you satisfied?"

"Most definitely."

"Then it hardly matters. And there is no need to think about it any further. Not when there are more important things to discuss."

"Indeed. Definitely issues of greater importance." Nimueh tapped a finger on the side of her teacup. "I believe you have some questions for me."

Throughout their entire exchange, Nimueh had spoken directly to Merlin. For her attentiveness, Arthur and Gaius seated on either side of him might not have even existed. Merlin, lowering his steaming cup of tea to the table, folded his hands in his lap once more and straightened in his seat. Arthur could admire that in him in that moment; seconds before he had been so obviously uncomfortable and unnerved by the situation, by the words that Arthur spoke with barely a thought as well as Nimueh's use of the name Emrys, and yet now he had steadied himself to approach the situation head on.
He truly is strong, more resilient than I've given him credit for. I wonder if that is a product of his current past or if it was something he always had but I just never really noticed? Never fully appreciated?

"Yes," Merlin said in that quiet way of his. Always quiet, as though his voice was still weak even though Gaius confirmed that it should no longer be. "Though I have to admit I'm a little dubious as to how you will answer them."

"Oh? And why is that?" Nimueh paused in casually sipping her tea.

Merlin shrugged once more. "Only that I have known you and, different person that you may be, some things never change." Though his chin lowered in something of a bow, he peered up at Nimueh with an unwavering gaze. "You were known to undertake in deceptions in the past."

Far be it from appearing irritated by his words, a smile tugged at Nimueh's lips. She sipped her tea once more. "That I was."

"You can understand my concern, then."

Nimueh nodded obligingly. "Understand, yes. However, in this instance you have the assistance and, undoubtedly, more reliable support of your two companions to unveil any fallacy of my claims. Surely that counts for something."

Merlin glanced first to Gaius, who, nodded, then the Arthur. Arthur met his gaze steadfastly before inclining his own head. "Trust me, Merlin, I am by no means fond enough of Nimueh that I will allow her to spout lies and let her get away with it."

"So articulate of you, Arthur, as always," Nimueh muttered almost inaudibly into her tea. "I'm merely telling the truth as I know it."

"As you see it, perhaps. When have I ever 'spouted lies' to you?"

"Maybe not deliberate lies but certainly omissions of the truth."

"Which is an entirely different thing."

"It is not –"

"Regardless," Gaius broke in. His tone carried the usual long-suffering thrum that played heavily upon his weathered face. "Rest assured that, at least in this instance, what Nimueh says will be made to be truth. Should she drift from such truths, I will not hesitate in correcting her errors."

Arthur spared Gaius a glance, an appreciative meeting of gazes that served to mellow some of his disgruntlement over his prior silence on the attack in the foyer. Gaius nodded fractionally and the unspoken words couldn't have been clearer: in this instance, they were allies once more.

Their words appeared to allay Merlin's suspicions. He too nodded before turning his attention back to Nimueh. "Then in that case…"

"Where would you like to begin?"

Merlin's expression became contemplative for a moment, then resolute. "Tell me why you helped Arthur rescue me."

Nimueh paused in the act of sipping once more. Her gaze fastened upon Merlin intently,
unblinkingly, as she slowly lowered it to the table. "I'm sure that Arthur has already informed you of
him reasoning."

"I have," Arthur confirmed. "But I think your reasoning differs quite substantially mine."

Nimueh spared him her attention for a brief moment. "I can see that you're accompaniment in this
conversation will indeed be as vexing as usual, Arthur."

"Thank you, Nimueh. That's what I'm here for."

Nimueh sighed. "Fine. Then perhaps I should start from the very beginning?"

She glanced questioningly towards Merlin, who shrugged. "That all depends on where you would
put the beginning at being."

"The Confederation."

"Oh. Then I suppose that would be a start."

"How much do you know of the Confederation, Emrys?"

Merlin was silent for a moment, his eyes downcast. His fingertips rubbed across one another in a
motion that Arthur had become familiar with, something that he wasn't entirely sure was simply a
nervous tick of Merlin's current incarnation. His suspicions were validated by Gaius' own
observations. It appeared almost… compulsive. Like his flinches.

Slowly, Merlin shook his head. "If you would, I'd rather you didn't call me that."

"Emrys?"

"Yes."

"And why would you wish for that?" Nimueh asked, appearing genuinely curious. Even so, there
was a hard edge to her words.

Merlin pursed his lips, refraining from meeting her gaze. "Only that I don't like the connotations it
entails."

"What, that Emrys is associated with a figure of power from times of Albion?"

"Yes, in Albion. Amongst other things." He pursed his lips more firmly, though Arthur was left with
the distinct impression that there was something left unsaid. The knowing cast to Nimueh's gaze, the
reflection of that knowing in Gaius', enhanced his suspicions. Not for the first time Arthur felt
distinctly out of the loop; it happened quite frequently, more than Arthur considered simply
negligible, and was an occurrence that irked him to no end. That sorcerers just seemed to know
things.

"Well, in that case," Nimueh said, pursing her own lips, "I would hate to make you uncomfortable."

"Thank you," Merlin replied, and he sounded sincerely grateful.

There was silence for a moment before Merlin shook himself from his thoughts. It wasn't that deep,
lost thoughtfulness that he fell into so often but concerned Arthur nonetheless; he'd seen it in Gaius
before and knew to attribute it to reflecting upon the Past. "The Confederation. You, Nimueh; you're
the head spokesperson of the Confederation?"
Nimueh nodded. "I am. The Queen, I have heard some refer to me as."

Arthur couldn't help but snort, despite having heard the term used sparingly before. "Is that because you have your very own castle?"

"Yes," Nimueh replied shortly, not even deigning to glance Arthur's way.

"That would make you its primary member then?" Merlin continued, similarly largely ignoring Arthur's interruption. It would have annoyed Arthur even further had he not spared him a brief glance of acknowledgement. He knew it to be petty, petulant even, but Arthur had never been one to take being ignored with any token acceptance.

"Correct. I am the founder of the Confederation for the Moderated Treatment of Magical Peoples." Nimueh sounded nothing if not satisfied with herself for such a proclamation.

That satisfaction was swept aside a moment later however as Merlin clicked his tongue and very obviously rolled his eyes. Her jaw tightened but Merlin spoke before she could get a word in. "I'm sure you're very proud of your accomplishments." The way he spoke suggested she should be anything but.

Nimueh's face tightened to statue-like hardness. "You do not approve of the actions of the Confederation?"

"It's hardly my place to approve or disapprove."

"Even so, I value your opinion."

"Why? Because I'm Emrys?" Merlin made his alternate name sound like a curse.

"No. Because you are a sorcerer."

"And what weight does that have, exactly? The rest of the world disdains anyone with magic. I see no reason for you to act otherwise."

If possible, Nimueh's expression hardened further. It was evident to Arthur – much to his veiled satisfaction – that their discussion was not following the steps she had planned. Gaius' slight fidgeting, the rapid-fire flicking of his eyes between Merlin and Nimueh, suggested he realised the same. "You truly have no understanding of what the Confederation does, do you?"

"Enlighten me," Merlin drawled in a tone that Arthur was all too familiar with – that tone was so reminiscent of the Past. It reeked of sarcasm and, as an onlooker rather than a target of that sarcasm, Arthur found himself struggling to suppress a smirk. He'd never quite appreciated it until now, not really.

Nimueh paused before speaking curtly. "Perhaps it would be more appropriate for you to relay your own understanding of what we do. Then I could strive to review your perception of our organisation."

Merlin regarded her flatly for a moment. Any trace of his prior discomfort, of his unease and worry, his fear in the face of the anger he perceived Arthur to hold, had evaporated. Arthur was left with the realisation that far be it from disappeared, the cold anger, the determination that had flared as golden magic in Merlin's eyes in the foyer as he fought his attackers was far from gone. When he finally spoke it was evidently deliberately devoid of emotion. His voice was low, quiet, but Arthur heard every word of it.
"The Confederation has been the only collection of parties acting in the defence of sorcerers for forty years. It began as a small collection of politically savvy individuals who acted through no means but by weary protests and the indignant objections of children told they were banned from playing with their favourite toy. Since then, it has grown in number if not in capacity; in a word, it is still, as it always was, largely redundant." Merlin leant back in his seat, fingers fiddling idly and regarded Nimueh with the same flatness as that in his tone. "That's how I perceive it, anyway. You're more than welcome to try to convince me otherwise."

"Merlin…" Gaius' voice was as wary as it was reprimanding. He didn't elaborate further, however, nor pursue that reprimand as Merlin and Nimueh ignored him and maintained their unwavering stares. Arthur watched them both with rising satisfaction. It was unexpected, to see Merlin so vehement after his hesitancy of the days since his awakening, but Arthur was sorely happy to see it nonetheless. More to, evidently, than Nimueh was.

If eyes could spark, if tongues could spit fire like a dragon, Arthur was sure that Nimueh would have been alight with her own flame. She maintained an admittedly respectable hold upon her anger, but it boiled and seethed nonetheless. Finally, after moments of silence, she took a noticeably deep breath and steadied herself. "Perhaps Arthur and Gaius would do better to correct you where you err, Merlin."

Merlin raised an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"Meaning your ignorance discredits you. You evidently know little of what you speak of. I believe that your companions could do much to prevail upon you the depth of your ignorance."

"I'm not entirely sure of how much confidence you should be placing in us to speak for you, Nimueh," Arthur said before Gaius could get a word in edgewise. "I've been an observer of the Confederation, and partaken in numerous conferences alongside you over the past sixth months. I've seen little to counter Merlin's words."

Nimueh turned her smouldering gaze upon Arthur for the first time but he barely acknowledged it. Barely saw it for that which Merlin turned upon him briefly. It was almost – though not quite – a smile. A brief pause in his hard anger that was the ice to Nimueh's fire. And in spite of the reprimanding gaze that Gaius now turned upon him, Arthur couldn't help but be happy for the fact. Because Merlin never smiled, not anymore. For whatever reason – whether it was the effects of torture in the Facility or his current incarnation's inhibitions – he seemed genuinely incapable of doing so. The slight softening of features, the ever so faint upward tilt of his lips and the flash of amusement in his eyes that was almost the gold of his magic, was all that Arthur had been afforded.

If speaking up against Nimueh, whether for the truth that it was or a falsehood, Arthur would do so time and time again if it would provoke such from Merlin. He needed that almost as much as he needed Merlin's presence itself.

Finally, Nimueh replied. When she did, it sounded almost as though she deliberately ignored Merlin's accusations entirely. "The Confederation is a party committed to seeking the improved welfare of sorcerers. I'm sure I don't need to inform you that the majority of our members are sorcerers themselves, with the rest closely affiliated?" She didn't wait for a reply before continuing. "As you have stated, for the past forty years we have been striving for something more, for even the barest improvement in the treatment of our people. Yes, it did begin incrementally; he seemed genuinely incapable of doing so. The slight softening of features, the ever so faint upward tilt of his lips and the flash of amusement in his eyes that was almost the gold of his magic, was all that Arthur had been afforded."

If speaking up against Nimueh, whether for the truth that it was or a falsehood, Arthur would do so time and time again if it would provoke such from Merlin. He needed that almost as much as he needed Merlin's presence itself.

Finally, Nimueh replied. When she did, it sounded almost as though she deliberately ignored Merlin's accusations entirely. "The Confederation is a party committed to seeking the improved welfare of sorcerers. I'm sure I don't need to inform you that the majority of our members are sorcerers themselves, with the rest closely affiliated?" She didn't wait for a reply before continuing. "As you have stated, for the past forty years we have been striving for something more, for even the barest improvement in the treatment of our people. Yes, it did begin incrementally; I would be the first to admit that our initial disputes were met with little more than disregard. But we have grown since. We have improved."

"Have you?" Merlin asked, and it was less of a question as a sarcastic dig. Arthur once more fought the urge to smirk; Merlin had beaten him to such a reply only by seconds.
"We have," Nimueh replied, ignoring the connotations of his words entirely. Arthur didn't miss the slight further thinning of her lips, however. "It is our efforts only that stand between numerous potentially disastrous bills that are on the verge of being passed."

"Such as?" Merlin asked.

"Such as the covert removal of magical individuals from their homes and direct translation toward Facility holdings. Such as the immediate execution of sorcerers upon discovery rather than putting them to trial. Such a minimising the frequency of census dates to avoid discovery of individuals who would otherwise desire to keep their gift hidden." Nimueh paused, pursing her lips once more. "They is not always successful, but our efforts are better than nothing at all."

Merlin stared at Nimueh. He stared and, just for a moment, Arthur couldn't get a read on his expression. Then abruptly it became chillingly cool. "You must be so proud of yourself."

Nimueh wasn't fool enough to take his words as genuine praise. Arthur doubted that anyone could. Yet she still replied only with a cordial, "Thank you."

Merlin narrowed his eyes. "You truly believe that, don't you?"

"Truly believe what?"

"That what you're doing is actually helping."

"I know it," Nimueh said offhandedly. "Already the attitude towards sorcerers in the government has begun to change. I believe that with continued pursuit of this –"

"You have no fucking idea," Merlin interrupted and his voice could have made a blizzard seem warm. Gaius shifted in his seat once more, while Arthur could only watch with a detached sort of fascination. It was like observing a duel, one that Merlin seemed to be winning. It was all the stranger because it was Merlin who was doing the duelling. "You really don't have a clue, do you?"

Nimueh narrowed her eyes. "I do, as a matter of fact. Most recently, Lord Garland has voiced in a public announcement that he believes that at some point in the near future the treatment of magical peoples will indeed need to be revisited and revised –"

"And you're an idiot if you think that's actually going to happen." Though quiet, Merlin's voice sliced through Nimueh's.

Her eyes narrowed further. "Your basis for that claim?"

Staring flatly in return, Merlin held his tongue for a moment before replying. When he finally did it was scathingly. "Fine. You want the truth of the matter, Nimueh? I'll give it to you. You say that attitudes are changing. That your efforts have made a difference. That you are helping sorcerers. Why? Because of the effects you see around you? Because upper class residents show slightly less unease in the face of the little 'issue' of magic?"

He paused, awaiting a reply. When Nimueh realised he wouldn't continue until she spoke, she nodded. "That is one area that validates my claim, yes."

"Right," Merlin nodded shortly. "Well, that might be true for the Inner City, but how many sorcerers run rampant through your pristine streets? How often has there been an incident of 'terrorist' proportions past the moat of the canal between the slums and the Middle city? When was the last time that anything perceived as remotely threatening from a magical source happened anywhere outside of the slums or in the micro-cities outside of London?"
Merlin's voice, far from growing more heated, only seemed to chill with every passing second. Any inclination Arthur may have had to speak had stilled upon his tongue, which was saying something because Arthur always felt the urge to talk. It was... shocking to watch, to say the least. Merlin had never been one to state his opinion in such an eloquent conveyance. He did often blurt out his opinion willy-nilly, yes, but not like this. Not with such a weight of intensity, of demand, behind his words. It was political, the way he spoke. Convincing, but not from a background of carefully collated facts and discussions to compile an argument. Arthur knew this; he knew because he had conducted so many such speeches in his time as a King. And he knew that Merlin's words would have just as much weight coming from an impassioned perspective as from a steady mindset.

"When was the last time you stepped into the slums, Nimueh? When was the last time you saw more than a Clip or a graphic picture of what it really looks like?" Merlin tilted his head, though his expression was one of cold fury rather than mild curiosity. "Because if you had, you might know how utterly ridiculous your claims are. Sorcerers aren't torn from their houses and taken to the Facilities?" He laughed, the first time Arthur had heard him do so since awakening. It was not a happy sound, holding no merriment. Not in the slightest. "How do you think I ended up in the Pits? Because it certainly wasn't because I handed myself over directly. You've heard of the attacks to the 'nests' of sorcerers, I'm sure. What do you think those are, exactly?"

Arthur held his breath, staring unblinkingly at Merlin. He was trembling just slightly, though Arthur didn't know if it was from anger, sorrow or the memory of pain. It could have very easily been all three; Arthur knew Merlin had been dragged through hell in the Facilities. Had been tortured to near death if not insanity. But this was the first time he'd witnessed him speak of it.

Before anyone could respond, Merlin continued. "You said there's no executions without a trial anymore?" He shook his head sharply. "The first time I saw a man killed was when I was four. He was shocked by too many electrical bullets at once. It did more than short his magic."

Nimueh, for all that Arthur and evidently Gaius from his paling pallor were rendered horrified, maintained her composure. "Four years old, was it? That would be over twenty years ago, Merlin. Times change –"

"When I was snatched to be taken into the Pits, I was trying to help my friend. By the time I got there, the Hunters had already caught or killed dozens of sorcerers. Don't try and tell me this doesn't still happen, Nimueh." Nimueh, respectfully, fell maintained her silence. She appeared effectively rendered mute, though not at all cowed for the fact.

Merlin met her stare for stare. Arthur could almost swear that the ice in his eyes was magical. "I will give you that the slackening of the census dates is desperately needed. That you've managed that much is at least something of a credit to your attempts. But don't try and tell me that what you're doing is actually helping people, Nimueh. Because it's not. It's really not. And saving sorcerers?" Merlin shook his head. "That's not going to happen. Not any time soon. Not with how things are going.

Once more Nimueh remained silent. She stared at Merlin shrewdly, calculatingly, and once more Arthur felt an upwelling of protectiveness for his friend flood through him. Even knowing as he did, after what he'd seen, that Merlin was more than capable of defending himself. At least, he was when other sorcerers were concerned.

Something in her silence seemed to speak to Merlin, however. The chill in his gaze sharpened. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"Merlin…" Gaius murmured once more, but again Merlin ignored him.
So did Nimueh. "Meaning?"

"Your alternative agenda. What are you really trying to achieve, Nimueh?"

For the first time, Nimueh glanced towards Arthur before he said anything. The flatness of her gaze was faintly accusing, and Arthur felt the need to raise a placating hand. "I've not spoken a word."

Nimueh's lip curled. "But in saying just that, you have attached truth to Merlin's claim."

"Granted," Arthur agreed with a nod. He couldn't keep the satisfaction from his tone; he'd never liked Nimueh or her mercilessness, and any chance to crawl beneath her skin he grasped with greedy hands. "I'd rather validate Merlin's words, not your own."

"And that you have," Nimueh replied coldly. Then she turned back to Merlin. "Shall we away with such pretences, then?"

"I think that might be best," Merlin muttered. He didn't seem particularly happy for the fact but accepted it nonetheless. "Though you don't do your name any credit by disregarding what your Confederation apparently stands for."

"I'm not disregarding it," Nimueh said, shaking her head slightly. "I do believe that the goals of the Confederation – at least the publically acknowledged goals – are well worth the effort of attempting fulfilment. However, I am a realist. Much as you appear to be, Merlin." She inclined her head with something akin to respect, only slightly mockingly. "I do not believe that the times are prepared to change. Magic has never been accepted, and likely never will be."

"Then what do you hope to achieve?" Merlin asked.

"In short? I wish to preserve that which still remains. If the world is so set upon driving magic from its surface, then I will gather that which is still fruiting and preserve its memory before it can be lost."

Silence ensued like a loud buzz. All Arthur could hear was the faint sound of water lapping at the very top of the tank, though he didn't glance over his shoulder to catch a glimpse on it. Watching Merlin, watching Nimueh, was far too important to spare a second even to blink.

"Which is where I come in," Merlin said quietly.

"Which is where you come in. It is no secret that Emrys is one of – perhaps the most – powerful sorcerer of all time. You could render the world asunder."

"And yet jabbed me with a Prod and I'm out for the count," Merlin muttered. He sounded more as though he spoke to himself than to anyone in particular.

Nimueh's face actually softened at that. Surprisingly, because Arthur had never seen her 'soften' for anyone. Not in his presence, anyway. Apparently, for all of her hard-heartedness and insistence that the only thing that mattered was magic itself, sorcerers did hold a slightly warmer place in her heart than did the rest of humanity. "That can hardly be reprimanded. Every sorcerer falls into immediate compliance with the very slightest touch of electricity. It is only natural."

"Natural?" Arthur asked, unable to remain silent at that. Oddly enough, he found he'd become wholly defensiveness of magic. As though any insult to sorcery was somehow an insult to Arthur himself. Strange, how different his perspective had become. "How is the debilitation of magic 'natural'? Magic itself is the most natural of gifts to possess. How can you claim that it would be 'natural' to stem its capacity?"
Merlin turned towards Arthur with wide eyes, his cold anger momentarily vanished into incredulity. Arthur stared right back at him. Was it such a surprise that he would defend magic? Perhaps it was…

"It's fairly obvious, really," Gaius explained with the faint, familiar tinge of condescension to his tone. "Magic is an overwhelmingly powerful force. And nothing can exist without its natural opposite. Its suppressor, if you will." He shook his head a little sadly. "It would appear that electricity is that to magic. I have considered at times whether the rise in the use of electronics has been in direct correlation to the discovery of its ability to counteract magic."

Nimueh nodded. "I have thought as much myself at times," she murmured distantly. Then she appeared to shake herself forcibly from her thoughts. "It is exactly this rise is electrical use, this destruction of magic itself, that has led me to the conclusion that the preservation of that which still lasts must be maintained."

"Hoarding."

Nimueh blinked at Merlin's words. "Excuse me?"

The cold anger hadn't quite returned to Merlin's eyes but Arthur could tell that it lay just beneath the surface, awaiting the trigger that would provoke it once more. "You're hoarding the knowledge. That's what you're doing." He frowned thoughtfully. "Is this a part of your character you have always possessed, Nimueh, or something that has only been initiated in your present incarnation?"

Nimueh's eyes narrowed once more. "What do you mean by that?"

"Hoarding," Merlin repeated. Then he gestured over his shoulder towards the tank behind them. "Not just the knowledge of magic either but of anything on the verge of disappearing. Like your pacific angel shark. I'd guess it was your decision to keep it confined like that?"

Glancing over his shoulder, Arthur frowned at the empty tank. Then blinked. The not so empty tank. What he hadn't noticed was the large, flat…fish that drifted at the very bottom, so well camouflaged against the sand and scant scattering of sea grass as to be almost invisible. He raised his eyebrows. He hadn't even noticed it.

"You recognise the genus Squatina californica?" Nimueh asked, curious.

"Loosely. I studied marine biology briefly."

"When?"

"A long time ago."

Nimueh gave a slight hum that sounded enough like laughter that it drew Arthur's attention back from the fish. She was indeed smiling once more. "Such a fountain of knowledge that collects in we sorcerers."

"Knowledge that, like supposedly extinct species, you are attempting to hoard," Merlin reiterated.

"I dislike the term 'hoarding'."

"That doesn't make it any less accurate," Arthur muttered.

Nimueh immediately lost her smile, expression becoming hard as she so often did in Arthur's presence. "Shut up, Arthur," she spat, and the enunciation was so surprising that Arthur was left blinking, faintly stunned. "The adults are having a discussion."
"Actually, I'm pretty sure Arthur's older than me," Merlin pondered aloud, sparing a glance over his shoulder for the tank with face set in a deliberate blankness that did little to hide his faint amusement. That amusement placated any dispute Arthur may have wished to voice.

Nimueh hummed once more, but in disgruntlement this time. "Maturity is another matter, however. Your legend certainly speaks more highly of you than the reality presents, Arthur."

"As many legends do," Arthur nodded, fazed not the slightest by Nimueh's words. It was an old taunt that no longer even stirred his hackles.

"That is why you're collecting sorcerers, then?" Merlin said, abruptly bringing the conversation back to the topic at hand. It dampened the light-hearted though slicing banter immediately. "All of your sorcerers, they live in this Castle?"

"Mostly, yes," Nimueh nodded. "It is, ironically, one of the safest places we can reside."

"Ironically?"

"Ironic because it is at the very heart of the non-magical government."

"But they know you are sorcerers," Merlin pointed out, frowning.

Nimueh inclined her head. "We suspect they have an inkling that some of us are, yes."

"You haven't been attacked? They haven't pushed for you to be taken to the Pits?" Merlin's voice quavered slightly, as it was want to do, with his final word, though Arthur was left with the impression that it was induced more by anger or disgust than fear. Or perhaps it was simply heavily laden with both.

"No, they wouldn't dare. We are far too public a figures." Nimueh's jaw set firmly, visibly. "I have made sure of that. Should any of us fall into the hands of the authorities, or be discovered by the Hunters," she spoke the word as though it dirtied her tongue, "then the world at large will know of the offence impressed upon a fellow political party. It would wreak havoc, create uncertainty with the suspicion that no one would be safe."

Merlin stared at her for a moment, then shook his head, muttering something beneath his breath that Arthur only caught of the word 'offence'. When he spoke up once more, the ice had returned to his words. "So you have a degree of protection?"

"We do," Nimueh replied, and Arthur didn't think it his imagination that she sounded wary. Rightfully so, as Arthur himself could tell that Merlin was gearing himself up for another accusation. A rightful accusation, in all certainty, but accusation nonetheless.

"You're protected," Merlin repeated slowly, "and yet you've done so little."

"We have done –"

"Next to nothing," Merlin overrode Nimueh as she made to speak with a heated bite of her own. "We've already been through this. Preach as much as you want, your 'efforts' have done very little. It's all theoretical, all 'we will' and 'we shall' but you've got no evidence that you can actually achieve your goals. Where is the evidence, Nimueh?"

"It is sitting right before me," Nimueh replied fiercely, and it took Arthur a moment to realise she referred to Merlin himself.
It evidently took Merlin just as long for when he did reply nearly a whole minute later it was with that sharp scoff that wasn't quite laughter. "Are you taking credit for the fact that Arthur saved me from the Pits?"

"Arthur would hardly have gotten within sight of the Facility without the assistance of myself and the Confederation," Nimueh scowled. The first true scowl that Arthur had ever seen, devoid of mockery or disregard. Arthur felt almost envious that Merlin had been able to provoke it had it not been for his own rising irritation.

"Your assistance, yes," Arthur said. "But you seemed to have overlooked the fact that you were anything but enthusiastic when I put forth my requests."

"Don't twist my words, Arthur," Nimueh snapped. It was evident that she truly was angered in that moment. "You mistake caution for reluctance."

"Caution that would have led to no action being taken at all had I not pushed for it."

"You don't know that."

"No, I don't." Arthur felt his lip curl, his arms tightening in their fold across his chest. "But I certainly wouldn't be prepared to leave the situation untended to find out."

"It's a good thing that you won't have to, then," Nimueh retaliated, scowling only more fiercely.

"Why?"

As one, Arthur and Nimueh turned towards Merlin. His eyes were wide once more, though not in fear. Anger was the impression that Arthur was left with, even greater than it had been before.

"What do you -?"

"Does this mean you don't have any intention of saving anyone else from the Pits?" Merlin overrode Nimueh, his voice rising louder than it had throughout the entire conversation. "Is this what you're suggesting, Nimueh? You hoard and collect and covet sorcerers for their magic, but you won't step forward to rescue those that really need your help?"

Nimueh paused, and Arthur felt like he could almost hear her mentally holding her breath. She knew as well as he did that she was treading on thin ice. "I never said that."

"Well? Do you?"

It was Gaius who replied in the face of Nimueh's silence. "Merlin, you have to understand that —"

"No, Gaius." Merlin cut him off with a swipe of his hand to punctuate the silencing. "I'm not going to just sit here and do nothing. Not when there are people who need help. I've lost…" He paused, swallowing in what Arthur perceived as physical as much as mental pain. Arthur felt the unexpected urge to reach out, to wrap an arm around him in comfort. Loss. Loss is something we both know too well.

But Merlin pulled himself together a moment later. "I've lost my father to the Hunters. My friends. And I've been at their mercy for longer than anyone could possibly want, and that's not even as long as some. Freya…" Once more he paused to swallow. He bit his lip fiercely before continuing, taking a deep breath and straightening his back. "There's still people who are going through that, Nimueh. It might not mean much to you – you don't know what it's like – but I… I can't leave them in there. Not anyone. Those people, they're… they're the last of those from Albion."
Silence once more gripped the room. The steady thump of Arthur's heartbeat in his ear drowned out even the quiet lapping of the water in the fish tank. He drew his gaze to Nimueh with sharp intent, but it was unintentional that his arm reached out to Merlin. He clamped a hand upon his shoulder, and though his attention was fixed upon Nimueh, noted with satisfaction that in that moment Merlin didn't flinch from his touch.

Finally, Nimueh spoke. "You are right, of course. I cannot know what the treatment is like in the Facilities. From an observational level, yes, I understand, but you are right in that I do not know. And because of this understanding of my own ignorance, I can similarly credit that I cannot fathom the depth of your conviction when it comes to rescuing your fellows, friends and strangers both." She shook her head. "I profess to each and every one of my sorcerer companions the same: I make no attempts to hide the fact that when I act, I act with the intent to preserve the knowledge of magic. Sacrificing possessors of that magic to seek out other vessels does not fall within the bounds of what I will encourage."

Arthur felt his lips twist, sickened by Nimueh's use of the term 'vessel'. The tightening of Merlin's shoulder beneath his hand suggested that he felt the same. Before either of them could speak, however, Nimueh continued. "However, I am willing to be lenient. At a price."

At his side, Merlin snorted with just a touch of amusement. A dark amusement, but humour nonetheless. "I would expect nothing less."

"I believe you are aware of that which I will request?"

Merlin nodded slowly. "I am."

"And?"

Arthur glanced between the two of them in a mirror of that his periphery showed Gaius to be turning. He thought he suspected what they spoke of, what they bartered, but…

Merlin was frowning. "I don't understand why you value my knowledge of magic specifically. I'm sure that much of what I am capable of is easily extracted from others. It's fairly rudimentary, I think."

Nimueh was shaking her head even before he finished. "It is not," she said firmly. "That is what you do not understand. Do you know, Merlin, that most individuals still utilise words of the old tongue to cast magic?"

Merlin's frown deepened. "Of course people use it. But that doesn't mean they have to –"

"That is where you are wrong," Nimueh enforced. "They do have to. Every sorcerer I have encountered has required the use of a word or phrase as a catalyst for magic."

"My father didn't."

"Then your father was indeed exceptional."

"But he wasn't." Merlin paused, then shook his head, though seeming more in an attempt to clear it than in dissent. "I mean, he was good with magic but not… not spectacular. I mean, I've seen others…"

"Others who have most likely forgotten their knowledge," Gaius said, though seemingly more to himself then to anyone in particular. He glanced up at Merlin intently. "Such encounters mostly occurred in the past, did they not, Merlin?"
"Yes, but surely…"

"Well, many in their current incarnations have lost such abilities," Gaius continued. He sounded genuinely saddened by the fact. "Which would, I believe, make you and your father even more exceptional cases."

"I…" Merlin trailed off, glancing between Gaius and Nimueh in rapid turns. Then he drew his gaze towards Arthur. Arthur met him stare for stare, tightened his hand upon Merlin's shoulder once more in an attempt to convey his support. He was surprised once more at this revelation of magic but not shocked. Not as he had been. Of course Merlin was exceptional. He would be.

You have the upper hand, Merlin. Use it.

Whether Merlin really heard his unspoken words or simply reached the same conclusion as Arthur, he nodded slowly. "Fine. Fine, you want my knowledge? I will share it." He shrugged one shoulder in a gesture so familiar to Arthur that it almost elicited a smile. "But you have to help me in return."

"I expected as much," Nimueh nodded. "You wish assistance with freeing your friends."

Merlin nodded. "Friends. And everyone else."

Nimueh blinked. "Everyone?"

"Everyone."

"That is impractical –"

"But not impossible. And it's going to happen." Merlin's voice became determined, and Arthur felt something akin to a flicker of pride well within him. "And I'd wager that should you put such a suggestion to the members of your Confederation, you'd have a fair number of people that would be willing to help." Merlin shrugged once more. "Besides, it feeds the greediness of those who are similar in their knowledge-seeking as you. More sorcerers means more knowledge, right?"

Nimueh pursed her lips once more, though Arthur didn't think it was so much in dispute at the accusation of her 'greediness'. Nimueh had never denied her greed. But he could almost see the internal struggle she was fighting with, buzzing like an incessant mosquito in her mind. Finally, with a faint grumble, she said, "Fine. But it will not happen quickly. Such an endeavour will take years –"

"Too long," Arthur interrupted before Nimueh could even begin to think that they would accept such a time frame. "Years is too long, Nimueh."

Nimueh fired a glare upon Arthur, but the faint, almost smile that Merlin turned upon him more than counteracted its effects. "This is not a simple matter. You know how long it took to infiltrate London's Facility and that was just for one individual. This is for numerous –"

"Numerous Facilities, yes, we know," Arthur nodded. This. This was what he was here for. To push Nimueh, to aid in the bartering. To ensure that Merlin's ultimatum wasn't too lenient. They shared a common goal, he and Merlin, and surprising as that goal may have seemed to Arthur in the Past, he had more than reconciled himself to it. "But you forget that every year, every month, every week –"

"Every day," Merlin murmured.

"- is that much longer the victims of the Doctors are subjected to torture." Arthur shook his head. "No, Nimueh. Not years."
Nimueh glanced between Arthur and Merlin in an almost frantic flicker of her eyes. Disgruntlement darkened her gaze. *Good*, Arthur thought. *She's finally realising that our efforts and intentions are combined.*

With a sigh that was more of a growl of frustration, she nodded. "Fine. One year."

"Too long," Arthur repeated.

"I cannot arrange for faster than one year –"

"Too long."

Another growl. "Eight months –"

"No."

"Anything less is –"

"No. Too long," Arthur glanced at Merlin, whose smile was almost noticeable now. That urged Arthur to persist almost as much as his ingrained determination did. "Three months. That is the longest we'll wait."

"Or what, you'll charge in yourselves?" Nimueh smirked.

"If we have to," Merlin said, shrugging beneath Arthur's hand once more.

Nimueh's smirk fell, her face falling into blank incredulity. Slowly she shook her head. "You are both fools."

"Naturally," Arthur agreed, restraining his urge to smile.

"You'll get yourselves and everyone else killed."

"Not if we can help it."

"Three months is hardly enough time to arrange such a mission." Nimueh shook her head firmly, though even with her dispute Arthur could see reluctant resignation in her eyes. "It will never work."

"Except that it will." Arthur raised his chin decisively. If anyone's commitment could lead to success, it would be Arthur's. He knew from past experience that morale was half the battle in a war. "We will, this time."

"Three months," Merlin nodded. It wasn't quite satisfaction on his face, but it was something close. And even if he wasn't fully content, the slowly dawning incredulity touched with excitement on Gaius' aged features more than made up for it.

"Three months," Arthur agreed. He couldn't withhold his own smile as Nimueh's growled once more, at her innate urge to resist, and reflected at its mirroring of a situation so similar to this earlier in the year.

They would get what they bargained for. Arthur would make sure of it. And maybe, just maybe, Arthur could find his sister along the way.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Thank you to vanhelsin019 for you lovely art for this chapter! If you'd like to take a look at it, please do so here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/8079583
Chapter 14

He swung the four-foot rapier in an arc overhead, twirling and dropping its length as though it weighed no more than a hollow Prod. He spun in a dance, dodging unseen assailants and raising the sword once more to parry. He thrust with a sharp jab, impaling his invisible opponent, then spun once more to raise his sword in defence of another attack. All the while, his breath panted rhythmically, sweat dribbled down his brow, and his arms trembled under the strain. They still held, though. They would always hold.

Arthur was a vision to watch sword dancing. A vision that Merlin had always loved falling prey to. At least, he had when he wasn't the poor sod on the other side of the shield that Arthur battered away at mercilessly. Being struck, even through wood, so hard that his forearm became mottled with bruises by the end of the day and as weak as jelly, was not an ideal way to spend a morning.

The gym in Nimueh's estate was unlike any gym that Merlin had encountered before. Like every room in the grandiose building, it was large, of tall ceilings and tasteful décor, though faux wood replaced carpet where synthetic rubber grip did not. Instead of paintings and hangings, comfortable seating and vases of flowers so obviously artificial Merlin couldn't help but roll his eyes upon seeing them, the walls were lined with equipment. From simulated Runner machines to those that simply clasped in a visor around the eyes and a miniature lap pool with currents that beat so strong it was a struggle to avoid being slammed back into the walls to the more old fashioned style of dumbbells and weights, suspended bars and steps. There was enough to train a small army, and it was entirely empty. Looked to have been for quite some time.

Then there were the weapons. There were the usual; Prods that had been stemmed of electricity in deference to the sorcerers that lived within the estate, guns that fired blanks and the targets set up for them, whip-like Zappers that typically thrummed with a regenerating sizzle of lightning. There were the more old fashioned kind of those too; crossbows and slings, swords like the one that Arthur wielded and quarterstaffs, batons and nun chucks and knuckledusters.

And knives. There was a whole wall of knives of differing shapes, sizes and functions. Enough to make Merlin drool in appreciation.

That was, if he weren't already effectively distracted by another sight entirely. By Arthur. Because for whatever reason he couldn't draw his eyes from him. Well, 'whatever reason' being the excuse he would put to anyone who noticed closely enough to ask. Merlin knew the reason. He knew exactly the reason.

If nothing else, watching Arthur drew his thoughts from those that had been plaguing him incessantly since he'd spoken with Nimueh for the first time weeks before. It stopped him from stewing, from mulling and gradually growing in irritation to frustration, to anger and then fury. Yes, Arthur was a very good distraction in that sense.

Merlin wondered how, in the Past, he had been so blind. Surely he had possessed at least some inkling. Hadn't he? He liked to think that he was wiser than blissful ignorance suggested him to be.

Perhaps it had been distraction with his duties. Perhaps it had been simply the discrepancy between their statuses that had forbade even considering it. Perhaps the relationship that Arthur had with Gwen had forcibly removed any contemplation of such a possibility ever occurring. But while that guilt still remained, coiled and tangled amidst the sadness and regret, the wistful sorrow that clung like a lingering smell to every memory of those that were lost to the Past... things had changed.
And when Merlin looked at Arthur, he felt longing. A different kind of longing.

He wasn't ignorant. Merlin had experienced such a feeling before, if perhaps not quite so fiercely as he did with Arthur. It had probably surfaced at first with Kip, so many years ago and if only just a little, and had only been tasted in the years since, in the time before he had been snagged by the claws of the Pits. Never so strong as it was now, however.

It arose when Merlin drew his eyes along the flowing lengths of Arthur's limbs. When he watched the ripple and bunch of muscles as the flashing sword swung in whistling arcs. When his eyes drew to the hard tension of Arthur's jaw, the intense concentration in his focused gaze, the slight frown upon his brow that shined with glossy sweat. His fringe was darkened with it, too, curling around his ears with droplets shaking loose with every duck, every dodge, every measured pant of breath.

Merlin could smell it. He had always been strangely in tune with smells. Pleasant smells were difficult to come by, far more frequent exposure being to those of the reeks, the stench, the cloying pungency of the slums or the biting sharpness of the Pits. In the gym, the sterile cleanliness that pervaded the Inner City was muted. In its place was the scent of exertion, of clean sweat, of heated breath as Arthur bent and strained in the dance of a warrior.

It was intoxicating. Merlin closed his eyes briefly to simply bathe in the smell, to shiver to the sounds of heavy breathing and feel the fluid motions of air that swept in the faintest wind with each of Arthur's distant movements. The inclination that he had been swimming in for the month since he'd awoken, the desire to simply draw upon Arthur's very presence, to sit in silence and be, was too great to ignore.

Until the almost-silence was abruptly interrupted.

"If you're going to fall to sleep, you may as well take yourself back to bed."

Opening his eyes with incremental slowness, Merlin turned his gaze once more towards Arthur. He'd paused in step, lowering his sword slightly to turn to Merlin with a smirk. Not a cruel smirk, though, nor even derogatory. Sarcastic maybe, but mostly simply enriched with amusement and affection.

That affection was new. Not entirely, but Merlin could never recall Arthur showing such fondness so openly before. Perhaps as a King he'd felt unable to before. Or perhaps he'd felt restrained by obligation, unable to become too close to anyone or give any obvious demonstration of that affection. Merlin could recall his reluctance even when it came to Gwen at times, and she had been his wife. It would be stranger if he had afforded Merlin such an exemption when he didn't give one to her.

Still, even knowing that there was likely a very explainable reason change, and that such a cause was just as likely to be painful should Merlin attempt to unearth it, he couldn't help but feel warmed by it. He couldn't withhold the warmth that had surfaced in the past weeks, urging them back into a sort of easy camaraderie that leapt across the distance and time that had stood between them. But more than that, Merlin couldn't suppress that unshakeable twinge of longing, the longing that had been building gradually and then suddenly not gradually at all until it was a constant nagging presence.

In some ways it would be better if Arthur treated me with disregard. Or at least in the way he always had. Then I might be able to see him as I always had.

"I'm not tired," he said finally, stretching his legs before him. He was seated with his back pressed against the wall upon a square of floor spongy with synthetic rubber. "I was just closing my eyes for a second."

"Funny. That's usually what people do when they sleep."
"I don't want to sleep," Merlin sighed. "I've had enough sleep to last me a lifetime these past few months."

"You know, I think there's a distinct difference between an induced coma and reparative sleep." Arthur idly swung the rapier in slow windmills at his side. "Apparently after the former the latter is far more frequently experienced."

Merlin blinked at Arthur for a moment before raising an eyebrow. "Well, look at you."

"What?"

Knocking his feet in jiggles against one another, Merlin tipped his head back against the wall. "Nothing. Just admiring your apparent newfound medical knowledge. One would have to wonder where it had sprung from."

Surprisingly – and delightfully – Arthur's cheeks flushed a faint pink. It could have been from his exertion, from breathlessness, but Merlin doubted it. He felt amusement tugging faintly at the corners of his lips. He could never recall making Arthur blush before and found he quite liked the effect.

Evidently Arthur perceived his amusement for he turned abruptly and lunged in an exaggerated feint, swinging his rapier once more. "I hardly have a choice, what with Gaius spouting technical jargon at me while he poked and prodded at you."

"You didn't have to listen," Merlin suggested.

"I could hardly help it when he was in your room every other minute. It was either hear him babble or leave the room and it wasn't like I was going to take myself anywhere else."

Merlin had to close his eyes at that. Don't think about it too deeply. Don't overthink it. That's just Arthur being his unnecessarily overprotective self. The same as always. He shook his head and himself out of the thought a moment later.

Just in time too, as Arthur spun around a moment later, cheeks cooled of their flush and drew his gaze towards Merlin. "What are you doing in here, anyway?"

"Am I not allowed to be?"

"It's not that you're not allowed. For God's sake Merlin, you're an adult. You can go wherever the hell you like."

Merlin snorted, shaking his head. "You try telling that to Alice. I used to think that Gaius was bad. I guess I know where he learnt his stubbornness from."

Arthur smirked once more, and once more it was with distinct fondness. "There is that. She's something, isn't she?"

"That she is. It's a shame, really…" Merlin trailed off.

"What?"

"Just that Gaius is being difficult."

"What, with Alice?"

Merlin nodded, then frowned. Surely Arthur wasn't so oblivious as to miss the blatantly obvious. "Have you talked to her about it?"
Arthur blinked uncomprehendingly. "About Gaius?"

"About Gaius. And Alice. And Gaius and Alice."

"It's hardly my place to comment," Arthur said, shaking his head and waving his free hand in a disregarding gesture. "I sincerely doubt that either Gaius or Alice would want to talk to me about the… difficulties between them."

"They might if you asked them. Maybe they just think you don't want to hear it?"

"Maybe I don't."


Arthur paused mid-step in the midst of a quickstep of sword dances. He studied Merlin dubiously for a moment before snorting and shaking his head. "You do that well, you know."

"Do what well?"

"The Gaius Look. He has that way of frowning that makes me feel like a child again."

"What, and I do the same?" Merlin felt amusement tug at his lips once more. Not quite in a smile but teetering towards it.

"Don't credit yourself too highly," Arthur said, waving the sentiment aside with his hand once more. "You're not quite as good as him."

"I've got time to learn," Merlin muttered beneath his breath. "Just you wait."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Arthur stepped through another series of swings once more before speaking. "So, have you?"

"Have I what?"

"Talked to the two of them. About either of them. About…" Arthur rolled his free hand in a grasping gesture, struggling for words. "Things."

"Very eloquent of you, sire."

"Shut up, Merlin."

Merlin gave a huff of laughter before the effort to do so grew too great and smothered the attempt. As usual. He shook his head regretfully, even as familiar warmth flooded through him. This was what he liked, one of the many things he'd missed about Arthur. Simple banter and playful exchanges just seemed so natural between them. They always had, even with their differences in social standing. "As a matter of fact, I have. And Alice has told me how Gaius has been reluctant to allow any furthering of their relationship because of their age difference."

Merlin rolled his eyes at his old mentor's foolishness. "As if that even matters."

Arthur paused from where he'd been stepping in slow paces. "Alice told you that? She did?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"
"That you were able to talk about deep and meaningful subjects with any eloquence yourself? Yes."

"I think you're confusing which of us with who has greater difficulty holding intimate discussions," Merlin said, raising an eyebrow. "You did just say --"

"Shut up, Merlin," Arthur repeated, and with another twirl spun and swung his sword in a series of elegant loops more suited to a claymore than a rapier. He was smirking once more, however, in a closer resemblance to a smile than before.

Merlin watched as he fell into another sequence of swings and lunges, thrusting and parrying. It was captivating to watch, and Merlin considered it truly appropriate to term it 'sword dancing'. At least these kinds of motions were graceful. Beautiful. Off the battlefield, sword fighting was an art. It drew Merlin once more back to Camelot, to times of Albion. To a time where everything had been better, of that Merlin was certain, even with the rose tinting of fond nostalgia. Even the sword itself was a trigger. Archaic. No one – or at least no Hunter – used swords anymore, not in real combat. It was a surprise that Nimueh even had any in the gym, but then she did have an array of Egyptian khopesh even more archaic so Merlin rationalised it must have been just another element of her hoarding tendencies.

When the silence was next broken, it was Merlin who spoke. And quite without his intention, too. "Why are you using a sword?"

Arthur paused in step once more, and when he turned to Merlin he was frowning. "What do you mean?"

"I mean…" Merlin bit his lip. This was evidently a sore spot for Arthur, from the sudden wariness of his expression, from the tightening of his hand on the hilt of his weapon. Merlin wondered if someone else had perhaps questioned his weapon choice before. "There's nothing wrong with it. It's just a little unconventional."

Arthur drew his gaze down to the sword in his hand. His jaw tightened visibly for a moment. He seemed to be coaching himself into something, and when he replied it seemed more as though he talked to himself. "Maybe to some. But not to me. It's not the same as a great sword – it's light and flexible, requires a different fighting style – but even so I will always be a swordsman. I will always use that which I'm best at wielding."

Merlin nodded. He could understand that. With weapons, those that fit stayed for life. Longer than life, even. Merlin knew that well. "You haven't tried anything else?" He asked, just for curiosity's sake. "Something like a Prod or a gun would be more effective in this day and age."

"Are you suggesting I'm inferior for my choice of weapon?" The affront was thick in Arthur's tone as well as his gaze.

Shaking his head, Merlin clambered to his feet. Easily enough, truth be told. He no longer felt any tinges or pains upon moving, could move at faster than a sedate stroll, and it was for that very reason – amongst others – that he had been permitted, even directed, into the gym. "No, I'm not questioning it. I just know that against something like Zappers a sword isn't going to do much good. Especially given that it's made of metal."

Arthur shrugged, eyes turning downcast once more. "I'm not going to use a Prod. Or Zappers. Or a gun with electrical bullets."

"Why not? Too sentimental?" Merlin wandered towards him, eyes drawn towards the weapons racks. There truly was quite a surplus.
"No. I just don't want to. Besides, it would be rather hypocritical of me."

"Why's that?"

"Because, Merlin, I would be using the weapons utilised by the people I am trying to combat. Not to mention that anything vaguely electrical sends you sorcerers into a fit of terror."

Merlin paused in step before Arthur and blinked in surprise at his bowed head. "You're doing it for the sorcerers?"

"Amongst other reasons, yes." Arthur raised his gaze and immediately adopted an exasperated expression. "Don't think I'm foolishly that altruistic, Merlin. I told you, it's just one of the reasons. Mostly, I simply prefer using a sword. And don't you try to tell me that I'm not allowed to." He shook a finger at Merlin like a scolding mother.

Merlin couldn't help but roll your eyes. "You're an adult, Arthur. I hardly think you should have to do as I tell you to," he said, repeating Arthur's comment of before.

"Oh yes, very witty, Merlin. Try and manufacture some of your own rebuttals in future, would you?"

"Why would I when you've left me such a bountiful repertoire?" Merlin smirked as he skirted around Arthur and made his way across the gym. "Besides, all things considered, I can hardly reprimand you for your choice of weapons. I'm a bit partial to the old fashioned kind myself."

"You are?" Merlin didn't need to glance over his shoulder to know that Arthur scoffed. "Every single time you've ever used a sword you've been just as close to lopping your own head off as you have stabbing at anyone else."

"It's a good thing I don't like using swords then," Merlin murmured in reply. His eyes grazed over the selection of knives – it really was an admirable collection – and assessed their usefulness and familiarity in rapid-fire efficiency. A moment later and he plucked a knife belt from the wall, strapped it around his waist, and proceeded to outfit himself with a multitude of the ridiculously immaculate weapons. They looked like they'd never even been used before.

"Knives? You can actually use knives?" Merlin could hear the incredulity in Arthur's voice and didn't deign to reply, even as another bubble of surprising amusement rose within his chest. "When did this happen?"

"About…" Merlin considered as he strapped a push dagger sheath around his wrist. "Eight hundred years ago? Give or take a couple of decades?"

"Eight… eight hundred years ago?"

"Yes."

"And you still use them?"

Merlin glanced over his shoulder, pausing with his hand on the unfamiliar hilt of a familiar karambit. Arthur was staring at him with sword lowered and eyebrows raised. Dubious didn't even begin cover his expression. "Is that so hard to believe?"

Slowly, Arthur shook his head. "It's just that I was under the impression that things didn't… stick so well from one life to the next."

"Then how do you explain the fact that I consider you as anything more than an arrogant prat who
revels in any opportunity to taunt the sanity out of Nimueh?" Arthur opened and closed his mouth indignantly for a moment, a mumble of objection grumbling from his throat before Merlin took pity on him. Shaking his head he turned back to the knife rack. "You're not wrong. But some things, important things, they stick."

"And I'm important?"

The mollification in Arthur's voice made Merlin roll his eyes. "Watch out, Arthur. Let that head of yours get any bigger and you won't be able to fit out the door."

"It was just a question," Arthur replied, though satisfaction was still thick in his tone.

Merlin shook his head again, though less in dissent this time. "I was actually referring to the weapons, but I suppose that counts too. Things that leave a lasting impression, big things, they resound more prominently than just hazy memories."

"And fighting with knives is a 'big thing' for you?"

Slipping a final dagger into his belt, Merlin nodded and turned towards Arthur once more. He felt somehow eased by the familiar weight of the weapons outfitted about his body, a contrast to the loose-limbed garments that the Inner City residents wore. Those in the slums dressed themselves in something far more similar to medieval times out of sheer necessity, and always of inferior quality, but Merlin found he preferred it to that which the upper class wore. He could understand why Arthur chose the most fitted trousers and shirtsleeves he could.

"Eight hundred years ago – if memory serves me – when I was about five I think it was, I lived in this little cottage on the outskirts of town with my mother and father." Merlin tugged distractedly at the edges of his sleeves to simply give himself something to look at other than Arthur. Arthur, who was staring at him intently, rapier lowered "Balinor was working late one night and my mam was unwell so I was looking after her." He shrugged. "When some drunken bastard crashed through the door in a fit of rage and went straight for her, I guess I saw attacking him as looking after her. The kitchen knives were all we had on hand."

Arthur was so quiet that after a long moment Merlin raised his gaze. The stare that was directed at him was unreadable. "You were five."

"Yes."

"And you attacked a man – a fully grown man – with just a kitchen knife."

Merlin shrugged one shoulder. "There wasn't really anything else on hand."

"How did you even…?" Arthur shook his head and gave a hum of humourless chuckle.

Merlin bit his lip, dropping his eyes down to his cuffs once more. "After that, I sort of had a bit of a thing for knives. I've always been told that I have to keep my magic hidden – always, in every life – to such a degree that at times I don't even consider it as a possibility to use to defend myself. Or at least I don't when I'm younger. Balinor, he…" Merlin shrugged once more. "I guess he saw that I'd taken to them. Every life since that he's still around he's made sure that I know how to use them, how to defend myself with them."

From his periphery, Merlin caught Arthur's slow nod. "I suppose I can see how you would consider that a 'big thing'." He paused, then an expression of deliberate arrogance, uncouth upon his face, drew across his features. "Almost as significant as me."
Merlin couldn't help but snort. "Your head, Arthur, your head. I can see it inflating."

Arthur chuckled in genuine amusement for a moment before sobering. "So me. And your knives. What else?"

Amusement dying, Merlin fell back to chewing on his lip. Not only was it just a little uncomfortable to say but... how could I even tell him that, next to those two, there is hardly anything that compares? He brushed the thought aside, however, and filtered through his thoughts. "There are other things. Steadfast patriotism sticks pretty firmly after you fight and die in a couple of wars. I've an eternal love of dogs after working in Lord Blackwood's kennels in one lifetime practically since I was born. And my sister."

"You have a sister?"

"Had," Merlin corrected, raising his gaze up to Arthur's curious expression. "Sometimes had. I've rarely had any siblings that I can recall, ever, but when I do it's always her. Always my little sister."

Arthur gave a faint smile and Merlin had to wonder if he was recalling his own sister. Hopefully, if he did, it was of times before she had fallen prey to insanity. "What was her name? Or is it names?"

Merlin shook his head. "No, just name. She always has the same name. Kestrel."

"Kestrel? You mean like –"

"The bird, yes. Don't ask me why; apparently Balinor likes to keep with the habit. I always called her Kes."

"Kes," Arthur echoed quietly. He gave a satisfied little 'harrumph' that Merlin couldn't quite read until he met his eyes. The reminiscence was definitely welling strongly. "I like it. You were – are, have been – close?"

Merlin nodded, biting back his faint amusement at Arthur's grasping gesticulation. "Always. Whether we were only a year apart or ten years, she's always my doting and doted upon little sister." He shrugged. "Maybe that's just the way with younger siblings."

"I wouldn't know," Arthur murmured, and his gaze dropped back towards his sword where it hung at his side. "I've only ever had an elder sister and 'doting' wasn't exactly how I'd describe her."

Merlin felt sympathy well within him. He did not dislike Morgana. Not really. Never in his lives save that from Albion could he recall a time where he felt anything deeper than frustration or irritation for her actions against he and Arthur so long ago. She had been a menace, to be sure, but always a foe that they had driven back. She been driven by a fit of insanity. He knew that, too.

Though he would remember with fondness initially that they had once been something akin to friends, and even with self-reprimand when he considered that his actions towards her had been, if nothing else, triggering and likely hadn't assisted the volatility of their ensuing 'relationship'... no, he would never dislike her, even if he didn't openly favour her. Even if Arthur had, somehow, overcome his own disgruntlement towards her.

"You miss her," Merlin said quietly. He hadn't really meant to speak, but then, it felt almost as though the words were for himself as much as they were for Arthur. Three words that both encompassed everything and too little of what Merlin felt for Kes.

Far be it from growing indignant, or disregarding, or even angry, Arthur peered up at Merlin once more. His expression was contemplative, a little sad from the downward turn of his lips. And then he
nodded. "I know it might be strange to consider, after she – after what she became." He deliberately truncated himself and Merlin was left with the impression, as he frequently was, that Arthur had almost said something of the Past. Something that he meant to remain unvoiced. He didn't comment on it, however, and Arthur continued a moment later. "But then, after all this time, and with the understanding that I have?" He shook his head, lips thinning and hand tightening around the hilt of his sword. "She's one of the few people I have left."

Merlin couldn't help but speak, no matter how much he may have considered it appropriate to remain silent. "You've got me."

Arthur didn't smirk. He didn't roll his eyes or brush aside Merlin's heartfelt sentiment. Instead, he finally fully raised his chin and met Merlin's gaze. Something approaching a smile settled upon his lips. "I do. I know that. I do." And he seemed momentarily comforted by the idea. The he shook himself and his smile became rueful. "Although, I feel I must admit, I made it something of a mission of mine to find you. And Morgana, but… well, to find you. I find myself a little at a loose end at times with that goal satisfied."

"I wonder why –?" Merlin began, then clamped his lips shut. *No, I know Arthur doesn't want to talk about that.*

But Arthur had heard him and cocked an eyebrow. "Why what? I think it's fairly obvious 'why'. It means I have to find another goal."

"You have one, though. Saving the sorcerers." But Merlin shook his head, teeth latching onto his lip almost without his notice. "But that's not what I meant. I just wondered why it was that you… came back."

Arthur was silent for a moment, still, his sword not even wavering at his side. Then he slouched casually and offered a very forced smile. "Anyone would think you almost didn't *want* me back, Merlin."

"Of course I don't. A giant prat hanging over me all the time who thinks he's entitled to tell me what to do?" Merlin snorted, striving for the casualness that Arthur had attempted. "Who would want that?"

Arthur's smile widened, but there was still an edge of discomfort to it. A conversation left unsaid. He knew what Merlin was suggesting, what he wanted to ask but withheld from saying, from asking. About Avalon. About how Arthur had returned at all, how it was even possible. Merlin was curious about it, had only learned as much to know that Avalon was where Arthur had gone when he 'died' but Arthur was always close-lipped about what he'd experienced on what he referred to as 'the other side'. It reminded Merlin of Freya when she spoke in reminiscence of her time in the lake. Neither seemed scared, exactly. Guarded, perhaps, but seemingly more from the questions themselves than from any wariness pertaining to the memories themselves. As though *they* were guarding those memories.

It left Merlin only more curious because there was always that faint light of wonder, of wistfulness, in Arthur's eyes when he visibly reflected upon those memories. A different sort of longing arose within Merlin when he perceived it.

The silence dragged on until it became almost awkward, the unspoken words hanging in the air. No matter how many conversations they exchanged, how many bridges they crossed and how much Merlin perceived they became – maybe, hopefully – closer, that was one wall that could not be broken through. And every time it arose, whether intentionally or incidentally, Merlin was always left with the distinct impression that he took two steps further from Arthur rather than one more
forwards.

With a visible effort, Arthur shook him self from his muteness. He adopted an excessively condescending expression as he affixed Merlin with a stare once more. "But enough of this. What are you even doing here? I thought you weren't allowed into the gym. Overexerting yourself and all."

Merlin brushed aside the condescension more easily than he had thought possible. Perhaps it was just because it was Arthur who was being condescending, that his Past memories somehow acclimatised him to it? "Alice told me to come here, actually."

"Really?" Arthur said dubiously, swinging his sword in a windmill once more. "And what did Gaius say?"

"Alice told me to come here."

"Ah. I see."

Merlin nodded in agreement. It was common knowledge to anyone with a pair of eyes that, while Alice was the one who offered the smiles, she was also the one who carried the whip. "I believe her exact words were 'if you knock the legs off a chair one more time, I'll smack you around the leg with it'. Then she said to go and vent my frustrations on something productive and, voila, here I am."

"Frustrations?" Arthur asked, but before Merlin could reply understanding dawned once more. "Ah. I understand."

"Mm," Merlin hummed. He flicked at the hilt of the dagger at his left hip in a soothing motion that wasn't as necessary as it would have been had anyone else spoken Arthur's words. For once, unlike when Gaius spoke, or Alice, or Nimueh sighed her frustrated 'understanding', Merlin felt like Arthur truly did know. The other sorcerers, many of them with Gaius and Alice included, vehemently expressed their dedication to the cause of 'rescuing' those captured by the Hunters and secreted in the Pits. But they were wary. They were scared to put themselves in danger after years and years, life after life, of being hounded for their magic.

Arthur wasn't like that. He didn't wield any magic himself so perhaps that was why he lacked the fear, but for whatever reason he was different. And Merlin, having lived through it himself, having endured the tortures that still woke him some nights, that still captured him and drew him into dark depths at unexpected intervals and still urged him to withdraw from contact at times – he was different too. No one else knew the true horrors of the Pits. No one but Merlin. And in knowing that, how could Merlin possibly leave others to such a fate? How could he leave Freya?

Forcibly shaking himself from his rapidly descending mood, Merlin deliberately settled both hands upon a knife hilt each. He took a firming breath and met Arthur's waiting gaze. "So. 'Venting frustrations'. Care to join me?"

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "In what exactly?"

"In a fight. Naturally."

Arthur snorted. "You can't fight."

"Correction: I couldn't fight. A long, long, long, long, long –"

"You're making me sound ancient," Arthur grumbled, swinging his sword in a petulant swipe.
"- long time ago." Merlin finished. Then he drew one knife – a parrying knife – and brandished it in a flourish. "I know a little better what to do now."

Arthur studied him for a moment, as though gauging the validity of his claim. Then, shaking his head and rolling his eyes, he stepped towards Merlin. "Alright. But don't cry if you get pulverised. You look like you'd break into pieces if you fell to the floor." His study became critical, the scepticism hiding just the faintest hint of concern that Merlin could discern. "Are you sure Alice said you were up for this? For fighting me?"

Merlin frowned, pursing his lips. True, he would be severely reduced in physical capacity to how he should have been, but he chose to ignore that fact. "Get your head out of your arse, Arthur. You're not that wonderful."

Arthur's eyebrows snapped upwards and he blinked in surprise. The he snorted, shaking his head. "You know, if you were still my servant I'd put you in the stocks for that."

"Good thing I'm not your servant then. I always hated them, you know."

"I know. Why else do you think I always sent you to them so much when we were younger?"

"Bastard."

Arthur only smirked. Then, windmilling his sword in his familiar, easy twirl – the rapier looked far too thin and wavering for such a motion – he stepped forwards. "Alright then. No crying? Fine. You can have preference."

"So kind of you," Merlin said with a roll of his eyes. "I choose knives, of course."

"Knives it is."

"You don't have to. Swing your overgrown toothpick for all I care. You said you like your sword. Just use that."

Arthur paused in the act of sheathing his sword at his waist to peer up at Merlin with a half-bowed head. His expression very clearly asked are you an idiot? "Merlin."

"Yes?"

"Are you an idiot?"

"I am not. Though you seem to think so, from how frequently you've called me as much in the past."

"You want to put a sword," Arthur spoke with slow, deliberate words. "Against knives? You'll be sliced to pieces."

"Good thing the swords in the gym are blunted, then," Merlin said with a shrug.

"You're serious?" Arthur's tone added the "bloody idiot" without him having to voice it himself.

Merlin raised an eyebrow. "Do I look like I'm joking?" He shook his head. "Try and have a little faith that I know what I'm doing, Arthur. Or, if not, just revel in the fact that you'll thoroughly beat me."

"There would be no satisfaction in such an easy defeat."

"Confident, are we?"
"Of course. You're using knives against –"

"Swords, yes, I know." Merlin tugged a second knife from his belt. He fell into a grounded stance and raised both arms in readiness. The blades felt a little heavy in his hands, heavier than they should have been, but he'd expected as much. His limbs done little more than rest in limp immobility in the past months after all, with only the increasingly strenuous exercises Gaius and Alice had given him in the last weeks to counteract that. They were familiar, though, those weapons. Like another pair of limbs. "Come at me, Arthur. Unless you're too afraid."

It was a childish taunt, Merlin knew. Just as he knew Arthur saw it for what it was. But it served its purpose. With a broadening of his grin – a smirk, really – Arthur hefted his sword once more. And, throwing any self-handicapping to the wind, he charged at Merlin without pause.

It should have been an obliteration. Of course it should have been. Arthur was right; swords against knives – there really was no contest. The simple discrepancy in reach would result in a sure and rapid end to such a fight. And that was disregarding the fact that, though Merlin knew how to wield his knives with bone-deep surety reflexivity, his body out of practice.

Except.

Arthur lunged, swiped, and Merlin ducked. The sword whistled dangerously close to Merlin's crown and had it been anyone else behind the handle of that sword he would have almost feared for his safety. But this was Arthur. And though he certainly strive win he never truly sought to injure. He wouldn't inflict more than a bruise, even if Merlin hadn't been able to dodge out of the way.

Another lunge, a thrust, and Merlin danced away from the weapon once more. A sweeping slice, and Merlin battered the attack way with his parrying dagger. The force behind Arthur's strike made his arm tremble, but he managed. He ducked again, dancing back further as another swing arced in a back-handed motion.

The clatter of dagger on sword, of reinforced steel alloyed with manufactured, nearly unbreakable DiamondGrit, rung through the cavernous gym. Breaths panted and booted feet scuffed the floors in pattering footsteps. Merlin let himself feel the movements, breathed into the leans and twists, the dodges and jumps. His body protested, but in a good way. It felt like –

He nearly yelped as Arthur's sword swept so close that he could feel the wind of its passage. Arthur loosed a crowing chuckle. "You're good, Merlin, I'll give you that. Better than I expected. But not that good." Then he darted forwards on the offensive once more.

Right. That's it. Merlin tightened his grip on his right dagger, dropping into a roll to duck another overhead sweep of Arthur's sword. As he propelled himself to his feet, his left hand swept in the familiar motions of exchange, replacing the combat knife for its heavier, serrated cousin. We'll see who's laughing now, Arthur, he thought with silent satisfaction.

When Arthur lunged in an almost cocky strike, Merlin was ready. He sidestepped, he twisted, and with a darting jab of his left hand he struck and captured Arthur's sword. Flicking his wrist to wedge it against the flat of the rapier, he twisted once more and –

**SNAP.**

Arthur froze as the end of his sword cleaved neatly and clattered to the ground. He didn't blink, didn't frown – but shock was blatantly writ upon his face. He didn't even move to lower the fractured length of his weapon.
Fighting the urge to voice his satisfaction, Merlin lowered his own weapons to his side. He straightened slowly, working to slow his breathing from where it panted significantly more than it should have. The urge to laugh was stronger than he had felt in… in years, and it was purely because of the stunned expression Arthur wore.

Casually spinning the sword-breaker in his left hand, Merlin slouched one hip. "Rematch? Care to choose another weapon?"

Finally, Arthur blinked. He gave his head a slight shake, visibly drawing himself from his stupor. As he did, his eyes dropped to his hilt, to his shortened blade, to the foot-length of dagger in Merlin's hand then back again. And finally, he spoke. "Merlin, just what is that?"

The urge to smile was stronger than it had ever been. Merlin almost thought it would be possible that it would arise. But he shrugged instead and hefted the dagger, placing it upon his splayed palm for better visibility. "They didn't exist back in times of Camelot."

"No, they did not."

"It's called a sword-breaker."

"For obvious reasons."

"You can hardly blame your own failings for defeat. I did spring it upon you somewhat unexpectedly." Merlin was enjoying himself far too much. This is exactly what I needed.

Arthur frowned indignantly. His composure gradual returned in the form of battered pride. "Failings? My failings? You can hardly blame me for being unable to combat it when I never even knew such a weapon existed."

"That's what I was saying," Merlin said slowly, soothingly, smothering his amusement with difficulty. "Although, I always thought you were one to preach using every weapon in your arsenal, conventional or otherwise."

"Yes, but…" Arthur stuttered slightly, gesturing with a sweep of his broken sword with rising indignation. "That. That's not even a weapon. It's not… it shouldn't have been able to… it can't –"

"But it did," Merlin said with a shrug. He supposed that it was probably not the best time to confess that, in this observation, Arthur was entirely correct. No, a sword-breaker couldn't really break a sword. Certainly not a modern-manufactured weapon such as the rapier that Arthur used. Not without a slight touch of magic to reinforce the blade further, to give a brief burst of superhuman strength to Merlin's arm. Sword-breakers captured swords, but actually break them? Not in Merlin's experience, no.

But Arthur didn't need to know that. Not now, anyway. "Perhaps you'd like a -?"

"Rematch." Arthur nodded his head curtly, a frown still deepening on his brow. "Now that I have some inkling of what that metal comb in your hand is, I believe we'll be on far more equal footing."

"Of course," Merlin agreed mildly, biting back the urge to highlight Arthur's apparently suggestion that, however briefly and unconsciously, Merlin may have had superior standing. "If that's what would make you feel better."

"Cheat," Arthur called over his shoulder as he made his way back to the rack of rapiers. Apparently Nimueh didn't cater to swordsmen with a stronger arm – there wasn't a claymore in sight, despite the array of other, less conventional weapons with the exception of the khopesh. Merlin suspected she
liked the refinement of the narrower blades.

"Hardly," he replied.

"Yes, you are. You're a cheat and you know it."

"Is that right?"

"It is. I can hear the guilt in your voice."

"You can't hear something that isn't there, Arthur," Merlin pointed out. He raised his eyebrows at the scathing expression Arthur cast him over his shoulder as he turned, gloved hand gripping experimentally around the hilt of his new rapier. "Better? You think you can handle it this time?"

"Don't seat yourself too high, Merlin," Arthur said with a scowl, but there was just a hint of his returning enthusiasm, of excitement in his expression. "It will just hurt more when I knock you down from your perch."

"Then I look forward to the fall," Merlin replied. Then he could say no more as Arthur sprung forwards and into the offensive once more.

They were relatively evenly matched, at least at first. Quite to Merlin's initial disgruntlement, they were now of almost exactly equal height rather than distinguished by Merlin's slighter tallness from the Past. Arthur was broader than Merlin, his arms and chest more heavily defined with muscles that retained their warrior's build even years after he'd last been on the battlefield. In strength at least Arthur outweighed Merlin, even disregarding the weakness of Merlin's limbs from his recovery.

But Merlin was faster. Even with such a lack in fitness, he had to be faster, had trained himself to be so long ago. It was an unavoidable state that Hunters were stronger than those of the slums, than those of just about everyone who was not of upper class. So Merlin, just like everyone else, had taught himself to compensate. And for the first time, he saw what he perceived as deficiencies in Arthur's fighting style. Deficiencies that he had never considered before.

For one, he kept his feet upon the ground too much. He was far too grounded. In contrast, Merlin, though still easing tentatively into the jumps and leaps, the turns and somersaults that he had previously been able to throw himself into with his eyes closed, Arthur remained upright. That was a significant advantage.

Another was that Arthur was far too chivalrous. When he fought with a sword, he fought with his sword only. Merlin did not. He used his knives and daggers primarily, but only primarily. He struck out with a foot to the ankle, an elbow to the ribs, flung a series of bo-kri knives not to injure but to distract momentarily, spinning so close to his face that they could have shaved him. He smacked at Arthur's sword hand with the flat of a blade when he was close enough and just as often strived to turn the rapier against its wielder.

It was hard work, but satisfying. And even more satisfying was seeing the combined frustration and exhilaration on Arthur's face as he too fell into the sheer, mindless joy of practice.

But Merlin faded quickly. He could barely claim to have an inkling of stamina, let alone measure up to Arthur's capacity. In less time then he had hoped, he was holding up his hands in submissive defeat and stepping backwards from Arthur's taunts to continue that faded into cries of triumph.

*Let him have his glory,* Merlin thought as he turned and slipped his knives back into their sheaths. It would be short lived, Merlin vowed. He'd upstage him once more, if for nothing else than to beat him down a few pegs from his proud height. For Merlin would stay true to his word: no, he might
not be Arthur's manservant any longer, but he could still at least provide the service of ensuring he didn't grow too big for his breeches.

As Merlin wandered from the gym, with the unexpected but nonetheless appreciated accompaniment of an enthusiastic and excessively vocalising Arthur, he couldn't help but let the satisfaction, the calm, the relief and the release, consume him. And as he glanced at Arthur sidelong, at the vibrant shine to his eyes, the colour to his cheeks and the smile curling upon his lips to replace the frustration of before, Merlin almost found himself doing the same.

Almost.

"… completely irrational turn of events, Lady Nine. We simply cannot evaporate the invasive tests for magic without criminals falling beneath the radar. The evidence of the failure of such an attempt is clearly written in Swedish History; Stockholm is still rendered inaccessible for the residue of magical fallout from the Land-Into-Sea Incident."

Merlin gritted his teeth, kept his head bowed and eyes fastened upon his fingers as they plucked with increasingly firm pulls of their opposite digits. It was perhaps a good thing that he sat half a city away from the Castle of the Government. His magic was growling, snapping its jaws just within the bounds of his restraint. He doubted that had he seen Lady Ester in person as opposed to through the starkly clear image presented on the Visual Comm before him, Merlin would have been overwhelmed by the urge to act.

Nimueh's voice rose, swimming to the fore with the cool collectedness that she approached everything. Merlin had only ever seen her remotely angry when around Arthur and that was more a reflexive response, more aggravated than truly angry. Even when Merlin had experienced his own fight of sorts with her over a month before, she'd held a careful restraint upon her evident anger.

"Lady Ester, the very definition of the testing as 'invasive' should be reason enough to remove the compulsory nature of the procedure. That individuals do not have the opportunity –"

"That is the issue, though, Lady Nine. Those that would object most definitely have something to hide. In which case – "

"Can you be so sure of that?" Nimueh's voice sliced like a scythe through Ester's pompous words. "Can you be utterly sure? Evidence demonstrates that, as of the most recent testing in midsummer, a number of individuals who protested the invasive testing were non-magicals."

"From where did you acquire such information, my Lady?" Another voice, a man's, momentarily off-screen until the image of the Comm flashed to face him and revealed a man who resembled nothing if not a praying mantis. "The results of such tests are strictly confidential."

"I assume in the same manner that you did yourself, Lord Kawa." Nimueh's tone was flat, almost accusatory, and effectively silenced the mantis man. Merlin felt a flush of momentary satisfaction, of approval, even as it rapidly died with Ester's continuation.

"Regardless of dispute from non-magic users, it is necessary. The criminals –"

"And by criminals, you refer to sorcerers and magical beings?"

Ester paused for a moment before speaking. "I do."

"I see. Just so we are clear."
"Yes, well… those with magic have repeatedly, time and time again, demonstrated their tendency to evade such tests, to jeopardise the safety of non-magical individuals by remaining covert and defensive of their powers. It is common knowledge, if nothing else. As such, by easing the constraints, by loosening the demands upon compulsory testing…”

Merlin clicked his tongue and jerked back from where he leant towards the Comm, ears immediately shuttering. It was useless. The same arguments, over and over again with little to no development. Not for the rights and freedoms of the magical, for the acknowledgement that while magic could indeed be deemed dangerous it was not, in itself, an evil force. Merlin wished desperately, not for the first time over the past month of listening in to the conferences between the Confederation and opposing parties, that he could simply speak himself. He was not one for public declarations, never had been; if anything he had long acknowledged his place as the silent shadow behind the orator, Arthur amongst those he stood behind. But in this instance he felt he could make an exception.

It only helped marginally that Arthur, the one who channelled the image through the Comm itself from his own end seated in the conference, fought to speak up as much as he could. As much as he was allowed to. Not that it did anything, but it helped Merlin to keep a hold upon his rising fury. It helped a little.

Standing abruptly, Merlin turned towards the door. Gaius and Alice, seated on either side of him, glanced up as he stalked past. "Merlin," Gaius said quietly. "Don't –"

"Don't what, Gaius." Merlin paused, glancing towards Gaius as he raised his hand to tap the ID-pad on the closed door. He kept his face deliberately closed, devoid of emotion. It wasn't Gaius he was angry at. Not at all, really, even if Gaius himself was more prone to passivity than active counterattacks. Even if he never felt the urge to do something, not like Merlin or Arthur. Merlin was only just rekindling the relationship he'd once shared with his old mentor, grown thin and distant over the long, long years and countless lives. He didn't want to jeopardise it.

Before Gaius could continue, Alice placed a hand upon his arm. She wasn't smiling, not now, and her gaze was intent upon Gaius' as he turned towards her. They seemed to share a wealth of silent communication in seconds, after which Gaius gave a heavy sigh and nodded. He glanced back towards Merlin. "Nothing. Just don't exert yourself too much, my boy."

Merlin nodded curtly, accepting the concern in Gaius' tone even as he disregarded it. The concern wasn't unwarranted; not one weeks ago he had pushed himself into exhaustion and fainted in the middle of the gym after a particularly triggering witnessing of a trial. Through the Comm only, of course, but that had made it no less real. Gaius hadn't been the only one to scold Merlin, though Alice – and Arthur – had done so by far less verbal means.

Striding down the hallway in the direction of the gym, Merlin seethed. His hands already drifted towards the knives that were strapped about his person, wrapping around cold hilts and along the smoothness of sheaths. He had not been a moment without them since he'd appropriated them from Nimueh's weapons supply and they almost felt like his own now. Almost a part of him. It was instinctive to want nothing more than to lob them at the nearest target, at the image on the Comm to embed between the eyes of the blathering idiots of the extremist party.

Yes, perhaps it was a very good thing that Merlin wasn't attending the conferences. Far from the danger of making his presence known – he was, and would remain to be, disappeared for all intents and purposes – it would have likely caused chaos to arise should the members of the opposing party suddenly acquire bloody headpieces. Not to mention it would do little for the floundering efforts being made to preach the humanity, the 'goodliness', of sorcerers.

Unfortunately, throwing knives at a self-repairing target on the far wall was not nearly as satisfying.
Merlin's arms were heavy and aching by the time the door to the gym opened. That in itself was saying something, for in the weeks since he'd first duelled with Arthur he had far developed the strength in his limbs, building his endurance. Now, his fingers twinged in protest of overuse.

He glanced over his shoulder, paused in the act of loosing another knife towards the faceless dummy of gelatinous Ruba, shaped to only vaguely resemble a human's form. He was panting in deep breaths and sweat had begun to dribble down his brow without his realising. He swept a hand across his forehead as he turned to face Arthur. "How did it end?"

Arthur leant back against the door and folded his arms. He dropped his chin, but even so Merlin could discern the tension in his face, the narrowing of his eyes. He could almost smell the frustration rolling off him in waves. Merlin nodded; Arthur didn't need to say anything. It was clear enough 'how it had ended'. With an abrupt spin, he raised a throwing knife once more and spun in end over end towards the Ruba dummy. It struck in the very centre of its forehead.

Unfortunately, Merlin felt no better for the act.

For uncountable minutes, Merlin stood facing the dummy and lobbing knives at the eyes, the throat, the sternum in the middle of the chest. When he ran out of weapons. He strode down the end of the room and tugged them free before striding back to his designated spot and beginning anew. He could have used a Collector, the magnetic device designed for such situations that would have darted forwards for him and gathered the knives before racing back to his side and offering them to him. But he didn't. He didn't want anything even vaguely electrical coming anywhere near him.

Throughout it all, Arthur stood silently behind him. His only movement was to prop one foot against the door in a stamp that was barely audible on the reinforced steel. Merlin didn't know if he watching him or if he simply worked through his own anger. For the moment, he didn't really care.

Finally, Arthur broke the silence. "It's not going to happen in three months."

"No. It very likely will not." The sickening squelch of knife into Ruba punctuated his words as Merlin flung another.

"Nothing is going to change with any kind of immediacy. It maybe never will."

"Probably not." Merlin knew it wouldn't. If centuries and lifetimes of ostracism, of hatred and fear for the power he wrought was any indication, Merlin was certain that it wouldn't. And no matter how Nimueh might preach to her fellow Confederation members, he knew that she was aware of it too. The difference was that she was so committed to her own mission that such pointlessness took a back seat in her carriage of importance.

"Then we have to do something."

Merlin paused in the act of flinging another knife. Freezing, his eyes unlocking from where they rested upon the Ruba dummy, he slowly, slowly, drew his gaze towards Arthur. Arthur, who was watching him with his keen intensity, with the expression that Merlin had caught him with so often of late. That unreadable expression that was perhaps a little protective, a little thoughtful, contemplative and… something else. Something unfathomable. Something resolute.

Lowering his arm, Merlin turned bodily towards him. His anger had far from died, even with hours of venting his frustrations, but he could speak with a modicum of decency. Voice low, he tilted his head curiously. "What did you have in mind?"

Arthur stared at him for a moment later before, dropping his arms from their fold, he pushed himself
from his lean against the door. He strode towards Merlin silently, stopping three feet away. "That all depends on how far you're willing to go. And what you're willing to do."

"It's not an issue of my willingness."

Arthur nodded, satisfaction narrowing his eyes. "That's good, then. Because I have an idea."

"You do?" Merlin raised an eyebrow. Arthur coming up with ideas wasn't anything new – he'd been a King after all, and a captain of his own knights, a strategist, even before that – but he'd held his tongue by way of suggestions before then. Merlin knew ideas clamoured for attention inside his head but he didn't voice them aloud. Not even to Merlin. But now…

Nodding, Arthur thinned his lips. "The only issue is that it would be best conducted out of the direct attention of the authorities. That it would require certain people's involvement. Meaning –"

"The slums," Merlin concluded. "Or even further afield if we have to." He felt a moment of confusion, of curiosity warring with his simmering anger, before determination took its place. It didn't matter what Arthur's plan was because, in terms of strategy, Merlin held no suspicions that even with countless lives lived in countless different situations, he was superior in such areas. He would rely on Arthur, because he had faith in him, not on just a professional level but personally, too. If past weeks had shown Merlin anything it was that the king he had once served so faithfully had very much returned. Even if he had no kingdom to protect any longer.

That protectiveness had evidently shifted its focus. Merlin tried with difficulty not to let it thrill him too greatly that he was encompassed by Arthur's redirected attention.

Arthur was nodding once more. "Yes. Which raises the problem of how to get there. The Facility was near impregnable but there may as well be a fifty-foot moat of spitting acid between us and the slums. It's almost as bad."

"Quite literally dangerous," Merlin replied distractedly. "The canals are dangerously acidic in late summer."

Arthur paused, blinking for a moment before his lip curled in distaste. "Even more of a problem, then. Flying over them is out of the question, and traversing through the terminals would require a pass, which I may – though unlikely – be able to acquire for myself. But you would be more…"

Merlin was shaking his head, which was likely what silenced Arthur. "We won't need that. I can get us into the slums."

Arthur raised a speculative eyebrow. "You can?"

"I can. And more than that, I might have someone to help us on the other side. Several someone's even, provided they're still alive."

Arthur's expression grew only more speculative at that, but after a moment he bowed his head in a nod. "Any assistance offered would be more than appreciated. So long as you can trust them."

"I can," Merlin said shortly. "At least in one instance, I definitely can."

"Then that's good enough for me. I trust you, Merlin."

Another thrill darted through Merlin, effectively overwhelming the anger that bubbled through him momentarily. If only Arthur knew what such a simple phrase did to him, Merlin doubted he would be quite so ready to utter such words again.
Struggling to keep his delight and upwelling of fierce determination in check, Merlin slid the knife still clasped in his hand back into its sheath. "Alright then. I'm ready when you are. So long as we can fly beneath Nimueh's knowledge and actually make it to the canals –"

"I'll get us there. Without Nimueh knowing." Arthur nodded his head curtly, an unfurling, almost cunning smile spreading across his face. And without another word, he turned on his heel and strode from the gym, pausing only to nudge the door open with the hiss of sliding mechanisms. Merlin followed in his wake, barely two steps behind.

Finally. They were finally doing something. Curse Nimueh and her promises; Merlin would hold up his end of the bargain should she stick to hers, but it was looking less and less likely that she would be able to. Not for the first time, Merlin thanked that Arthur had possessed the foresight to limit the sharing of magical knowledge that he held until after the invasion of the Pits. He doubted she would have truly upheld her end of the deal had they not. Merlin didn't hate Nimueh, not particularly – not like Arthur so evidently did – but he didn't like her. Nor did he trust her, not even as far as he could throw her.

The dual thuds of their boots sounded on the corridor as Merlin and Arthur made their way through the estate. Determination blossomed and spread through Merlin and he could almost feel it thrumming through Arthur. Finally, they were doing something. It was just an added bonus that they would be undertaking a covert quest into the slums. Merlin did have people – or a certain person – he wanted to see, especially after certain Past Memories of said people returning had resurfaced.

Merlin was long overdue in discerning Mordred's wellbeing.
Chapter 15

"Good god, it stinks."

Merlin glanced over his shoulder towards Arthur, his face suspiciously mild. "Well, what were you expecting?"

Arthur shook his head behind the hand raised to cover his mouth and nose. His eyes squinted in sympathy to the assault upon his nostrils and he turned a glare upon the slowly flowing canal of sludge that was just visible in the darkness. "I don't know. Some form of cleanliness? Could not someone clean it?"

Surprisingly, Merlin scowled. It wasn't directed towards Arthur and yet somehow Arthur managed felt guilty for speaking his mind nonetheless. Especially when Merlin muttered a nearly inaudible "and just who would be the ones to clean it I wonder?" in such an infuriated tone that he was left with few suspicions as to whom would be responsible for such a duty. As Merlin turned to start along the jagged shoreline of the canal, Arthur followed silently in his wake.

They'd managed to slip from Nimueh's estate with relative ease. Arthur could have attributed such ease to his own knowledge, to his skills with silent movement, avoiding detection and his acquired inventory of the minimal exits of the building. And he had initially, racing through the darkness of night dimmed Inner City alongside Merlin until they were well from the walls of the estate, they had paused and he'd glanced over his shoulder through the back window of their commandeered Skimmer in satisfaction. Arthur similarly assumed the acquisition of that Skimmer was attributed to his own knowledge – quite without a purpose in mind, he'd long since learned Mascus' identity passcode to direct the vehicle, one of the few in the New World that didn't require a fingerprint scan.

"That went better than I'd anticipated. Especially finding the break in the electrical field."

Merlin had peered at him with an odd expression on his face from the seat at his side, the meaning of which had only become apparent to Arthur later. "Yes. Lucky that."

Arthur had felt the right fool when the realisation that Merlin had used his magic swum to the fore. How had he not realised?

Arthur was still a little in awe of Merlin's magic. No longer as fearful of the ultimate power itself, for he had grown over the years to appreciate the beauty of magic, its complexity, and the sheer wonder of its existence. His appreciation was enough to quell any lingering unease. And Merlin… Merlin seemed to possess the most complicated magic of all.

It wasn't because his power was specific, of a strain that was focused on an unusual area. He didn't specialise in healing, like Alice, or illusions like Sebille, nor even something as broad as elemental magic as was common in several of the Confederation sorcerers that Arthur had encountered. No, it was more that Merlin was so broadly spread in his magical skills, touching in every area just a little – or a lot – that was unusual.

That and his strength. Arthur didn't know all that much about magical strength but he knew that Merlin was strong. He didn't have to overhear the whispers of Nimueh's subordinates – or 'allies' as she called them, though didn't really fool anyone – to know that much. It made Arthur wonder even further the incredible reality of their shared past, that Merlin had used that magic for Arthur, for Camelot and the kingdom.
And that Arthur hadn't known. Though his sense of betrayal had dwindled to next to nothing over the years, it had done little to quell his humiliation that he simply hadn't noticed. How had he not noticed?

But that humiliation was secondary, was so familiar that Arthur barely even noticed its constant presence anymore. It was unimportant when compared to the greater situation, their greater goal. The purpose that would lead to their eventual success and the idea that Arthur had gradually developed as he realised that Nimueh's approach wasn't going to work. Not fast enough.

That Arthur and Merlin, they would act for their goal. They would be the ones that would push for the invasion. And they would, with the assistance of every other sorcerer they could find, from the slums and beyond.

*If* they could find them, that was. That 'finding' would be the primary difficulty, the main stunting in Arthur's 'plan'. Only, Merlin didn't seem to think so. Arthur could only hope there was something to be said for that.

The Skimmer slipped almost silently though the streets of the Inner City, purring along the darkened roads of pale pavers and grey cement. It swung around corners and hummed past identical buildings of stoic, watchful silence. Faster than should have been possible, with a speed that had once churned Arthur's gut and cast him into dizziness for the blur of the passing streets, they whipped through the thin ring of Middle City, barely discernible from its wealthier cousin but for the absence of electrically-thrumming fences, and skidded to a halt before the moat of the canal.

It was a wide expanse of not-quite-water, at least one hundred feet across and slogged with the speed of a semi-frozen river. Even in the darkness of the feeble, constant light pollution Arthur could see the pops of gas bubbling intermittently across the surface, the spears of wreckage, of jagged metal spears and rusted sheets of discard protruding like twigs from a bird's nest. It was thick, that was apparent, as much ridden with gunk and muck, sludge and thick, sucking clay as with water. And it stunk.

Arthur could only follow Merlin as he hastened along the edge of the canal, eyes peeled and searching for something. Arthur didn't know what, only that, as he had been the one to sneak them from Nimueh's estate, to undermine the security systems of the Skimmer and trigger the vehicle into motion towards the Northern sector canal, the rest of their journey lay in Merlin's hands. He hadn't said how exactly, but had assured Arthur that he could get them both across the canal and into the slums. Alive.

Unlike Arthur, Merlin didn't appear concerned by the smell. Or perhaps he was simply ignoring it, though how he could overlook the stench that wafted in a visible fume was a mystery to Arthur. His eyes were narrowed, peering and head turning beneath the hood of the borrowed cloak as though searching for something. Barely ten minutes of searching, moving at a low run along the shore of the canal, and he started with the distinctive motion of 'found'.

Arthur stood silently beside him, watching with keen eyes as Merlin dropped into a crouch and extended a hand. His eyes flashed a distinctive gold, vibrant in the otherwise shallow darkness of the night around them. Arthur drew his gaze towards the direction that Merlin reached, his arm stretching as though straining to grasp at the non-existent distance. Until, seconds of silent, cautious waiting later, a boat drew forth from the gloom.

"Is that…?"

"It's a gondola," Merlin murmured, slowly lowering his hand as the long, canoe-like structure grazed in a scrape of coarse metal along the cement shore. "The canal sweepers use them."
Arthur glanced once more towards him. He paused for a moment, holding his tongue upon the question that, truly, he already knew the answer to. It didn't last long; Arthur had never been one to hold his tongue. "You were one of these… sweepers?"

Merlin nodded curtly but remained silent. Without glancing towards Arthur, with more agility than his past marked clumsiness would suggest him capable of, he slipped silently into the boat. It barely rocked at his weight, and he squatted low with the practiced distribution of weight that would have answered Arthur's question even without his nod. Arthur, pausing only to glance with faint disgust and slight apprehension towards the carpet of stewing canal grime roiling along the hull of the gondola, followed him.

Merlin didn't use magic to draw them across the river, which Arthur considered to be a wise choice. Instead, reaching into the shadowed interior of the boat, he drew a long rod with a slightly broader end from within. An oar, though it was less oar-like than any Arthur had seen before for its metallic structure and the narrowness of the paddle. With that same, practiced efficiency he'd used to clamber into the gondola, Merlin swung the oar over the side of the boat, dipped it into the sludge and, with a jerk, pushed them from the shore with a wobbling sweep. Another sweep sent them carding with surprising speed across the surface of the canal, and by the time he swung the oar to the opposite side and drew it through the sludge once more they had already set a steady course for the distant shore.

Arthur swiftly steadied himself, planting his feet and mimicking the crouch the Merlin fell into seemingly without consideration. He was not unfamiliar with seafaring, but his experience was minimal at best, and those he had experienced were far removed from the low, wobbling passage of the gondola. When he felt himself capable of retaining his feet, he gestured to Merlin with a flick of his hand. He kept his voice low and muted, tuned to prevent echoing. "Here, pass me the oar."

Merlin didn't even pause in his paddling as he glanced towards Arthur. The paleness of his face was all that was discernible from his expression, shadowed as it was by his hood and the further deeper shadowing of the canal. Arthur would wager he rolled his eyes, though, for the exasperation in his tone. "No, thank you, sire."

"Arthur, you've never rowed a gondola in your life. I'd fancy reaching the other side some time tonight rather than struggling with the prospect of being overturned and having to wade our way across instead. It's not a particularly enjoyable experience, having your skin gradually get eaten away by the acid."

Arthur was rendered mute for a moment, had to forcibly thrust aside the mental image of sizzling skin and drowning in sucking sludge to reply. "Don't be ridiculous, Merlin, I'm more than capable of paddling a boat. Besides, didn't Alice say not to overexert yourself unnecessarily?"

Merlin had turned back towards the prow but at Arthur's words cast him another glance that definitely included an eye roll. "What exactly do you call the visits to the gym, Arthur? I'm more than capable of exerting myself."

"You're hardly recovered."

"More than you seem to think, though," Merlin replied. "Recovered enough to beat you in a fight."

Arthur knew what Merlin was doing, taunting him into affront and diverting the conversation. He knew, and he let it happen. Scoffing, he shook his head. "You've hardly beaten me, Merlin."
"You keep telling yourself that. If it's what helps you to sleep at night."

"It's not a matter of sleeping at night. It's simple fact."

"That's your opinion, Arthur. You can't argue with the reality of what happened. Besides, I'm more than capable of rowing across a little strip of river."

Arthur raised a sceptical eyebrow to the back of Merlin's head. "You wouldn't pick it, Merlin. You've always been a beanpole; I'm surprised you can paddle this thing without your arms snapping in two."

The flick of sludge that only narrowly missed Arthur's face as Merlin swung the oar once more didn't seem accidental in the slightest. "I'm hardly a 'beanpole'. Just listen to Gaius; he seems to attribute that I've 'put meat on my bones' purely to his own doctoring skills." And as though to prove that he had indeed regained a modicum of muscle, Merlin paddled with an exceptionally forceful lunge that had them propelling in a slightly leaping skim across the surface of the canal fast enough that Arthur wavered slightly in his crouch, hand making a grasp for the side of the gondola.

He could have continued their argument. Likely would have had they not been drawing alongside the shoreline in just that moment. Well, that and the fact that Merlin was right, at least in this regard. He had filled out, recovered physically with remarkable speed. He would never be a solid man, his physique even less so than it had been in times gone by for reasons Gaius attributed to the hardness of slum life. He was deceptively skinny, almost sinewy, and demonstrated the hidden strength of his limbs with the leaps and bounds of his fighting style, with the launching swings of his throwing knives. It was a little captivating to watch; Arthur had always held the ability to admire another warrior, even if he quelled verbalising his appreciation for pride's sake. The way Merlin twisted and turned, flowing between motions, spinning to his feet and flinging himself into the air as though he were practically weightless was strangely hypnotic to watch. Arthur attributed that fact to the reason he'd had somewhat more… difficult thoroughly trouncing Merlin in their practice sessions.

And yet, at the same time it was disconcerting, and not only for the seeming incompetency of his frame. Comparing Merlin's skill with knives to his complete failure with weapons of any sort in the past was like… was like… it was like considering the possibility that Arthur couldn't paddle a gondola.

There were some things that had changed, some things that Arthur couldn't overlook in Merlin himself as much as he couldn't in the world around him, that still drew him to pause. Like the fact that he was quieter, both in the volume of his voice and the fact that at times he'd seemingly learned of the ability to hold his tongue where he'd been previously unable. He was less clumsy, which was something that Arthur hadn't thought he would miss but actually did, and he was more solemn, though such a change could be attributed his experience in the Facility. Just like his seeming inability to smile could be.

Arthur considered that he missed Merlin's smile most of all. Not once had he seen more than a glimmer, a shadow of its past vibrancy. It was another thing that Arthur didn't realise he would miss so dearly until it vanished. And for some reason – perhaps for the suspected cause of its vanishing – it only intensified Arthur's protectiveness of his friend and once-manservant. Intensified it almost compulsively.

It was his solemnity, his deep-thoughtfulness, that surfaced in the moment that Merlin leapt lightly from the gondola. Arthur followed close behind, stepping onto the mud-slick shoreline – no cement or pavers here – before turning towards to regard his friend.

No, solemn didn't begin to describe it. Even in the gloom, in the dim light that shadowed most of his
expression, Arthur could see that Merlin's gaze had become tight, had turned hard and slightly haunted as he stared upon the sprawl of streets before him.

Arthur had seen it before. He'd seen the lasting impact of a battle, a war, an injury or a great pain. It lasted, clinging like an aching injury, unshakeable and enduring. From what he had seen, what he had experienced himself, there were two ways to respond: there were those that would fall into listlessness, into despair that gradually ate at their sanity and their will to live. And then there were those that committed themselves to another cause with passionate intensity.

Merlin was committed. He'd dedicated himself to a different war entirely. Arthur saw it every day, when he spoke to Nimueh with sharp demand that he would have shied from doing out of respect in the Past. He saw it when he watched the OGAs declaring the latest changes to the laws concerning sorcerers. He witnessed it when the Confederation sorcerers visited with increasing frequency to request in tones his teachings with deep, almost awed respect and he deflected them with words of "not yet" and "when your side of the bargain is upheld". And he saw it when he fought, when he blanked his face and threw himself into his knife-wielding, dancing and twisting, throwing himself with speed and intensity until sweat dripped in thick dribbles down his face. Until he passed out which, Arthur swore, he would never let happen again. Merlin had indeed become committed, had grown strong – or perhaps that was simply the strength that had always been there, a strength that Arthur hadn't fully realised?

Yet even in spite of that visible strength, far be it from diminishing his desire to help Merlin, to rescue him, when his friend was once more by his side he felt only an intensifying of his need to do more. As though his motivation had shifted focus. The desire to support Merlin was at least on par with his continuing need to find his sister. He'd long since realised it, just as he'd realised that, incarnation though he was, Merlin wasn't exactly the same person that he had once known. And that there was no way that Arthur could force him back into that mould, even had the once-desperate longing to do so remained strong. Now, he was simply… different. And Arthur had a far greater desire.

*If only I could help you…*

Merlin shook himself out of his thoughts as Arthur watched him, his face hardening further and angular features seeming to become even sharper for their tightness. He appeared to steady himself, to form a resolution, and nodded his head as though reaching a decision. "Come on."

Unfamiliar as he was – and distasteful of such a floundering situation – Arthur ceded Merlin's greater capacity to lead their mission. Arthur may have plastered together the foundational bones of the idea, but other than that there was little else he could do. "You know where you're going?"

Merlin nodded once more. "If I have my bearings properly."

"And do you?"

Merlin turned towards him, and Arthur was relieved to see that his expression had cleared of its intent, melancholic reminiscence. "I know the slums better than you'd know Camelot, I'd wager."

"The entire slums?" Arthur raised an eyebrow. "That's markedly larger than Camelot."

"Yes, it is," Merlin replied simply. And without another word he set off at a silent, steady jog down the narrow road directly before them. Arthur fell into step beside him.

It was the first time Arthur had ever truly been in the slums. He'd passed through them in the armoured vehicles that carried upper class individuals through the stink and grime into Middle City, by-passing the direct need to dirty the faux-leather boots with clinging mud. The windows had been
narrow and shaded, both from visibility and sun, and allowed barely a hazy view from without.

Even in the darkness of the night, a night that was never, in fact, entirely dark, Arthur could see more than he’d been able to before. As he ran at a steady pace alongside Merlin, he allowed his periphery to drink in the sights around him.

What he saw was horrifying.

It was as vastly differently to Inner City as was Camelot but for entirely different reasons. Whereas Camelot was cluttered with people, was earthen and rich with life, was devoid of the pervasive metallic substance and synthetics that coated everything from buildings to candlelight like a smothering blanket, the slums were… disastrous.

There was none of the orderliness of the Inner City buildings standing at identical attention along wide roads. Arthur felt discomforted by that orderliness, but even that had to be better than that which he passed by. The houses in the slums barely warranted the term, were identifiable only from the leaning roofs atop a mismatched number of walls. Those walls were punctured with holes that peered into the inner blackness of the buildings, were more patched and disordered than a quilt and looked far less sturdy. It was only the pathetic excuse for awnings dotted along the road that indicated the misshapen, and skewed scraps of metal were doors rather than an extension of those walls.

But that was only a part of it. There were the almost claustrophobically narrow roads lathered in such a thick layer of clinging mud that Arthur fought to maintain his pace before he managed to establish a stepping-stone rhythm to his steps that minimised the suction. There was the streaking of filth that marred the rusted metal of the houses, that provided a modicum of consistency across the mismatched materials. There were the darting motion of rats, of grumbling cats of skin and bones, of scrawny dogs that provided a glimpse of some of the only animals Arthur had ever seen in the New World.

There were the bodies.

The first sight of them drew Arthur to a stop in the middle of the road. He wasn’t certain at first that a body was even what it was. But when Merlin grabbed his wrist and dragged him with almost brutal manhandling into the shadows of an awning, the following illumination of an overhead light streaking through the path of where he had stood seconds before. Merlin stood silently beside him, pressed similarly into the wall with eyes downcast. One hand, warmth of his fingertips just detectable through the thin fabric of Arthur’s shirt, settled against his chest as though to withhold him from throwing himself from the wall. The lingering glow of the light cast the street into stark relief.

It was definitely a body.

"What…?"

Arthur choked off his words as he heard the flare of anger that coloured them, making them louder. He couldn't bring himself to continue.

Merlin, eyes still downcast, shrugged one shoulder. "Spotters rake the streets looking for anybody out after curfew. Authorities nab them if they see anyone."

It wasn't what Arthur had meant when he'd asked with his truncated question but he was distracted by the new information, eyes drawn from the twisted, crumpled body across the street. "They do what?" Merlin lifted his gaze to him but didn't reply. The faintly haunted cast to his expression had returned, but he vanquished it with what Arthur recognised as being practiced disregard. "Where are
Merlin shrugged his shoulder once more. "Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe to the Pits? Maybe to another sort of facility?" He shook his head grimly. "All I know is that if someone's taken, they never come back. Like with the Pits. With the sorcerers."

Arthur stared at Merlin in silence. That brief insight into the reality of the slums was… it was unexpected to say the least. Horrifying if Arthur was to be truthful with himself. He wasn't naïve enough to believe that any 'holding facility' would be anything less than vicious in their punishment. And no one came back?

*It's not just the sorcerers either. This is the entirety of the slums. What has this world descended to?*

Whatever it was, whatever the depth of its disaster, Arthur hadn't the faintest idea of how to approach rectifying the problem. He could hardly conceive of how to aid the minority of sorcerers.

Merlin dropped his hand from Arthur's chest and, with a beckoning tilt of his head, directed them once more down the street. Arthur paused only briefly to peer at the body of what he could now discern was a young woman. Or the remains of a young woman. Horribly, it appeared as though some scavenger, a dog or perhaps a stray cat, had torn at her cheek, her shoulder and limbs, to expose bone where the mud of clothes-less skin failed to cover her.

It only served to urge Arthur to rekindle his anger, the fury rising within him once more. It was a struggle to suppress it, for Arthur to drag his feet into a run after Merlin and abandon that which had been so carelessly discarded. So abandoned.

They were forced to duck for cover twice more from the Spotters, each time Merlin drawing Arthur into the shadows and placing a hand upon his chest to withhold him. Arthur didn't comment on the touch but let it be, even if it was unexpected. If it comforted Merlin in any way, the thought that he might be in some way directing Arthur – or perhaps even protecting him – then he would accept it. The rapidly darkening cast to his expression stilled his tongue further from any possible objection.

It was almost two hours later that they finally drew to a halt without the trigger of a Spotter. A singularly unremarkable building stood before where Merlin had turned his attention, wedged between two similarly plain and unwelcoming abodes, the only distinguishing feature being that it was perhaps slightly larger than those that surrounded it. Merlin cast a glance around himself, a cursory snap of his head in either direction that appeared nothing if not useless but Arthur would wager picked up even the distant movements of scurrying rats half a street away. A moment later he was slipping beneath the leaning awning that seemed to creak even in immobility. Arthur cast a similarly scanning glance around himself before following. He fell into the shadows and through the door as Merlin led the way.

Inside was empty. Or it appeared to be. Empty and cluttered with broken furniture, what could have been a bed, what may have been a cupboard, what had probably been a kitchen before it had fallen to mildew and dereliction. Arthur peered warily around himself; he could have commented, felt the need to comment and dispute the fact that no, Merlin, this was not what he'd had in mind when he'd suggested they make contact with the sorcerers in the slums. Except that Merlin had fallen to his knees beside what appeared to be a feeble attempt at a threadbare rug, cast it aside and scrabbled his fingers upon the floor until he swung open a door.

A hatch. Into the ground. Arthur could just make out the faint murmur of distant voices below.

Merlin paused in the act of sliding forth through the trapdoor, one foot already on the top, rusted rung of the ladder descending into darkness. No, not quite darkness. It was just faintly lighter, illuminated
as the city as a whole was but from an underground source rather than the tangible light that blanketed everything. He glanced towards Arthur. "Maybe you shouldn't come down."

Arthur lifted an eyebrow, resisting the urge to fold his arms across his chest. Merlin had, not three days ago, smirked when he'd told him that he always did that when he was being objectionable. He made it sound as though he meant 'petulant', however, and Arthur was not petulant. Similarly, he fought the urge to scowl and condescend in his reply. "No, I'm coming."

Pursing his lips, something like worry flashing briefly across his expression, Merlin nodded. Then he descended into the hole in the floor with more speed than Arthur had thought realistically possible to ensure he could still see where he was going. Arthur hastened to follow. He should have demanded he go first; it wasn't as though he didn't trust that Merlin could take care for himself, with both his magic and his surplus of weapons, but… Arthur should have gone first regardless. Just in case. Besides, one never knew who would be waiting below to wave a Prod around carelessly.

The climb down the groaning ladder was longer than Arthur had anticipated. By the time his feet hit the floor, a hard sound devoid entirely of the squelch of mud, his surrounds had brightened markedly. By fire, he noted, not electricity. A glance around himself, outside of the slight crevice the ladder was secreted in, he noticed an arrangement of sconces around the room, conical torches casting leaping shadows across the walls.

But it was the room itself that rendered Arthur silenced. Not the occupants – of which there were perhaps two dozen in total – but the room itself. It resembled nothing if not a tavern. A tavern from the days of Camelot, as though it had been plucked directly from the less respectable streets of the city. The walls were dark but for the illumination of the torches, devoid of even pretend windows. The tables were cluttered by too many chairs, stained and splintered and sticky with some sort of spillage that was likely the source of the sharp reek to the air. The bar itself was little more than a collection of tables mashed together, with the barkeeper pouring drink after drink into mismatched cups and mugs and palming them off for the exchange of ragged, plastic rations tickets. And wedged in one corner, a man and a woman tapped idly upon what might have been drums in an alternate universe in what could have maybe resembled music.

"What is this place?" Arthur muttered, leaning towards Merlin. He didn't need to lower his voice, the chatter of those lounging at tables more than drowning out his words. But he did so anyway, and not only because of the glances that had already turned their way, ranging from disregarding to mildly curious to outright suspicious and even faintly aggressive. He was glad not for the first time that Merlin had suggested they dress themselves in the clothes that Arthur gauged were reminiscent of 'medieval' times, as Nimueh called them. Though theirs were of a distinct difference in the quality to the patched and thinning breeches and tunics that most of their onlookers wore, it was served to lessen the discrepancy more than could have been achieved with the wide, flowing sleeves and skirt-like trousers of the upper class.

If there was one thing Arthur knew it was that standing out, at least in this world, elicited unwanted attention. Negative attention. And suspicion. That suspicion more often than not led to aggression.

Merlin, dipping his head slightly to better hide his face, turned into Arthur. "It doesn't have a name. Or at least not one that I know of. Keeps its existence even less likely to be discovered."

"Then what is it?" Arthur repeated. He similarly dropped his chin, hiding further into his hood, and maintained a steady scan of those around them. He was not one to hide from potential assailants back in the day, but then more than his attitude had changed over the years.

Shifting in a motion of discomfort, though what Arthur recognised as grounding himself, Merlin shrugged. "Just a place. To be away from the authorities. To have something that the authorities don't
know about, or at least that they don't know the exact location of. And this one," he tipped his head indicatively, "is the only place in the Northern sector that I know has seen evidence of certain… people."

Arthur nodded, hearing the unspoken words. He had asked Merlin before, spoken to him of where they would go, and Merlin had only stated that they were going somewhere that he would be able to contact his acquaintances.

"Not my friends," he'd said with a slight curl of his lip. "'Friends' is too benevolent a term to be used in the slums, really, except with a touch of irony. But they're relatively trustworthy, so long as you don't turn your back on them." And Arthur had heard the warning in his tone.

If only Merlin seemed to realise it for himself. Arthur knew he was aware of the need for care, for delicacy, not only because he was a sorcerer but because he was a wanted sorcerer. That he'd been captured, identified, and even spent years under the cruel tortures of the 'doctors' of the Facility. Though no public announcement had been made for his escape – because of course there wouldn't be – Arthur was aware that the Hunters were on the lookout for him. And even had they not been, Gaius spoke that his picture had been sent by Clip to every individual within the encompassing region of London when he'd first been arrested alongside his fellow sorcerers. Even years past there would be some who remembered him.

We need to be careful. The second someone looks at him sideways... Arthur drew his gaze around at those still glancing at them sideways. Aloud, he asked, "Do you recognise anyone? Any contacts?"

Merlin bit his lip for a moment. Head still bowed, he made a nearly indiscernible gesture towards a candle of a fireplace across the room and a pair of hunched individuals seated before it. Without another word he strode silently across the room, edging along the wall in an attempt to attain unobtrusiveness. Arthur followed a step behind, his hand drifting towards his waist to where his cloth-shrouded sheath of his rapier hung. He'd draw it if he must. In a heartbeat.

The figures – two women – immediately ceased their conversation at their arrival. The younger of the two, barely more than a girl of indiscernible colouration for the grime that smeared her face and hair, scowled with a curl of her lips. "What do you want?"

Merlin didn't spare her a glance, however. He had eyes only for the elderly woman seated across from her junior. The woman's narrowed eyes squinted further as she peered into the darkness of his hood. Arthur's hand tightened on his hilt. "I need to talk to you, Grim."

The effect of those short words was profound. The old woman's eyes widened just perceptibly and she drew back into her chair. Understanding brightened her features momentarily before she masked it.

The girl evidently didn't know what Merlin spoke of. Her scowl only grew more profound. "What? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Mae," her companion said quietly. It was in a whip-crack of sharpness, however.

Mae turned towards her. Her scowl dampened only slightly. "What?"

"Go and get yourself a drink."

"What? I'm not going to –"

"Go. And have a chat to Hermann while you're there." She tossed her chin towards the barkeep who, noticing her attention with some sixth sense, raised his gaze towards her and nodded in
"But –"

"Mae."

Mae's scowl grew deepened once more. With a spit that left a wet splatter on the floor at her feet, she jerked herself to her feet. Arthur was only mildly surprised to notice that, for all of her painful thinness, she was nearly as tall as he. She paused to lean with glaring intensity towards Merlin, then to do the same to Arthur, before sweeping past them to the bar.

Arthur drew his attention back to the other woman – Merlin had called her Grim? – just as Merlin eased himself into the chair Mae had vacated. Arthur almost objected, for seating oneself in a volatile and potentially hazardous situation was tantamount to suicide, but bit his tongue. It had to do the same on multiple occasions in the past with political allies. It was just that it was different when it was someone else other than him playing the part of the blissfully ignorant diplomat. His hand tightened on his sword hilt once more.

Grim was studying Merlin intently. Her eyes were narrowed once more, but Arthur was given the impression less of suspicion and more of compensation for poor eyesight. She leant forwards slightly into her seat, an elbow propping on the table between them. "You. I know you."

Though Merlin nodded, he only withdrew further into his seat. "You do."

"You're not gonna to tell me, are you?"

"I'm pretty sure you've guessed already."

A thin smile tightened Grim's lips. "I've my suspicions. And if they are correct –"

"Then you'd understand why I want them to remain unknown," Merlin finished, lifting his chin slightly but still somehow managing to keep his face shadowed. Arthur wondered if his magic had something to do with that.

Nodding slowly, Grim leant further towards him. "It's been a while, then."

"It has."

"Though you were dead, I did."

"Not quite." Arthur could hear the dry amusement in his tone.

"No, I can see that." Grim cocked her head curiously. "Would take a bit to kill you, I'd wager. Was surprised when you disappeared 'cause of it." She tilted her head back the other way. "What can I help you with?"

"Who's to say I need your help with something?"

Grim chuckled lowly. "'Course you do. Why else does anyone come to me?"

Merlin inclined his head slowly. It was a respectful gesture and Arthur was left with the impression that had sat with him since the first confrontation with Nimueh: it was almost as though he and Merlin had switched places.

\textit{Which, really, we almost have. This is his world, and though I may publically hold a higher station than him – a much higher station – it is his world.} With such an understanding, Arthur found it
remarkably less difficult to remain silent. He kept his hand held firmly upon his sword, however. "You're free to name names?" Merlin asked. His voice dropped in volume by half at least.

Grim leant towards him further. "That all depends on what name you're referring to."

Merlin was silent for a moment. The only sign of his discomfort, of his unease, lay in his slight fidget, barely discernible. His voice was barely more than a whisper when he said, "Mordred."

Grim drew backward immediately. Her eyes narrowed and suspicion swum forth in place of curiosity. Arthur couldn't exactly blame her – he'd felt the same when Merlin had first offered him the name of his 'contact', though he thought it likely for a different reason to Grim's. The old woman opened her mouth to reply and yet, after barely a second, snapped it shut once more. Her eyes slid sideways towards Arthur and fastened upon him like a hook through the lip of a fish. "You gonna listen?"

Arthur could have nodded. He could have gone further than nodded, and spat that of course he would listen because why shouldn't he? Arthur had always struggled with what he had come to realise in recent years, since climbing into the New World, was a sense of entitlement that was at present entirely misplaced. Because Arthur truly wasn't entitled to anything, not anymore. Even if he wanted to remain at Merlin's side simply to offer what scant protection he could, he wasn't necessarily allowed to, regardless of the fact that he deliberately overlooked such restrictions.

But before he could speak, in indignant objection or cordial reply, Merlin turned towards him. His face was still hidden and yet briefly, for a split second of a moment, Arthur could make out the barest flicker of gold. It flickered like a shooting star before disappearing as he turned back towards Grim.

Arthur understood. He understood the unspoken words and, though his protectiveness reared its head and raised its hackles, he withheld it. For all that he may feel the need to remain at Merlin's side, to protect him as fiercely as he had once protected his own kingdom, Merlin could take care of himself. Or at least he could when not faced with the honed skills of the Hunters. The thought caused Arthur to grit his teeth fiercely. He could only hope that none of the bowed, glaring individuals in the room were Hunters in disguise, that none carried electrically-imbued weapons. As much for their sakes as anything else; they wouldn't survive an attempted attack, not if Arthur had anything to say about it.

Nodding his head, Arthur didn't spare Grim a second glance. Merlin could take care of himself, if not – hopefully not – with magic, then with his knives. He could defend himself, even without Arthur's support and certainly against an gnarled, elderly woman. So Arthur only reached towards him, pressing a hand on Merlin's shoulder in deliberate warning that he was sure Merlin would understand, and stepped backwards, sidling towards the bar counter. Grim watched him the entire way, not speaking until he'd settled himself in a casual lean against the counter. Only to stop immediately when it groaned its protest and wobbled in distress.

"You want a drink?"

Arthur glanced over his shoulder towards the barkeeper. He was a square-faced man, with a heavy brow and heavier eyes underscored by thick smudges that could have been the smear of soot for their prominence. He stared up at Arthur as he filled a chipped mug with something that looked like dirty water.

Arthur frowned. He didn't particularly want to drink anything, not from the slums and certainly not if it resembled the dirty water chugging from the tin barrel, but he was supposed to be blending in. So… "What have you got?"
The barkeeper paused in the act of handing the sloshing mug to a hunchback of a man and stared at him blankly. Then he sneered. "It that supposed to be funny, boy? You think you're funny?" The hunchback chuckled hoarsely, coughing as he muttered "what you got?" in a mocking tone.

So much for blending in, Arthur thought. He saw the error of his words as soon as he'd said them. They likely had nothing but the one beverage, and it was a surprise that they would even have that. Shaking his head, he glanced back towards Merlin and Grim. "No, thank you."

"Well then, bugger off," the barkeep growled.

Arthur turned towards him once more, frown deepening at the aggressive cast to his face. The hunchback, stringy hair nearly obscuring his features, grinned like a child watching a puppet show. "Excuse me?"

"You not buying anything, you can bugger off out of my bar." The barkeeper jerked a thumb towards the ladder at the end of the room, nearly obscured by the shadows dancing across the walls. "My bar, my rules."

Suppressing the urge to sigh, Arthur gritted his teeth. He paused only for a moment, however, before, grumbling, he slipped a hand into the depths of his cloak and extracted a ration ticket. Nimueh had wordlessly handed him a packet of what he had realised was a wealthy amount upon adding him to her Confederation, of which she'd repeatedly did so every month since. He couldn't help but notice that the ticket was in far better condition than those he'd seen the leering hunchback hand over moments before.

The barkeeper seemed to take his reluctance as a personal offence. He filled a mug and slammed it onto the counter with enough force to empty half of its contents before deliberately stepping away, shambling up to the other end of the counter. Arthur took the mug gingerly and peered inside. Dirty water. Surely it could be nothing but dirty water. He didn't particularly want to drink it but… he'd already made a scene of himself and didn't feel inclined to do so again. Arthur was trying to avoid being the centre of attention for one of the first times in his life.

With persisting distaste, turning towards Merlin and Grim once more, Arthur raised the mug to his lips. He had to struggle not to splutter and retch as the liquid, scoldingly, burningly cold seared through his mouth. He was almost sure was that it was canal juice, skimmed from the surface of the river moat. Arthur resolved to drink no more. Pretences be damned, he valued his organs and didn't think fondly of the prospect of liquefying them.

He kept his eyes trained on Merlin, on Grim more than Merlin, and just as much upon the room at large. He couldn't hear any distinct words of the surrounding conversations, could make out nothing but the buzz of exchanges, the ringing clink of mugs on splintered, rusted metal and the scape of chairs on a dirt floor. What he did notice was that no one laughed. No one raised their voices. No one spoke above a murmur and every single patron glanced over their shoulder every other minute as though all were partial to a nervous twitch.

And some stared.

It wasn't a blatant stare, and as such Arthur only noticed after several moments. Yet when he did he couldn't shake the weight of cold eyes. He noticed Mae affix him with her chilling stare moments after he caught the eye and crooked smile of the hunchback once more. They watched him, suspicious more than curious, aggressive more than mellow, and with each passing moment that suspicion seemed to grow.

It was when Arthur noticed that many of those stares were fixed upon Merlin as much as they did
himself that he knew they had to leave. It was when a table of shambling men and women, moving with deceptive casualness, slowly rose to their feet that he knew it had to be immediately.

Placing his barely touched mug upon the counter, he strode with the casual, lengthy stride of one distinctly 'unworried' back towards the fireplace. Grim, mumbling with a fast quiver of her lips, immediately silenced at his approach. Arthur didn't spare her a second glance but fixed Merlin with a pointed stare. "We're leaving," he said, his ears pricked and straining for the slightest noise behind him, the barest indication that someone was making a break to divert them.

To his credit, Merlin didn't object. Whether it was something in Arthur's voice or that he'd noticed the potential for discord himself hardly mattered. He rose to his feet with a nod towards Grim and in seconds they were making their way towards the ladder. Arthur directed Merlin first after a split-second face off that ended with Merlin's exasperated sigh and an inaudible mutter that sounded distinctly like a reprimand.

They made it out of the bar. They made it a full street away before they were set upon. It was only chance that saw a Spotter soaring overhead moments before, sparingly illuminating the party of what had to be at least half of the bar's patrons. They wouldn't have been noticeable had not Arthur been looking for them, but when he did, it was with a shove of Merlin's hand pressing him against the wall beneath an overhang and a practiced flurry of whipping cloak that he drew his rapier.

He waited only long enough for the Spotter to drawn into the distance before launching himself into the middle of the narrow street and planting his feet to face the oncoming attackers. There was no point continuing to run; these were slum-dwellers, they would know their way around. Arthur had no doubts that they at least had minimalistic tracking skills. Merlin was at his side, the very tautness of his body indicating his readiness.

The attackers flooded like bees rushing forth from a hive, both in front and, Arthur realised momentarily, from behind. *Huh. We wouldn't have been able to keep going anyone,* he considered detachedly. They couldn't be anything but members of their pursuer's party from the slow drawing of batons, of knives and automatic crossbows, and of some weapons that Arthur was less familiar with; a strange contraption worn like a spiked gauntlet upon the hand, a quarterstaff with what appeared to be a curved spear along one end, a mace-like tool with a heavy trio of chains that trailed on the ground behind its wielder.

And a Zapper. The crackle of electricity in the whips could be heard with every step its handler took. Arthur could only wonder at from where a slum-dweller had gotten a Zapper.

*That one will have to go down first.* Arthur knew with certainty, with sureness acquired from months amidst sorcerers, that electricity was the bane of any magic user. Not only did it short magic like a candle abruptly extinguished but it hurt, more for that sudden stunting of magic as the jarring attack on the nerves upon contact. To hear the Confederation sorcerers speak of it, the loss of magic was the worse of the two. *I have to take down the Zapper, before it gets to Merlin.*

It wasn't even a want anymore. It was a necessity.

As the slum dwellers drew forwards, Arthur raised his rapier and pointed it towards the nearest pursuer. It effectively stoppered the further approach of the entire party. Narrowing his eyes, sweeping a steady glare around the circle of them, Arthur raised his voice just enough to be heard. "We've no quarrel with you. Be on your way."

There was a pause, a deliberate suspension of noise, before a bubble of snickers rung forth. Arthur scowled, made to speak once more – did they have no sense of propriety? No, they probably didn't – but then Merlin was at his side and murmuring in his ear. "Yeah, I didn't think that would work."
Arthur turned his glare towards him. "Oh, very astute of you, Merlin."

But Merlin wasn't attending to him any longer. His gaze was casting a quick, measuring scan around the ring of attackers in a gesture Arthur was all too familiar with for conducting it himself. Already he'd lowered himself into a grounded stance, his hands hovering at his waist where Arthur knew his knives were hidden, though not yet drawing them. "It just depends. There's only two reasons, really..." He sounded more as though he spoke to himself.

Before Arthur could say a word in reply, a wide man, large when compared to his fellows though still gaunt and sinewy in his thinness, stepped forwards. He hefted his spear-quarterstaff and nearly touched blades with Arthur. "No quarrel, huh?" He scoffed, shaking his head as though bemoaning the idiocy of Arthur's words. "I'd say we have something of a quarrel."

"Then tell me of your concerns," Arthur said, keeping his voice mellow and free of objection despite yearning to do nothing but growl at the man. "Perhaps we can reach an accord without exchanging blows."

"I sincerely doubt that," the man, the apparent spokesperson, replied. "See, what we're wanting is everything you've got. Have a pretty packet of tickets with you, I'll bet. And those clothes; don't come by them in the slums. Which means your either from the micro-cities or..."

"Inner City," a hooded woman, the one who held the Zappers, spat viciously from behind the man.

"Or Inner City," the man agreed. Arthur didn't need the dim glow of distant Spotters to illuminate the snarl on the man's face. He could hear it in his voice. "We don't take kindly to Inner City folk. What, you thinking you can just trample on down to our streets, into our bars? Drink our Burners and warm by our fires?"

"Thought that was it," Merlin muttered at Arthur's side, too quietly to be heard by anyone else. Arthur tightened his jaw; knowing didn't exactly help.

"Perhaps we can compromise," Arthur attempted. "I'll offer you the entirety of our ration tickets if you will allow us to pass by untouched." He gestured towards himself without motioning exactly towards his pocket; he didn't want to give the game away entirely. "I believe we would both rather leave from this confrontation unharmed."

"You think we're in danger of getting harmed?" A voice behind Arthur chuckled in dark amusement. Several surrounding voices snickered alongside him.

"I think you shouldn't underestimate foes you've no knowledge of," Arthur replied just as darkly. "If it's material goods you want, then..."

"And more'n that," the hooded woman took a half step forwards. The coiling tails of her Zappers swung as she gestured towards Merlin. "Him. I recognise him. Not sure as to what he did but I recognise him from years ago. You're a criminal, you are. Got plucked from the slums by them Hunters. I saw your face on the Clip."

"Aren't we all criminals?" Merlin murmured, but once more it sounded as though he spoke more to himself than to any of their aggressive audience. "There you go, I was right on both counts."

Arthur disregarded his sarcastic self-praise. He kept his gaze upon the hooded woman, upon the man with the quarterstaff. "What is it to you?"

"Criminals should be locked up," the woman said, a hiss in her tone. "You know what happens if a chase gets taken to the slums? People die is what. Them Hunters, they don't care for anyone else..."
'round them. Four times as many people'll end up dead after a Hunt than would have if them criminals just gave themselves up like they should." She jerked her Zappers towards Merlin once more and it was all Arthur could do to not to swipe his sword through them and cleave them in two.

Anger. He felt a sure, rising anger well within him. Merlin was a criminal? That was what they had a problem with? From the sounds of it, they didn't even seem to consider the prospect of him being a sorcerer. He was simply tagged as 'other' and 'deserving of punishment' and immediately ostracised from their community.

If they even have a community, Arthur thought grimly. He had thought that perhaps the slum dwellers would be bound by circumstance. That similar trials would forge stronger interdependence, that they would perhaps even help one another to face the universal enemy of the government, of the authorities and the Hunters. But no, it appeared such was not so. It seemed that they cared for themselves, and themselves only. The sympathy that Arthur had felt feeling rise further and further with every step into the slums was abruptly capped.

They wanted to hurt Merlin? What, just because he was labelled a criminal? Without even knowing why? No, such people didn't deserve Arthur's sympathy. Not when it came to Merlin. They were desperate, true, but even the desperate could be something more than cold-hearted and hateful.

The man was speaking once more and Arthur whipped his attention to him with a jerk of his head fast enough to cause several of their attackers to shift warily. "We've no 'quarrel' with you," he was saying, gesturing towards Arthur. "None of us reckon we know you, not from what we could see. Which isn't much, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. You give us your clothes, your tickets, that pretty little sword you've got there, and we'll let you go. But him," and there he gestured towards Merlin. "Him, we keep."

"Like hell," Arthur growled under his breath. He glanced sidelong towards Merlin. "Merlin, I've -"

"Got the Zapper I take it?" Merlin spoke just shy of a whisper.

Arthur blinked in surprise. He'd expected more of an argument from him, more useless words of caution. "You're remarkably lenient. I expected more of an argument."

Merlin shrugged, deliberately ignoring the rising hisses of the ignored attackers as they raised their weapons higher. "I can recognise practicality when I see it. You take the Zapper," he nodded towards the hooded woman, "and I'll take the rest."

Arthur snorted at that, but only shook his head in reply. Merlin wasn't incompetent with weapons, but against half a dozen assailants a trained swordsman could almost struggle against a horde or amateurs for sheer overwhelming number. Still, he could hardly dispute Merlin's eagerness; he'd just take care of the Zapper before turning his attention towards the rest of them. It shouldn't take long, surely. Hopefully Merlin could waylay them for long enough.

Slowly, with such fluid motions that Arthur doubted their audience even realised what he was doing, Merlin drew his knives.

That was when Arthur snapped.

It was always better to attack than to wait to be attacked, Arthur considered. Better to have the higher ground. With a lunging leap, Arthur swept towards the man with the spear-quarterstaff, battered the weapon away with his sword and managed to strike him off balance with a blow of hilt to head before leaping sideways towards the hooded Zapper-wielder. The woman sprang backwards like a spooked cat, but an instant later her hands swung aloft. The electrical crack danced in a sizzling
melody with that of the whips.

Arthur darted after her, the sound of cries, of anger and pain behind him alerting him to Merlin similarly launched attack. He danced and spun, ducked and dodged the swings of the whips, and then lunged sideways as the quarterstaff man attempted an attack from behind.

Two on one. Hardly fair. But Arthur couldn't object, couldn't think of anything truly but the almost reflexive movement of his feet, the swing of his arm as he parried with his sword and the jolt that trembled the length of his blade as he deflected the whip's strikes. That, and the anger that had hardened into molten lava coursing through his veins and sharpened his senses to needlepoint fineness. He thanked the strap of material, of spongy grip, that stemmed the flow of energy thrummed from the contacting Zapper towards his hand; he doubted he would have stopped fighting even had the electricity caused him to drop his weapon, would have fought barehanded if he had to. Fought, and perhaps even fallen.

It was a fierce fight. The sheer contrast of their weapons made normal tactics next to impossible. Arthur found himself thrown bodily into rolls, leaping to avoid the thrash of whips, spinning in twirls as often as swiping with his sword to avoid the extensive reach of the quarterstaff. It was a testament to the practice he'd had with Merlin, he knew, that he managed so well. Say what he would about Merlin's fighting style, about what could more likely be labelled a theatre act for all the leaping and cartwheeling, the somersaults and springs, but it had honed Arthur's wits to expect the unexpected. Even more than his knights training had in some ways.

Because in the New World, people didn't fight with swords. They didn't fight cleanly, either.

The reason for such became readily apparent seconds into his fight. Arthur's sword had not the reach of the quarterstaff, nor the flexibility of electrical advantage of the Zappers. He was limited, and he knew it. His opponents knew it too. His sword a called foolish and reckless, Arthur launched himself completely at the man. He bowled into him, knocking him to the ground with a shoulder in the gut and narrowly missing the sweep of the woman's Zappers grazing overhead. Then, with an awkward slice of his rapier, he swung at the quarterstaff.

It shouldn't have done more than knock the weapon away at best. To cast it from the man's hands; that was what Arthur had intended. He was as shocked as his opponent evidently was when, as the sharper edge of the rapier struck the rod of the staff, it sliced it in two. A brief spark of something distinctly and fluorescently blue glowed briefly in its wake, like a flash of lightning, and the spearhead clattered to the ground.

Arthur stared, momentarily stunned. He stared for what felt like much longer than it likely was, for the Zapper woman didn't manage to slide into the attack. Neither did the man recover from his own surprise, not before Arthur. Spinning swiftly, Arthur drew his sword towards him, across the man, through the man. And once more, the sword sliced like a knife through butter. Like –

*Magic.*
Of course. Just like magic.

The man fell with a gurgling cry, slumping to the mud with a slick thump. Arthur didn't spare him a second glance. He spun to face the hooded woman, the woman whose shadowed gaze was turned, immobilised, towards the man. Her stupefaction lasted only briefly, however, before, with an audible hiss, she raised the Zappers once more.

"You. You'll fucking die for that." Then she leapt for him.

It was a flurry of twirling whips, of swinging sword, of ducking and sliding through the mud and parrying with more luck than real skill. The woman was in frenzied, hissing in a long stream of curses like an infuriated snake. And it was likely her fury that was her downfall. For on one whip crack, one strike that failed when Arthur snatched it from the air and immobilised the weapon with a flourish of his sword, she shrieked her rage, stomping in nothing so much as a tantrum. Arthur, sword still wreathed in the Zapper, lunged for her. The wet crunch of blade sinking into skin, scraping along bone, cut the woman's shriek short. She fell to her knees without even a cry, hood sliding from her head as she jolted against the ground.

Arthur heaved to withdraw his rapier, pausing only for a split second to glance down at the woman. At Mae. Well, at least now we know how Merlin was recognised. She likely saw him when we approached her. Then Arthur turned his attention towards the rest of the attacks to leap once more into the fray.

Or at least he would have, had there truly been more attackers. He managed to skewer another assailant – the crossbowman – before he paused. Because there wasn't truly much more that he could do. Because the rest of the opponents were all but downed, all save for a skinny man carrying a pair of narrow, stunted batons and a woman with the three-chained mace. And Merlin rapidly overwhelming them.

Arthur truly came to appreciate for the first time that Merlin, his Merlin, was a warrior. The Merlin who had once been so clumsy he tripped over air, who could barely lift a sword let alone wield it, who bumbled and muttered and spewed pacifist intentions more often than aggressive ones – he was gone. No, not gone; he had grown. As Arthur watched, he admired, truly admired for the first time, just how much Merlin had grown throughout his incarnations.

He fought as though his motions were choreographed. He sprung with what Arthur had come to realise was inhuman height, likely driven by magic, turning in a curl and landing on his knees to skid through the mud as though the fall had been intentional. It likely had. The two knives in his hands – the karambits, he'd called them, those he favoured, darted towards the man with the batons and sliced, yes, he sliced through them, in what Arthur was certain now was magical reinforcement. He kicked out a foot to fell the man before turning towards the woman, ducked a flail of her mace and launched forwards to stab at her throat. Not with the karambit, though; a push dagger sprung into existence between his knuckles, somehow juggled alongside his other knives, and sliced through the woman's jugular in a spray of blood turned black in the night. She wailed in a gurgle as she slumped towards the ground. Merlin was already upon the recovering man before she finished her fall. A slice, a jab, another cry of a deeper timbre, and it was over.

There was a moment of stillness.

Merlin, mud splattered across his thighs and blood speckling his face, slowly rose to his feet. When he turned to Arthur, it was with an entirely familiar expression, the unspoken words of "Well, that's that. Shall we?" ringing so loudly that Arthur could only shake his head in mellowing surprise. Even in the gory scene they'd created, he couldn't suppress a bark of genuine laughter.
"Honestly, Merlin, you're so bloody stubborn," he said, striding towards him.

"Stubborn?" Merlin raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"You simply had to stick to your word, didn't you? Taking down all of the rest of them?"

"Well, I'm an honest man, Arthur," Merlin replied. Arthur barked in another burst of laughter. The anger that had stuck with him throughout the fight had dwindled, leaving behind only the light-headedness of post-fight in its wake.

Their momentary peace didn't last however. Like a hound drawn to a scent, Arthur saw the tell tale light of a Spotter soaring overhead towards them. He frowned, even as he began a backwards step in retreat. "Didn't one just pass over here?"

Merlin, head turned towards the light, nodded. "Yes, but they've a radar for sound too if they're loud enough. Probably heard the cries."

"Brilliant," Arthur grumbled, and, reaching towards Merlin to grab his wrist, he dragged him into a run from the scene. Merlin, after initially stumbling with a clumsiness that seemed to counteract every one of Arthur's newly formed considerations, fell into step beside him.

The gallop they set forth at momentarily forbade speech. For minutes, the only sounds were the slap of their boots upon the thick mud, their muted pants. Arthur gave way to Merlin's lead, hoping he had some inkling of where they were going. Adrenaline replaced the residual anger pumping through Arthur's veins once more and, in spite of killing for the first time in years, an act that had always dampened his spirits and driven him towards contemplation, Arthur felt a smile tug upon his lips. A smile of satisfaction, of success.

They'd won. He and Merlin, they'd fought together against impossible odds and they'd won. True, Arthur had taken out three of their attackers while Merlin had somehow doubled his number, but that hardly seemed to matter in that moment. Arthur's competitive streak was for once entirely absented. He didn't know exactly what aspect of the fight was so satisfying – had it truly been the fight? The exertion? Fighting alongside a comrade? – but he couldn't shake the sentiment.

A brief sidelong glance at Merlin broadened his grin further. Because Merlin, he almost smiled. Arthur would swear it.

Not quite, but almost.
Chapter 16

Merlin slammed his back into the wall of a house that was so weatherworn and broken that it swayed beneath his weight. Swayed again when Arthur crashed into it at his side. He was panting heavily – they both were – but Merlin hardly spared a thought for the racing of his heart, the weary strain in his legs from running throughout the entirety of the night. Running, and then sprinting when dawn and sunlight’s illumination threatened to fall upon them. Merlin was under no allusions that should anyone see his face and recognised him then Hunters would be upon him in a matter of hours, if not minutes. Those in the slums were no more lenient towards sorcerers than the authorities were, not unless they were magic-users themselves. Criminals, maybe, but not sorcerers. Regardless of Mae’s accusation, she wouldn’t have routed him out unless she’d recognised him exactly. No one would have the care – most slum-dwellers were incriminated in some way.

Even knowing that the Spotter wouldn’t catch sight of them pressed as they were beneath the awning of the house, Merlin still froze. He ceased even his breathing and strove to sink further into the shadows. He could use magic but to do so in public when he wasn’t desperately in need was asking to be found. A one-way ticket back to the Pits, as it were.

Arthur silenced his panting in the same moment.

The Spotter illuminated the sludge of the road, throwing it into sharp, reflective relief for the watery potholes and footprints of those that hadn’t the sense or the inclination to hopscotch their way over the stepping stones of harder ground. Illuminated, and then faded, leaving a faint trace of glow in its passage that mixed with the barest hint of pre-dawn light. Both Merlin and Arthur released a sigh when the Spotter disappeared. Their mutual nervousness only seemed to have exacerbated throughout the night rather than eased. Since the blood-pumping adrenaline, the sharpened focus and yes, even the excitement of their fight hours before, anxiety had arisen to take its place.

They were running out of time.

"How much further?" Arthur whispered.

Merlin glanced towards him sidelong. It was a testament to how much Arthur had changed, or perhaps how much he had grown in his acceptance of Merlin, his competency and his knowledge of a world Arthur had only been a part of for a handful of years that there wasn’t a hint of accusation in his tone. Arthur didn't begrudge that they were effectively running on a wild goose chase through the slums, through thick mud and dodging Spotters and clutches of night-dwellers alike. He didn't sound irritated or even slightly frustrated. Faintly concerned if anything, but even through the darkness Merlin could make out the visible confidence, the faith, he turned upon him.

Merlin would ensure himself worthy of that faith.

Stepping from beneath the awning, Merlin turned to start at a run down the road in the direction they had been heading. "Not far," he whispered in reply as Arthur fell into step beside him.

"How can you even tell? Every street looks exactly the same."

"Yeah, they do," Merlin agreed, but left it at that. What could he say? Arthur was right in that regard. But as a slum-dweller Merlin had had always had a strange sense of direction, an ability to discern the identical, narrow streets from one another in a way that he could only attribute to some sixth sense of Knowing. He couldn’t explain it. There were slight changes – there was a hole where a house had been that looked like it had been burned down somehow, another rickety shed of a house
had acquired a second storey that looked too wavering to hold the weight of an inhabitant, a crudely replaced awning, a building that appeared to have been attacked by a battering ram yet still stood. — but only slight. Only small, and nothing huge considering it had been over six years since Merlin had seen them.

_Six years._ He still marvelled, still shook his head as he darted and bounded down the dark streets, his unfailing internal compass directing him. _Six years since I've been in the slums. Mordred, what are you still doing there?_

It wasn't surprising that Mordred was still in the slums. Merlin had been counting on the fact that he was and had been almost certain that he would be. People entered the slums, became weary, wary, dying residents, a never left. Not unless they were dragged somewhere worse and there were precious few places worse than the slums. Mordred would have to be in the slums, unless he was already dead or had been taken to the Pits. Anything would be better than the latter.

Grim the Whisperer, so named for her uncanny gossipmongering and murmured truths, had said that Mordred was still around. More than that, she'd said that Mordred was still in the exact place that Merlin had last seen him. Where he'd left him when he'd charged out the door to save Edwin all those years ago. Merlin had been torn between sighing with relief that he would be able to find him and cursing Mordred's stupidity. The same place? For over six years? Did he want to be found, to have torture death rained upon him? It was surely only sheer luck that had prevented him from falling prey to such so far. Merlin couldn't count how many times in the past he'd been forced to move squats, both with his father and otherwise. It was the way of a sorcerer to be constantly moving or else be discovered. Merlin had known it and he thought Mordred had too.

_What was he doing, the fool?_

Once more, as he turned down an alleyway so narrow that Merlin had to turn sideways to avoid scraping his shoulders, he felt his worries rise. His fears for confronting Mordred. Not because of what he remembered of the Past, of which was significantly more than he had known the last time he saw him. He recalled how Mordred had returned to Camelot, had become a knight, had joined the ranks of men loyal to Arthur. Just as he recalled oh so recently how Mordred had abandoned Camelot for what had happened to Kara, the girl he had loved. Merlin wasn't nervous about that — such aspects of the past might be prominent, true, might still resound and entice resentment, but it was in the Past. It was always acknowledged that a being of magic should not be held responsible for the actions of their Past incarnations in the Present.

No, Merlin didn't fear Mordred's resentment or potential hatred of both himself and Arthur. He feared the Mordred of the Present and what he had become. People changed in the slums, changed in the world at large, and six years… six years was a long time.

_But he's still there_, Merlin reminded himself once more. _He's still in the same place, so that means I can find him. It means that I can talk to him, can convince him of our need for his help. And maybe, just maybe, he'll give it._

_Hopefully._

Merlin could only hold onto that hope. He wasn't certain of anything, but Mordred, with his gift itself… surely he would be the one who could help Merlin and Arthur in their cause the most.

The shadows had faded enough that even without his naturally magically-enhanced vision Merlin could see completely and worryingly clearly by the time he slowed. They descended the familiar street towards the old shack in which he had once lived in, Arthur slowing to a creeping walk at his side. Nearly daybreak meant that he and Arthur would have to bunker down for the day before
returning to Nimueh's residence. There was no way they could cross into Inner City during the day, nor remain out of cover in the slums. Which, Merlin realised, only made it all the more integral that Mordred was receptive to their entrance.

Slinking down the side-path of the street, hyperaware of the slight morning noises, the sounds of residents as they awoke with the wan sunlight, Merlin beckoned Arthur to a stop when they sidled up to the shack. To his old house. He paused just outside of the awning.

It looked no different to how it always had. It was little more than four punctured yet reinforced walls, the heavy door that Merlin had expressly chosen it for firmly shut, what could be considered windows squinting accusingly out at the empty streets. The tin roof had perhaps a little more rust on it than it had six years ago, and a patchwork tarp had been drawn across part of the roof, likely to prevent seepage into the rooms below as so many slum-dwellers attempted. It never really worked.

Yet it looked smaller than Merlin remembered. Even more rundown that it had been. Perhaps it was so simply when compared to the Inner City. The thought drew an unexpected upwelling of emotion through Merlin.

"This is it?" Arthur whispered at his side. Merlin almost started, drawn from his thoughts and glanced towards Arthur. Arthur, who was dividing his attention between peering warily at the building before them and the street as though expecting an ambush to spring from nowhere. He wasn't entirely unjustified in considering it a possibility.

"Later. I'll reminisce later. Right now, though, we need to get out of sight."

Firming himself with his resolution, Merlin slipped beneath the awning. With barely a thought, a moment of worry for using magic – even if he had to – he placed a palm in the middle of the door and let the ribbons of his power work at the wards that prevented any trespassers from entering. They were the same wards he and Mordred had always used.

The door groaned, scraping across the ground as it did upon its hinges to sweep inwards. Merlin paused for only a moment longer, his wariness redoubling as he peered into the deeper darkness inside, before he slipped through the doorway.

Blackness. It was impregnably black, unlike any that Merlin had witnessed outside of the Pits. The thought stuttered his breath slightly and he had to force himself to breathe with more consistent breaths, to thrust the memory to the side as he always did. Not the Pits. It wasn't the Pits. How Mordred – if it was only Mordred – had managed to attain such darkness he didn't know, but then Mordred had always been magically strong. Strong and alternate, manifesting his powers in ways that Merlin never considered himself but seeming incapable of the normal strains. He could likely divert any light that sought to creep through the cracks in the walls should he want to, dangerous as such a liberal use of magic was. Even that which trickled through the doorway seemed to die into the unnaturally thick shadows barely a footstep within.

Merlin heard Arthur slip through the door behind him. He heard his steps stop just before he heard the door groan shut behind him and plunged them into darkness once more. Just as his ears pricked to the sound of growling that arose but moments later. Instantly Merlin dropped into a half crouch, hands grasping for the knives in his belt and raising them.

An animal. It was an animal's growl, Merlin was sure, even with the knowledge that many who dwelled in the slums were as animalistic as a rabid wolf. The growl he was sure was not human, however, which he wasn't sure concerned him more or less for being so. It thrummed in vibrations through the dark air, the slow increase in volume as though the creature approached…

What kind of a creature did Mordred keep with him?
Whatever it was, it was getting closer. Closer, and only seeming to grow increasingly aggressive. Merlin didn't want to kill the animal, especially if it was important in some way to Mordred. Not because it would hardly endear them to him but because… because it was Mordred. Even after so many years, after remembering a Past long lost and the discord that had arisen between them, this Mordred had been like a little brother to him.

Merlin thrust aside the rising focus, the determination and detached notion of 'killing', and drew breath. "Mordred."

That was all he said. One simple word, and the growling ceased. And as it ceased, Merlin was certain that he heard a sharp inhalation of breath. Only for a moment, a brief moment of stasis, or frozen wait, and then –

"Merlin?"

Merlin released a sigh before he could silence himself. He was still wary, still aware of the animal in the room even if it was now silent, but his nervousness, his apprehension, had eased some. Eased for nothing other than that one word. It was tentative, nervous itself, and just the faintest bit hopeful.

Forcing himself to rise from his crouch, though unable to sheathe his knives as of yet, Merlin found himself nodding. "Yes. It's me."

The sharp inhalation sounded once more, just as Merlin heard Arthur murmur a nearly inaudible "What? What are you…?" So suddenly it was almost jarring, the smothering blackness of the room snapped into simple dimness. And there he was.

Mordred had changed over the years. He wasn't any taller than Merlin recalled, but that was about the only similarity. That and the vivid blue of his eyes that seemed to shine widely through the darkness. His hair was longer, pulled back messily from his face in a tie that dribbled knotted curls down his back. He was thinner, too, the roundness of his face hollowed, his frame lankier in the way that slum-dwellers often were, and even more so because Mordred was taller from when he'd lived in the sorcerers community before he… didn't. He looked older than Merlin had expected, as though the weight of the world, of living, had settled upon his shoulders. And yet as he stared at Merlin his could have been that young boy once more, the ignorant, helpless and petulantly precocious kid he'd stumbled across in the streets.

Merlin barely got time to take in the room – dark, fractured walls, half-opened or half-broken cupboards, something that might have been a bed beneath the nest of ragged blankets – and to notice the animal – it was a giant of a dog, a mottled hound more the size of a lion than a dog – before Mordred was upon him. Before Mordred was flinging himself across the room and nearly bowling Merlin over to wrap him in his arms. Merlin might have responded instinctively, might have ended his friend's life in a quick stab to the gut had not a string of mental words been coursing through his mind as Mordred rushed him.

"You're here, you're really here, I can't believe it, I can't, I thought you were dead, I thought you were gone, but you came back, you're really here and you came back – "

With a struggle, Merlin sought to sheathe his blades to avoid a catastrophe. It was a struggle to even breath within the confines of Mordred's locked, squeezing arms, and not just for his discomfort with being so confined by another person. He'd just managed, had just succeeded in sliding his knives back into safety and wrapping his arms tentatively back around Mordred, when Mordred himself pulled away from him. Pulled away only briefly to stare, wide eyes brimming with something close to tears, before his hands darted forth to grasp Merlin's head and bring it towards his own. Their lips met in a crashing kiss.
Merlin was frozen, as much in surprise as confusion. He didn't respond, didn't even think to push Mordred away from him, such was the depth of his confusion. He heard a sound behind him that could have been Arthur, a surprised grunt emitted of his own that seemed at odds with the grasping hold Mordred had upon him, the press of his warm, chapped lips upon Merlin's and the heat of breath that touched his face as they parted. It was brief, chaste, and Mordred drew away with a gasping breath in a bare moment. He didn't let go of Merlin's face, however. Not for a second, despite the immediate wince his face fell into.

"Mordred, what -?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I just..." Mordred didn't open his mouth but sunk his teeth into his lip instead. His wince became a cringe, a slight flush of his cheeks that sat oddly upon the face of the man he now was, accompanied by the brief dropping of his gaze before they met Merlin's once more. "I just never thought I'd see you again. I knew I'd never see you again, even though I waited here all the same just in case, because I knew it would be impossible, that you were gone and that..."

Mordred's thoughts continued in a babble. Even with Merlin's slowly dying surprise, the wayward ranting of those words was reassuring. This was Mordred. Innocent still, even if he did appear hardened, and impulsive, completely unaware and unable to constrain his own actions and words. Mordred, who was so different to what Merlin recalled of the Past, with his confidence and his loudness even in muteness, his inability to show even the slightest amount of restraint. Perhaps he hadn't changed all that much from the boy Merlin remembered. And the kiss? No, Merlin didn't put any stock in it. It was likely as impulsive as so many things that Mordred did. He was like his brother, and Merlin knew that Mordred felt the same for him. He knew it.

Reaching up to grasp the hands that still held onto his head, Merlin drew them from their clutching cradling. "Hey, calm down, slow down. You're overwhelming me with all your nattering." He attempted – and failed – at a reassuring smile, but hoped the sentiment was conveyed all the same. "In more ways than one."

Mordred raised his gaze to meet Merlin's and that flush spread visibly once more. His shoulder's hunched slightly and he winced, eyes dropping to where Merlin clasped his hands between his own. "Oh shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean – I mean, that wasn't what I – I shouldn't have done that –"

"It's okay, Mordred. Seriously. Calm down. No harm done."

"No, really, I was just so – so happy, so relieved to see you, I didn't mean to –"

"Mordred, you're starting to sound hysterical. It's fine."

"I can't believe I did that, honestly. You'd think I was a teenager again –"

"The thought did cross my mind."

"...but I'm not an incompetent idiot. Really. I swear." Mordred, though still cringing slightly, peered down into Merlin's face imploringly in a way that made him seem smaller and younger despite his greater height. As though he was truly hoping to convince Merlin of his words. As if he needed to. "Really, I can take care of myself. I know you always used to say I acted rashly, but I truly can."

"Oh, I believe you. You've been living in the same house for six years? That takes a certain degree of skill, perseverance and intimidation on your part, not to mention stupidity." He glanced down to Mordred's side at the monstrous dog that easily reached his elbow in height. It was staring up at Mordred with mismatched eyes and keen attentiveness, as though awaiting an order. "You and your
companion, I would assume."

The beginnings of a smile crept across Mordred's face as he spared a glance for the dog, but before he could reply Arthur spoke up. Arthur, who until that point Merlin had – quite shamefully, now he realised it – momentarily forgotten about. "What in God's name are you going on about?"

Glancing over his shoulder, Merlin took in Arthur's evident discontent. It was clear from the cross of his folded arms, the slowly deepening frown upon his forehead, the flickering of his gaze between Merlin and Mordred and the fact that he had actually crept almost to Merlin's side like a hunter seeking to protect his companion from a foreign, confusing and potentially dangerous opponent. He looked confused, just bordering on angry, and there was something approaching accusation in Arthur's gaze.

The accusation was one that Merlin had beheld upon several instances before when the topic of Mordred had arisen. It had only done so infrequently, had only been mentioned when Merlin had voiced his idea for seeking Mordred in the slums. It would have been foolish not to. Merlin hadn't quite understood it until recently, with his newest acquisition of truly memorable Past memories from Camelot – of Mordred, of Kara, of the execution and Mordred's betrayal of sorts, but even so… it seemed a little excessive, even for that. Negligible, even, when he considered that the memories that arose at almost the same time of his death in the seventeenth century English Civil War had arisen at almost exactly the same time.

But he didn't have the time to consider the nature of Arthur's wariness. Or, more correctly, the inclination. Rolling his eyes, Merlin turned his regard back onto Mordred. Mordred, who appeared to only just have recognised Arthur and was staring at him with a strange mixture of expressions running rampant across his face that Merlin couldn't quite unravel. "Mordred, were you keeping our conversation private by any chance?"

Mordred didn't respond. He stared at Arthur, stared unblinkingly, and Merlin gradually began to untangle the play of emotions and what they meant. Mordred had never been particularly adept at hiding his thoughts – it was a product of a youth where he largely didn't have to. Even his years with Merlin in the slums, the years after when he'd been by himself, evidently hadn't shaken him of that openness. How he'd survived so long – and as a figure of apparent intimidation by his maintenance of his house – Merlin didn't know. Now, he watched as astonishment drew across his face. As slowly, spreading like uncurling leaves, wariness grew, a touch of resentment, a hint of accusation, and a growth of fear. Mordred was… he was frightened. Of Arthur? Or was that just the resentment manifesting itself in alternative ways?

The resentment was from the Past, Merlin knew. It had to be, for a Past long gone. Why? Why would that still even affect him? The Past was past. So infrequently were memories of such a time influential to the present. Had Mordred really been so deeply in love with Kara in lives long lost that it would effect the one he lived now?

Merlin wasn't sure. And he wouldn't give Mordred the chance to discern if he truly was as resentful as he seemed to consider himself. "Mordred, I'm sure you remember Arthur." Of course you do. We talked about him and Albion so often that there's no way you couldn't.

Slowly, Mordred nodded his head. The motion as just as wary as his expression. "I… do. But… how is that even possible? How is he here? He wasn't magical, he wasn't a sorcerer, so how…?"

Mordred paused, then a slow frown settled upon his face, almost replacing the wariness with confusion. "He looks exactly the same. And that… what is that. He looks a little… is he touched by magic?"

Merlin had to admit that Mordred's questions had occurred to him more than once before. The
magical shadow too, settling like a cloak upon Arthur's shoulders too, though it had taken Merlin so long to actually shift his gaze to be able to see it at all. Maybe because he hadn't been expecting it. "That's because he is the same. Almost exactly the same." Merlin glanced over his shoulder at Arthur, caught his eye and the slightly raised eyebrow. "A bit older and wider around the girth, though, I'd say."

That did it. Arthur's sudden wariness, his evident distrust of Mordred, was momentarily thrust to the side by affront. "Excuse me? What exactly do you mean by that?"

Merlin shrugged casually. "Only that, should you feel the inclination to outfit yourself in your old clothes, I feel we might need to add a few extra holes to your belt, if you understand me."

Arthur's affront grew to open discontent. His frown was nearly as petulant as Mordred could manage. "I'll have you know, Merlin, that I am in peak physical condition at present. My belt would be perfectly fine just the way it was."

"I'm sure."

"It would be! If we could run a test I would prove it to you."

"Such a shame that we have neither the time nor the resources to do just that," Merlin sighed. Then he turned back to Mordred. "He looks the same because he is the same. He wasn't reincarnated but instead arose from..." Merlin trailed off. This was the part that he wasn't exactly sure of. He'd known that Arthur had died, but he didn't know how. Painfully enough, he also knew that when Arthur had died, Merlin couldn't have been much older than he was now. The time difference just didn't add up otherwise. No one had told him of the exact circumstances but Arthur wasn't all that much older than his memories recalled him being. Merlin almost wanted to ask, but Arthur had always seemed nearly physically pained by the barest mention of his Past 'death'. More so than most sorcerers and magical beings for the end of their Past reincarnated selves.

Merlin gave his head a shake and turned his attention back to Mordred. Mordred who, if anything, looked even more disconcerted, even more wary, for Merlin's words. "You say he's not reincarnated but I can definitely sense the magic upon him. If he's not, then what is that?"

Merlin cast another glance over his shoulder towards Arthur, who was flickering his gaze between the two of them with barely suppressed disgruntlement. "I know. I can sense it too. It's strange, but -"

"Can sense what?" Arthur interrupted. The fold of his arms hitched tighter. "I'm clearly only hearing half of a conversation here, Merlin, so I'd appreciate a little more context."

Raising his eyebrows, Merlin glanced back towards Mordred. "Why are you still isolating him from the conversation?"

"He's not a sorcerer. Obviously."

"So?"

"So those who aren't sorcerers can't hear my telepathy. That's just how it is." The objectionable note in Mordred's voice suggested that Merlin should have known that. Which Merlin had, but he also knew that Mordred was merely erecting walls of excuses. He was as smart as he was frustrating.

Frowning, Merlin squeezed Mordred's hands - still clutched in and grasping his own - in reprimand. "Yes, but we just deduced that Arthur is touched by magic. In which case he should be receptive to your own magic. Do you think I wouldn't have warned him if I hadn't -?"
"Wait, what? 'Touched by magic'? What does that mean?"

Mordred frowned at Arthur's interruption but Merlin ignored his annoyance and turned back towards him. He felt like a courier passing messages between the two of them. That was cause for annoyance more than Arthur's interruption was. "It means that you have a trace of magic upon you. That you are, in some way, affected and similarly innately dependent upon magic." He paused, considering the truth of his own words as he peered at Arthur thoughtfully. No, he hadn't even noticed the magic at first, subtle as it was and because he simply hadn't been looking for it, hadn't been expecting it. But it was definitely there. Like a second skin and yet seeping from Arthur as surely as magic radiated from any other sorcerer. It wasn't visible, wasn't tangible, and yet Merlin could feel it.

Arthur's eyebrows inched up his brow. "What? I have magic?"

"You're touched by magic, yes," Merlin nodded. "Sort of in the same way that a magical creature is. That's how I perceive it anyway."

"A magical creature? What, like a dragon?"

"More like a Sidhe. Or a pixie. Or a changeling, even." Or a Bastet, he thought to himself, the memory of Freya surfacing.

"Or a troll," Mordred added, and even the relative darkness couldn't completely hide his smirk.

Arthur visibly twitched at the suggestion. Evidently Mordred had decided to break his silence and include Arthur in the conversation, even if it was only to tease provocingly. "A troll." He sounded faintly horrified.

Mordred's smirk turned into an objectionable curling of his lip. "Do you take issue with trolls? Not all of them are quite so disagreeable as those you have happened upon." Then, before Arthur had a chance to reply, he continued with a visible snarl upon his face. "Or is it being compared to anyone with magic that you object to?"

"Mordred," Merlin said sharply. His frown did little to alleviate the scowl on Mordred's face, even if it did weaken momentarily into a sheepish wince. He maintained his focused gaze upon Arthur.

Arthur stared straight back at him unblinkingingly. If anything, rather than appearing cowed by Mordred's words he had grown visibly more indignant. Merlin noted the almost imperceptible widening of his stance, the settling of his folded arms and the lifting of his chin. Merlin didn't need to hear his words to know how he would respond to Mordred's accusation. His eyes narrowed just slightly as he spoke. "I do not. Magic holds no aversion to me."

"That's new."

"Mordred," Merlin warned once more.

"If anything, I would consider myself honoured to be even vaguely a part of the forces I have aligned myself with." Arthur lifted his chin up slightly further. "Do you have an objection to that, Mordred?"

There was definitely something else going on, Merlin knew that. As though there was an entirely different conversation passing between Arthur and Mordred that he wasn't party to. He could have almost suspected that Mordred was conversing with Arthur of something outside of his knowledge. There was challenge in his stance, in his words and in his tone. A challenge that Mordred seemed to understand.

The staring match continued for long seconds, Merlin glancing between the two of them. He felt the
urge to speak, felt he *should* speak, but had no idea what to say. Finally, Mordred replied. "*I don't object. I was merely discerning the degree of your apparent... allegiance.*" Even his mental voice was lathered thickly with disbelief. Clearly his discernment hadn't been entirely convincing.

But then Mordred was turning to Arthur, disregarding him entirely but for the wary, sidelong glances flung his way. "*What is he doing here? Why are you with him? What – Merlin, what happened? What are you doing here?*

There were a number of unspoken questions behind Mordred's words, unspoken but nonetheless heard and warping those that had been voiced. Where did Arthur come from? What was this supposed 'allegiance'? Was Arthur trustworthy, truly upon the side of magic? Merlin heard the disbelief thickest in that insinuation. Mordred evidently didn't trust Arthur.

And beneath all of that, with the simple two words of "what happened", Mordred was asking. Asking where Merlin had been, what had been done to him, how he could possibly have ended up in the company of Arthur.

Merlin couldn't really answer a significant proportion of those questions. Both because he didn't know – where had Arthur really come from? What about that magic? And how had he arisen? Arthur had always seemed hesitant, even wary, to attempt to explain – and because he didn't want to relive his experiences to fully reveal to Mordred what had happened.

Instead, he chose the most important one to answer. The one that wasn't accusing but was queried starkly and surely nonetheless. "*What are we doing here?*" Merlin glanced over his shoulder towards Arthur briefly, saw the nod of his head in agreement to the necessity of their explanation, before turning back to Modred. He squeezed his hands again just slightly. "We've come for your help, Mordred. I know we can't ask anything of you, that we can't expect anything, but –"

"*What do you need?*

There. There it was. Just like that, without hesitation, arose the Mordred that Merlin had known so well. The confusion, the touch of worry, and yet the determination that overrode Merlin's words as Mordred committed himself in an instant. They had been close, once upon a time. Close in a way that people shouldn't be in the slums. Almost family, even, though the word itself meant little in their world.

But Mordred had, for whatever reason, always trusted Merlin. He had stood by him, stood by his decisions even when he'd suspected them of being foolish or wrong. Just as he had when Merlin had raced to Edwin's aid – Mordred had known Merlin's actions were wrong, were dangerous and potentially disastrous. But he'd stood by his decision anyway.

Merlin had to wonder where such loyalty had sprung from.

Squeezing Mordred's hand's once more, Merlin met him stare for stare, unblinkingly. "We're going to save them, Mordred. All of them."

There was a brief pause. Brief and silent. Then a slow, spreading, hungry smile stretched across Mordred's face. His eyes seemed to gleam with a faint mania, if only for a moment. His mental tone was fierce when he spoke, bordering on savage.

"*I don't even care how, but count me in.*"
him, hung in the air. Even when the sound of pedestrian traffic, the cries of the angered, of the desperate, the demanding, flooded through the thin walls, the morning light that managed to pervade alongside it did little to illuminate the mottled walls and filthy floors. Apparently Mordred liked to keep it that way: dark and removed from the world. He'd never been one to accept the poverty of his situation. Evidently, even after so many years, he was still disinclined.

They didn't have much choice but to remain away from prying eyes. To keep their voices hushed so as to draw as little attention to the abode that appeared as every other did in the slums – no better and no worse. It was that or risk drawing the attention of the Hunters. Merlin would avoid that possibility at almost any cost.

He sat in the middle of the floor beneath the heavy weight of Mordred's dog. Cerdan, as he was called, appeared to have taken a liking to him when Mordred had assured him – by telepathy, of all things because somehow he'd managed to telepathically speak to the dog – that Merlin at least wasn't a danger. For all of the heaviness of his weight, Merlin was quite satisfied to have the monstrous creature lazing across his lap. He'd always liked dogs. Or at least, he had for many lives. His years as a kennel master, and even before that when he'd simply lived and slept alongside Lord Blackwood's hounds, had stuck with his strongly. There was something so calming, so comforting, about idly stroking a broad, furred head.

"You're really going to do it," Mordred murmured not for the first time in the past four hours. He was watching Merlin's fingers stroke across Cerdan's black head. "I can't believe it. You're really going to make a change."

"Hopefully," Arthur replied before Merlin got the chance. He had stationed himself across the room, leaning against the wall and propped in a seat so leaning and decrepit that Merlin was hesitant to call it a seat at all. "If we get enough support from fellow sorcerers." Arthur folded his arms and leaned backwards slightly further, head turning to peer through the crack in the wall that he'd been watching through for hours now. Merlin had checked his line of sight – it fostered a relatively clear view of the street and the pedestrians that wandered, staggered and raced upon it.

Mordred didn't glance over his shoulder towards Arthur. He barely nodded to acknowledge that he had spoken at all. He and Mordred were acting almost exactly the same way in their efforts to ignore one another. Though Merlin was hesitant to call it anything so blunt as hatred on either of their parts, there was certainly a definite wariness, distrust and resentment that welled to the surface of their eyes whenever they glanced at one another. Something that, unless Merlin was truly an idiot and had misinterpreted the situation entirely, had to do with the Past. Which was strange because Mordred at least should know to leave the Past in the past. Perhaps Mordred's aversion was driven by Arthur's own, which was to Merlin's eyes struggling to break from his control in an expression of excessive discontent. Perhaps it was a good thing that neither had turned towards the other in over an hour. At least Mordred was no longer excluding Arthur from their conversations, though. Merlin considered he would knock both of their heads together should he consider doing as much again.

Instead, Arthur seemed content to watch through the crack in the wall, almost silent unless the unexpected urge to contribute arose, while Mordred sat upon the floor next to Merlin and simply sat, or voiced an observation, or requested slightly more information upon the subject of their intentions. Only sparingly, however, as he was aware enough to know that Merlin was concentrating. Concentrating even as he ran a hand in repetitive strokes across Cerdan's broad head.

In his other hand, Merlin cupped a pebble. It was unremarkable, plain but for the magic caressing it, and barely larger than the head of a spoon. And yet it glowed just slightly beneath the focus of Merlin's silent magic. He stared at it almost unblinkingly, training his magic and intentions upon it with the sole request of 'amplify'. 
"Can I help?" Mordred asked quietly, again not for the first time. Nor even for the tenth in the last four hours.

Merlin shook his head, eyes glancing only briefly up towards him in acknowledgement. "No, it's fine. Thank you anyway. I've always found that doing complex spells is easier when it's just me."

"You and no one else in the world."

"I don't think that's true."

"Well, you should. If anyone else was going to give it a try they'd be too weak in terms of power to do it by themselves." Mordred shook his head, a small smile touching his lips. "Not everyone is as powerful as you, Merlin."

Merlin glanced up from the pebble once more, from the touches of gold that illuminated the dull greyness and made it shine. He opened his mouth to reply, a little exasperated, but before he could Arthur spoke.

"You are, aren't you." His words sounded more a statement than a question. "I wasn't sure, before. Or at least before we first visited Nimueh's house, when she recognised your abilities. I suspected but I wasn't sure. You really are powerful though. Aren't you?"

Merlin shot him a sidelong glance before deliberately turning back to the pebble. He didn't like to discuss his strength. It made him feel uncomfortable, arrogant, assuming and overly proud – the latter three of which he had never been inclined towards possessing. Merlin knew he was powerful, yes. He knew that Mordred's words could be taken casually, off-handed, but that they were genuine nonetheless. And Merlin knew enough about magical strength to recognise his own as being marked, even if it did feel unnerving. How could it not? He had been suppressing and hiding his true magic for his entire life. It felt strange to admit that he even possessed it.

Instead, he shook his head slightly and glanced briefly back up at Mordred before dropping them back to the pebble. "Have you finished reading through the messages? If you have any suggestions for changes then let us know and we'll consider them openly."

At his direction, Mordred turned once more back to the little Personal Comm that was cradled in his hands. The holographic screen, starkly clean and vibrant and blue-white against the browns and greys and filth of their surroundings, depicted a screen of typed text. He swiped his finger through it idly, giving a shrug. "There doesn't seem to be. If I were to hear such words… I would surely be driven towards offering you assistance."

"But would you be driven enough to trust us? To trust us, even without knowing us, and come physically to our aid? To offer your support?" Merlin didn't lift his eyes from the pebble. He didn't know if he wanted to see Mordred's face, to behold the uncertainty or the disinclination he may demonstrate. It was a worry that sat firmly upon both his and Arthur's shoulders. They had a plan of sorts. A plan that was as uncertain as was the response of the sorcerers they hoped to contact. They would request their aid, would pool their communal resources and build their makeshift force of rescuers beneath the notice of the government. And they would set to saving those who were within the brutal and murderous clutches of the Doctors of the Pits.

Their plan relied almost entirely upon their ability to encourage those with magic – the beaten, the worn, the oppressed and the wearied – to support them, to willingly turn their collective gazes and arms towards a mutual cause and to save those that had been taken from the streets, from their beds, from those who might actually care for them. And that itself was entirely dependent upon the translation of the messages sent to every pair of potentially favourable minds within hearing distance.
That was where Mordred came in.

Mordred had been nothing if not enthusiastic since the moment Merlin and Arthur – well, mostly Merlin – had described their intentions. The light of premature triumph swirled in his eyes, set a smile upon his lips and instilled a jitteriness in his limbs that was not as much nerves as it was excitement. He had seemed like nothing so much as a child once more, with an eagerness absent from the children of the slums for their youthful world-weariness. Even Cerdan had appeared affected by Mordred's excitement; his tail had actually twitched a little in a wag.

"What can I do?" He'd asked immediately, for the second time and the second of many times hence. "Just tell me what I need to do and I'll do it."

So Merlin had explained their intentions. That they needed Mordred to relay the messages telepathically to those who might answer their call. Only the sorcerers, naturally, the magical beings, as no one else could hear.

"I suppose you have an idea as to how I can call that far?" Mordred had asked. There was no confusion, no scepticism in his tone. He had absolute faith in Merlin, as though Merlin truly was all-powerful enough that he could simply erase any difficulties they might encounter. Merlin only wished he had as much confidence in himself.

He'd glanced to Arthur, pursing his lips. "We've an idea. To perhaps amplify your telepathy so that it can extend further than it otherwise would. So it could reach far further to convey the message."

Mordred had expressed a moment of concern. Not a lack of confidence in Merlin's words – no, Merlin didn't see even a hint of that – but a faint worry. "How would I be able to do that? With some sort of amplification spell or sorts?" He'd shaken his head. "It would have to be incredibly powerful – you know I can't even talk to people that are outside of my direct line of sight." Despite his evident uncertainty, Mordred hadn't once seemed to consider that Merlin didn't have a plan, an idea for overcoming the issue. That he wouldn't be able to craft a spell to remedy the difficulty.

Thankfully, Merlin did actually have one in mind. Or at least an idea, which was really as much as he needed, even more than a spell itself. An idea was all he ever really needed to cast magic – he hadn't used words for centuries. He'd nodded. "I know. I can handle that."

"Of course you can," Mordred had replied with a smile. Merlin hadn't missed the slight frown that had touched Arthur's face at the sight of it but he'd chosen to ignore it. He didn't know where it had come from or for what reason, so brushed it aside as inconsequential.

Instead, Merlin had affixed Mordred with a stare, reaching forwards to clap a hand onto his shoulder to impress the gravity of the situation. "It will be difficult, Mordred. You know that, yes? It will be draining for you to use so much magic to communicate the messages, even with my own amplification spell behind you."

Mordred had nodded his immediate acceptance. "I know that. Did you honestly think that would faze me?" He shook his head. "I let you down once before because I did too little, Merlin. It won't happen again."

Merlin had shrugged a little sadly at Mordred's words. He hadn't known whether to be relieved or guilty for the promptness of Mordred's agreement, that he perhaps felt obliged to help because he had done 'too little' to assist Merlin before. Merlin felt like a devious taskmaster ordering a trusting, guileless child into action. It wasn't right, but then he hardly felt like he had a choice. "Just so you know that it will be exhausting for you. I wanted you to understand –"
“Merlin.” Mordred's interruption had been slightly long-suffering, though laced with fondness. "It's not like I didn't think I'd have to work. I'm not an idiot, no matter how much you might consider me to be." He'd smiled with that same fondness. "If I didn't have to work I would consider that I wasn't doing enough. So you make me an amplification spell or something, tie it to a talisman, and then I'll send the messages. What, stagger them over a couple of days or something, yeah? What else do we do?"

Merlin had stared at Mordred for a long moment. Mordred, who so readily accepted the duty that Merlin and Arthur were hitching him to like a draught horse to a weighty carriage. He hadn't been able to speak for the guilt welling within him. People in the slums, they used one another. That was just how it was. Merlin had done so himself on countless occasions, both to those he almost considered almost-friends, to acquaintances and to strangers. He might never expressly like it, but he would do it without a second thought. But with Mordred it felt different.

Arthur had spoke for him into the silence once more. Stepping up to Merlin's side and very pointedly ignoring the wary glance Mordred had turned upon him, he'd untied the collar of his Comm from around his neck and held it out. "Other than that? Nothing. But you can read the messages that will need to be conveyed. I trust you know how to use one of these?"

Mordred did. Merlin knew he did, as even slum-dwellers with no ready access to such technology simply knew. But even had he not, Merlin was certain that Mordred wouldn't have admitted it. Plucking the Comm from Arthur's hand, very deliberately not touching his fingers to his palm, Mordred had nodded and retreated to his seat on the floor to study the messages.

That had been four hours ago. Four hours of Merlin working at the pebble to affix it with an amplification spell. It was tiring work, the magic necessary to amplify Mordred's telepathy like a multitude of spider webs interwoven with the hard immovability of the stone. That and linking it to Mordred – it was slow work to get it just right, and Merlin was very aware that he only had until nightfall to complete his spell. He and Arthur couldn't afford to stay another night in the slums, both because of the renewed likelihood of discovery and because… well, Merlin at least wasn't looking forward to facing the combined forces of Nimueh and Gaius upon their return. The note they'd left the night before would have been found by now. Merlin could only imagine their reaction with a cringe, not to mention Alice's – she would adopt that unsmiling expression that looked so foreign upon her face, prop her arms on her hips and affix Merlin with a stare that demanded a reply to her unspoken "how dare you". He could picture it already.

Not that Arthur really seemed to care. He had appeared nothing if not nonchalant when Merlin had mentioned his suspicions for their upcoming reprimand. Even thinking about it was wearying. That, and the brief conversation he'd had with Mordred, tentatively begun but with a demanding need that no hesitancy of words could mask. When Mordred had asked the gut-clenching question once more.

"Merlin? What happened?"

Merlin could only pass off some of his curtness with his distraction for the spell. The rest… he simply didn't want to speak of it. He didn't want to relive those years in the Pits, years that he was struggling to thrust aside, to move beyond, and was largely succeeding in doing so because he had a purpose and a distraction and there were the Doctors and the government that he needed to fight back against. In the quiet of his old house, the house that was barely a house at all, those distractions had been far removed for the moment. When Mordred had asked, had peered at him from across the short distance between them with gaze raised from the Comm in his hands and staring attentively at Merlin, there had been no escape. The memories swirled to the forefront of his mind.

The darkness and the light.
The pain of overstimulated senses that never really gained a reprieve.

The constriction of limbs, arms tamped to his body and unable to even stretch his fingers.

The pain, the seizing agony, the poking and prodding and touch of fingers that felt so gentle in comparison to what followed.

And Freya's voice… beaten, broken, faded… just as Merlin had felt.

He'd had to squeeze his eyes together momentarily. The compulsive touch of fingers to fingers, to hands, to feel the pressure of touch and to make sure that it didn't still hurt just so much to just touch almost caused him to drop the pebble.

Arthur's voice was what had snagged him, snapped him into focus and attention, drew him from the rapid, tumbling slide that Merlin had found himself falling prey to. "Do you really have to ask that? Isn't it obvious?" Arthur's tone was sharp, reproving, and as Merlin opened his eyes at the sound of his words he saw Mordred actually flinch, his face crumpling briefly into heavy shame. "Don't ask ridiculous questions."

"Arthur, it's alright." Merlin had felt obliged to say. It wasn't. Not really. He didn't want to tell Mordred what had happened, didn't want to relive any of it and was barely even inclined to voice what he'd been through after he'd awoken, after Arthur had torn him from the clutches of the authorities. There was so much negativity, so much shadowing and avoidance in the past weeks and months, that Merlin's urge to speak of any of the past at all was hesitant at best.

But Mordred deserved to know something, even if it was only a little. He deserved to know where Merlin had been after he had left him six years ago, alone like the child that, in many ways, he still was. So he'd schooled his expression and turned back towards Mordred, shunting the hesitancy and reluctance to the side to train their clamouring attention upon casting the amplification spell instead. "I'll tell you. Not everything, but as much as I can. But," he'd held up a finger, "you have to tell me what you've been doing too. After"

Mordred's guilt and self-reprimand was still pronounced, but he'd given a small smile at that. And when he'd glanced briefly towards Arthur, it had been with a slight nod, almost as though he were apologising. Or thanking him. "Alright. That seems fair."

So Merlin had told him. With a deliberately distracted voice, he'd skimmed over his time in the Pits, a retelling that he didn't have to glance towards Arthur to know that he listened to attentively because really, he'd told Arthur precious little too. He'd kept it brief, minimalistic, leaving the worst of what he'd experienced out and glossing over even the less-bad parts. Not quite as effectively as he'd thought, apparently, for Mordred had stared at him with wide, unblinking eyes and a brief, sidelong glance in Arthur's direction had shown him to be as immobilised and granite-faced as a statue. He'd hastened on to encourage Mordred to speak of his own years.

His words had been brief. Mordred had merely shrugged, scrubbed a faintly sheepish hand to the back of his head and quirked his lips. "Not all that much, really. Just…"

"Living."

"Existing, more correctly," Mordred had corrected. He gestured towards the mammoth dog sprawled across Merlin's lap. "And scaring most everyone off with our growls. We have something of a seeker's job between the two of us. Someone's lost something, we go and find it, if they can gather the nerve to approach my door. With the use of Cerdan's tracking skills, of course."
"Of course," Merlin had nodded his head with false solemnity. "And I'm sure your own particular gifts have no part in this endeavour?"

"Of course not," Mordred had replied, though he couldn't smother the smirk spreading across his face. At least he hadn't looked so devastated then as he had when he'd been listening to Merlin speak. "I've no idea to which gifts you refer."

Merlin had shaken his head stroking across Cerdan's head with his free hand. "You named him Cerdan, then?"

"Yes. After my father."

"I remember. You told me about him."

Mordred had shrugged a little bashfully. "I think 'told you about him' is putting it mildly. I just about talked your ear off with professions of my father's greatness, didn't I? You must have been so sick of me when I was younger."

Fidgeting to swing a leg forwards, Merlin had nudged Mordred reprovingly with his foot. "I wasn't sick of you. You were annoying, but I've had a little sister before and I didn't hate her for being a chatterbox. Kids are allowed to talk about their parents. It's what they do."

"You never did."

"I wasn't a kid when we met."

"You were as good as," Mordred had refuted. "I barely heard a word about Balinor in the entire time I knew you."

Merlin hadn't missed the sudden attentiveness Arthur had turned upon him. He seemed to be doing that with increased frequency throughout that day, as though he were studying Merlin like a book he thought he'd read but was rapidly coming to the conclusion told an entirely different story. It made Merlin feel faintly discomforted and he wondered if Arthur was picking up on all the white lies and deliberate oversights he'd made in the past. Did he recognise the name Balinor?

Merlin had chosen to ignore the question to turn towards Mordred instead with a shrug. "There wasn't all that much to tell. But if you really wanted, I could tell you about him."

Mordred had beamed like a child given double portions of rations. "I'd like that. Maybe when we eventually get out of this place, yeah?"

"Yeah," Merlin had nodded, then frowned slightly at the pebble as he rewove the spider webs of the spell the reaffix them just slightly. "Why are you still here, by the way? I thought I taught you better than to stay in one place for too long, Mordred."

Mordred had been silent for a moment before replying. "Because... because you said you'd be back in a bit. When you left, you said you'd be back. So I didn't want to..." He'd trailed off, and a ruddy flush of actual embarrassment had touched his cheeks as though he were a child who had just confessed the foolishness of his actions to a parent. Merlin had stared at him with suddenly wide eyes, almost forgetting about his spell entirely.

After that, they hadn't spoken for some time.

When midday clocked around, Merlin had almost finished his spell. It took time, longer than it should have perhaps, and might have been completed more quickly had there been more hands to
contribute to the spell – not that he would even ask Mordred because working with others had always seemed more complicated to Merlin.

It would likely have been faster too if he'd limited the range of the amplification but he'd considered it better to stretch as far as he could, to reach as many as could understand the words. Which reminded him…

"We'd probably just have to limit it to the United Kingdoms and perhaps Western Europe. I might be able to stretch it to reach further, across to the Americas with a bit more power if I kept at it for a couple of hours, and maybe even creeping into the Southern Hemisphere. It would probably be largely pointless to try anyway, though, so I should be finished by –"

"Why?" Mordred asked, glancing up from where he was raking his eyes over the messages on the Comm screen once more. "Why would it be pointless?"

"Language barrier," Arthur explained. The way he said it, slightly frustrated and vexed, would have told Merlin that he'd had his own difficulties with it in the past even had he not already been aware of such. "Anyone who doesn't speak the common tongue of this region won't understand the message."

"Why not?" Mordred spoke directly to Arthur for the first time in hours, and there was definite indignation in his tone. As though he considered Arthur's words to be an insult to his abilities. "Why wouldn't they understand the message?"

"Because –"

"You speak in the common tongue," Merlin hastened to explain to Mordred before Arthur could do so himself. He didn't want to leave it up to a very obviously exasperated Arthur whose consideration of "Really? How can you be so stupid?" radiated from his expression with a rolling of eyes and shaking of his head. It might have been obvious, but Mordred had always been strangely naïve in some areas. He wasn't dumb, simply… obtuse. "So any message you convey won't be understood anyway."

"Yes it will."

"No, it won't," Arthur sighed. "Honestly, this is basic understanding of linguistics –"

"Yes it will, because I don't speak telepathically in the common tongue."

At Mordred's announcement, both Merlin and Arthur were rendered speechless. Merlin almost forgot about the pebble and spell entirely. "What?"

Mordred's rising smirk was faintly smug. "I don't speak in the common tongue when I'm speaking telepathically," he repeated. "No telepathy is spoken with actual words. It's intentions, pictographic images, sounds and impressions. Nothing so cut and dry as actual words."

At Mordred's description, Merlin was immediately thrown into a disconcerting experience. He trained his attention upon Mordred's words – words, they sounded like words, but were they? – and had to shake his head to clear it of its confusion. He didn't quite manage.

"Don't try and pick it apart," Mordred cautioned him with a mental tone that was far too amused for Merlin's confusion and Arthur's evidently rising aggravation. "You're not supposed to hear my words as anything but words."

"That just doesn't make any sense," Merlin muttered, and even with Mordred's explanation couldn't help but reattempt to view the mental communication through different eyes. "How does that
even…?"

Mordred shrugged. "How do spells convey magical intentions when the words themselves are of a different language to the language of magic?"

"What?" Arthur asked, confusion and growing frustration thick in his tone.

Merlin shook his head. It was more than just disconcerting to have Mordred so openly explaining a complex concept of magic with when he evidently viewed it as lacking in complexity at all. He was reminded once more that, naïve in some areas he may be, Mordred was not unintelligent. Not in the least. "That doesn't make any sense either."

"That's probably got more than a little bit to do with the fact that you don't use words with your magic like most people do, Merlin," Mordred explained, and for once it almost felt as though Merlin were the child of the two of them. Then he shook his head. "But regardless of that, we're drifting away from the topic at hand. What I meant is that I should be able to reach every sorcerer within the blast radius of your amplification spell." Mordred gestured towards the pebble still glowing in Merlin's hand. "Make it as wide as you'd like. My intentions and directions should get across no matter what the first language of the speaker."

Merlin stared at Mordred for a long moment. Longer than he probably should have, given that the situation had been tipped on its head and he now had markedly more work to do. With a physical shake of his head he'd turned back to the pebble. This changed things. This changed a lot of things. If Merlin could spread Mordred's call out far enough, who knew how many sorcerers they could call to their aid? How many they could draw beneath a blanket of protection? For Merlin at least considered that to be their goal as much as anything else – to protect those that were still free of the hands of the authorities by sheer force of numbers, regardless what his father had always told him of magical gatherings. Surely anything was better than being bared to the clutching talons of the Hunters. With Mordred's telepathy and Merlin's amplification, they could reach the entire world.

Merlin set about revising the spell on the pebble. It was a good thing that it was such a hardy talisman for the amount of power he poured into it would surely have cracked anything of lesser strength than stone. Merlin shunted wave after wave of spider-webbing ribbons of magic into the pebble, weaving in intricate lines and expanding them like a billowing balloon. Not entirely amplification but magical support as well. If he didn't add the support, Mordred would just as likely kill himself as translate the message to every sorcerer in the world. It would be draining to Merlin himself but he would rather he was temporarily exhausted than Mordred was.

But even with that thought, even with the knowledge of the danger they faced, Merlin felt excited. This. This was huge. They would make a huge difference. Just imagining if the combined forces of countless magical beings, even worn and destitute as they were, banded together for a common cause set his heart racing. How many people they could help…

"You'll definitely have to wait at least a day between messages," he murmured to Mordred after some time. It was said more distractedly than he had been before and not just from his growing excitement. The combined spells were more complex when worked together, requiring greater concentration. Merlin wasn't sure how long he had been working upon them but if Arthur's pacing was any indication, if the dim light that was seeping through the walls and rapidly fading was any indication, it had been a while. "You'll burn yourself out if you don't."

"Yeah, I figured," Mordred agreed with far less resistance than Merlin had anticipated. He shrugged when Merlin spared a second to glance towards him. "I'm not ignorant to the extent of my powers. I doubt I'd even be able to talk to anyone in between messages for it all." He didn't need to clarify that he was referring to telepathic talking.
Merlin nodded, turning his gaze back to the pebble. He took a moment to inflate another layer of spider web tendrils before replying. "That will include talking to me, unfortunately."

"What?"

"We'll have to maintain our distance just for the time. Only until the messages are finished and then I swear I won't leave you again."

Mordred was silent for a moment and across Merlin's lap Cerdan gave a faint, sympathetic whine. "You really have to go back to Inner City?" Mordred asked, though there was resignation, awareness as to the redundancy of his question, in his telepathic voice.

Merlin nodded but it was Arthur, paused mid-pace, who replied. Surprisingly, his voice wasn't as hard as it had been when talking to Mordred for the rest of the day. "Yes. It is too dangerous for Merlin to remain in the slums. It's almost too dangerous for him where we are now."

Merlin was on the verge of refuting that statement, in declaring that he could vanish if he needed to out of the way of prying eyes, when Mordred, just as surprisingly as Arthur's attitude, nodded in agreement. "I understand. Your safety comes first, Merlin."

He paused in his weaving to peer at Mordred once more. There was despondency in his expression, but alongside that was fierce determination. Mordred might not wish to be left behind – and Merlin was questioning doing so more and more as the day went on; maybe they should just bring him with them regardless of how dangerous that in itself was? – but he'd accepted it. Just as he had immediately accepted that he would participate, would contribute to their cause. Hell, without Mordred's actions, without his telepathy, there would hardly be a movement at all.

"We rely on you, Mordred," Merlin found himself saying. Mordred glanced up from where he was frowning in his study of the messages once more. There was no way that he hadn't memorised them to a T but he seemed intent upon committing them to every aspect of his mind over and over again. "We do need you. And I swear, I'm not going to just leave you again. Not like – not like last time."

The guilt that Merlin hadn't even known was present until he saw Mordred again resurfaced, a guilt that reprimanded him for his careless behaviour years ago, for his abandonment of the young man who still seemed like a child, like Merlin's younger brother, in so many ways. But it was shunted to the side when Mordred raised his gaze to stare right back at Merlin. A small, heartfelt and proud smile settled upon his lips.

"I know. I swear, I won't let you down."

They stared at one another for a long moment, for once Merlin barely even aware of Arthur's presence still paused barely three steps away. Then he nodded slowly and, as Mordred turned back to the Comm in his palm, Merlin focused back upon the spell at hand. They had a job to do, the both of them. They had a mission.

Arthur silently fell back to his pacing.

They left as soon after nightfall as possible. Merlin tried not to, knew it would do nothing for either of them, but he couldn't help glancing over his shoulder at the shack of a house that he and Arthur left behind. He shouldn't have done it. The sight of Mordred staring after them with barely concealed longing, as though he desperately wanted to come with them, as though reliving the last time they had separated, was heartbreaking. He may have grown older, may have become more resilient and more self-sufficient, but Merlin would always see the young boy he'd been when they'd first met
when he looked upon him. Or looked up at him now, for Mordred was indeed taller than him. Taller than he was before, even. It felt stranger for his memories of the Past. Memories that, though touched by the distrust and wariness Merlin knew he had felt at the time, did nothing to sway his affection for the Mordred of the now. He was practically family – the only family that Merlin had left.

It was a struggle to turn from those intent, staring, unblinking eyes to set off at a run through the slums once more. Merlin knew that he and Arthur couldn't afford to delay, not if they intended to make it back to the Inner City that night. He fell into pace beside Arthur and they chewed through the miles at a steady rate.

It wasn't until they were at the canal-side once more, Merlin heaving a moored gondola from the shadows with a tug of magic that, as usual, set his wariness to doubling when he heard it. He froze at the thought that blared through his mind, however, stilled mid crouch and staring with rising triumph.  

Sorcerers, the strong, the true, the magical. The people. I call upon you who would see the end of your suppression. Those who would choose freedom over constraint, those who would fight rather than fall into line like cattle being drawn to the slaughter.

The words resounded through Merlin's mind as though projected through a loudspeaker. Not audibly – no, his ears detected nothing but the lapping of sludge on the man-made shoreline – but he heard it nonetheless. The amplification spell had worked then. He had been concerned to leave it before he was assured of its success, even with the confidence he held in his own magic, but here was all the proof he needed. Mordred was casting his voice wide to every individual with a hint of magic, to anyone capable of hearing it, to anyone who would be most effected by those words.

To the suppressed.

"Merlin, what -?"

Merlin snapped his hand up, finger raised to silence Arthur in a way that he knew in the Past would have earned him a scowl and a cuff over the head at the very least. Arthur didn't cuff him. From Merlin's detached notice he saw that he didn't even look put out. As Merlin strained his mental ears to hear every aspect of the continuing words, the tone, the flavour of the message, he murmured, "Just a moment. Just…"

Arthur stared for a moment. Then he just nodded.

The time has come that we must retaliate. Too long have we taken what has been dolled out to us. To long have we slinked in the shadows, cringing from the light, from the sharp electricity of the authorities, fleeing from the Hunters. They have taken from us, they and their self-justification for the 'danger' we present. Our mothers, father, our sisters and brothers, our children...

It is time we fight back, People. Sorcerers. Magic users. The strong who have had enough of the abuse. Who will stand tall and declare that no longer will we take such abuse lying down. No longer. Rise, People, sorcerers, creatures of magic. Rise as one.

The message ended in static silence, the empty space it left behind in Merlin's mind abruptly vast and hollow. Empty, alongside the sagging of a blow sapping his energy, the drain upon his strength at supporting the spell. Not saddened, though. Not grieving or regretful. Merlin only felt his triumph rise, despite the sudden weariness.

It was the first of several messages to come, messages that he and Arthur had hashed out before visiting Mordred, that he and Mordred had adapted to impress most agreeably upon their fellow sorcerers. It would make no demands now. Not yet. Not ever, truly, for Merlin knew he wouldn't,
couldn't, make demands of a people so beaten down. But those who would lift their heads, would rise to stand tall once more – those he would work with. Those he would fight alongside, would save their people with.

Merlin cast a glance towards Arthur. Arthur, who hadn't spoken a word since Merlin had requested his silence, who hadn't moved an inch nor lowered his crossed arms. Arthur, who waited at Merlin's behest to be told what had happened.

Merlin sunk the rest of the way down into his crouch, hand reaching towards the gondola. He didn't break eye contact with Arthur when he spoke. "He did it. It's started."

A slow smile spread across Arthur's face, visible even through the gloom. He'd been guarded, wary, almost resentful since they'd met with Mordred, and Mordred had appeared almost the same, though perhaps not to the same degree as Arthur himself. Merlin wasn't an idiot. He knew there was something there, something between them that had happened in the past. Something greater than Mordred's abandonment of Camelot and his knights, of his betrayal of sorts. He could sense it, even if he didn't ask because no one would ever ask about the Past unless such information was freely given. Merlin wasn't even sure he wanted to know. But that smile erased the guardedness. It was flooded with satisfaction, with tentative hope. With the triumph that Merlin felt but couldn't so visibly express himself. He nodded slowly, contemplatively. "So now we wait."

Merlin nodded his agreement. "Now we wait. And hope for the best."

Arthur didn't say anything to that. He didn't have to. They both knew that their attempt could be fruitless, could amount to nothing. Asking a people so suppressed to rise against their oppressors, even those that most strongly remembered the Past and the instances where it hadn't been quite so bad, where they had possessed freedom, would be like asking a rabbit to turn in opposition of a hungry lion.

But they could hope. They could hope for the best, even if they would prepare for the worst. Because regardless of how few rose in response, Merlin and Arthur would fight. They would fight if it killed them.

Neither had to admit that fact to know it for a truth.
"Lady Nine, I understand your mindset but –"

"Do you? Do you really, Lord Wevil?" Nimueh's tone drew a slight flush from the weedy man's cheeks, visible even in the relatively poorly lit room. Arthur suspected that it was so shaded to hide such responses but evidently it failed in its duty. "I don't think you do, for otherwise you wouldn't pose such resistance."

"Minimising the immediacy of the actions taken towards sorcerers is not – it's not possible, my Lady," the man puffed, as though he were struggling for breath as much as smooth composure. He appeared to lack attainment of both. "There is no motivation, no cause for –"

"No cause?" Nimueh arched an eyebrow. "No cause? What of consideration for fellow humans, my Lord? What of the European Convention on Human Rights that peaked but years before the turn of the millennium, a convention which our government still maintains stands fast despite the prejudice, discrimination and impoverishment of not only sorcerers but so many less fortunate? What of the entitlement of any and every human being to a trial, to consideration before a court, to basic human rights? Is such not reason enough to revisit the immediacy of the treatments enacted upon sorcerers?"

As Wevil puffed and twitched his ears, turning just slightly towards his fellow Lords and Ladies on either side of him, Arthur settled himself back in his seat. It was all he could do to suppress a smile of satisfaction, one which had been threatening to spread across his face upon frequent occasions over the past week. It wasn't only because Nimueh had begun to change the whistle of her own tune either. That in itself would have left Arthur smirking– they'd finally pushed her towards a more proactive and persistent attack – but no, it was not for that. The reason lay in that, for all of the politicians and activists dithering, their spluttering and denials, it was all for nought. In the end, it hardly even mattered. Because he and Merlin, they would change that.

A week it had been since they'd returned from their visit to Mordred. A week in which a complete set of five other messages had been flung abroad to every magical being with the ability to hear it. Arthur knew what the messages had said – he, as an orator and king in the Past, had been the primary hand to write the address their potential future allies – but Merlin still pulled him aside to relay them to him whenever another sounded. Any disgruntlement Arthur might have felt at not being included in the messages – because Mordred, the bastard that he was, appeared to have somehow expressly excluded him from earshot – was vanquished by the knowledge that their attempt to send the messages was working. That they were making progress. It almost alleviated Arthur's desire to brood on the encounter with Mordred in the slums.

Almost.

Arthur resented Mordred. Hated him, even. It was a difficult thing – and difficult was the understatement of the century – to brush aside the fact that Mordred had killed him. That had it not been for the combined efforts of Mordred and Morgana, he would have been able to return to Camelot with his men, with his people, and revel with his kingdom in their victory over a most fearsome foe. He tried, he really did; he knew that this Mordred and that of the Past, as every sorcerer he had met referred to it as, were as good as different people entirely. Knew it, but couldn't quite bring himself to accept that Mordred was entirely on his side. Even with the linchpin of Merlin that he obviously cared for. Cared for a lot. He seemed to idolise Merlin much as one would a king. Or a god.
But Arthur saw it. He saw it in Mordred's eyes that he remembered what Merlin didn't yet. That he
knew he'd killed Arthur, that he recalled the drive for his betrayal of the kingdom, and that distanced
though he was from it by countless lifetimes Mordred wasn't entirely without resentment on his own
part. Resentment that Arthur had been forced to execute the druid girl he'd cared for. That he had, at
least in Mordred's eyes, betrayed him in turn. Or the fact that Arthur had been the one to kill Mordred
moments after he had been stabbed himself.

They didn't like each other. That was another understatement.

Arthur could see that, though perhaps not as heavily weighted as Arthur's own memories, not quite
as pervasive in their effects, Mordred's recollections manifested a distinct inclination towards
wariness, aversion and yes, perhaps more than a little bit of hatred. It swum in the gaze that he spared
Arthur countless times over the course of the day they'd spent closeted from view in the dingy little
shack that hardly warranted the title of 'house'. But he hadn't said anything. He hadn't acted upon his
old hatred, had barely even let it show. And the reason for that was, quite obviously, Merlin.

As always, when memory of that meeting rose to the forefront of Arthur's mind, he would feel his
jaw clench, his hands ball into fists and a blast of anger and protectiveness well within him. Merlin
had a fondness for Mordred that appeared to be reciprocated even more extensively by Mordred
himself. That and the kiss... it shouldn't matter to Arthur, not in the greater scheme of things. It was a
spur of the moment inclination, a response driven by excitement, relief, disbelief, pure joy. When
compared to everything else that had happened – the initiation of their retaliative mission, Arthur's
first glimpse of the slums, the fight they'd battled just the night before, meeting Mordred himself – it
shouldn't have been all that great. Merlin had even told him that Mordred didn't mean anything by it,
offhanded as it was, and that Mordred had told him as much.

But Arthur couldn't help thinking about it nonetheless. As had happened so many times in the past,
that upwelling of protectiveness arose. No, it wasn't quite protectiveness. Possessiveness. Arthur was
realistic enough to realise it for what it was, at least to a degree. Merlin had always been his – his
annoyance, his counterpart, his manservant, his friend and comrade and most loyal companion.
Never had there seemed to be anyone more important to Merlin than Arthur, not a friend or a lover.
And Arthur, without even realising that he had noticed as much, had quite liked it that way. Selfish
as it might have been, he had.

But a kiss? A kiss was important, no matter how nonchalantly Merlin may view it. Even if Merlin
didn't feel it meant all that much, Arthur knew differently. He'd seen how Mordred had looked at
him. It might not be romantically as such a gesture would insinuate, but admiring? Possessive in
itself? Yes, both in their entirety. Mordred clearly adored Merlin in a way that Arthur hadn't seen
anyone consider his friend before. It was almost strange, that adoration, considering how aversively
Mordred evidently considered Arthur. It forced him, even reluctantly, to cede that Mordred could be
trusted.

Even so, it didn't sit well with he. He didn't like it. Yes, it might be selfish of him – was selfish, he
knew, and entitled, and indulgent; the very picture of the spoiled prince that Merlin had once so often
 teased him of being – but Arthur couldn't help himself. It annoyed him. And that was because...

Because Arthur...

No. No, Arthur wouldn't think about that. Not now. Not at this moment anyway. Later, he would
revisit what such a supposedly 'offhanded' gesture had meant, but not now. Not when he had more
important things to consider, even when a very large part of him was grumbling that this was
important, that Merlin was his friend, his manservant, even if not really the latter any more, that he
was his... his...
No, Arthur couldn't think about that. Not now. Not when he had a movement to initiate, an entire people to rescue, and a pointless conference meeting to participate in. There was only so long that he could stare glassy-eyed at the stupidly nattering Lords and Ladies across from him without sighing. It helped that even Nimueh appeared frustrated by the conversation taking place before her. She wasn't even trying particularly hard to hide that frustration anymore, just as she hadn't on numerous previous occasions that week. It was as though for her too something had very distinctly shifted.

As though drawn by his passing thought, Nimueh flashed Arthur a glance, pointedly drawing his attention to the words she had just spoken. The words that he'd largely missed, aware only on a subconscious level and immediately storing them into his mind to consider later should he feel the need. Nimueh's expression was flat, eyebrows only slightly raised as though questioning if Arthur had anything to contribute.

Arthur didn't. He didn't really consider he had a whole lot to do with Nimueh's political tampering. They utilised her proffered facilities, included her in their planning and conversations of what was to come but otherwise she was simply there. And, oddly enough, she supported them, despite the fact that he and Merlin had gone behind her back and entered the slums with barely a recorded note to tell of the nature of their disappearance.

Despite the fact that Nimueh had nearly popped a vein, had become truly, seethingly angry for the first time that Arthur had seen when they'd explained to her, to Gaius and Alice, what they had done. Arthur fathomed that it was only Merlin at his side, a flicker of gold surfacing in his eyes and chin raised just slightly, that had quelled Nimueh's desire to fling magic at them. If there was anything that Arthur had come to realise in this new world it was that he was… less than he had been. Less intimidating, less concerning, less superior. Lesser. Instead it was Merlin who held sway in such situations. Arthur didn't resent him for that. Not in the slightest. Not when such a fact was so beneficial to the both of them.

Nimueh hadn't unleashed her fury upon them both. She hadn't done more that struggle against the rising ball of visible energy in her hand, clenching a fist to evaporate it into non-existence. With a deep breath that did nothing to dissipate the raging storm tightening her features, she'd trained a glare upon Arthur. Not Merlin, he noticed, as though his sorcerer status and the fact that Nimueh wanted him for the knowledge inside his head alleviated his guilt.

"Do you realise what you have done?" She'd said coldly.

Before Arthur could reply, Merlin had spoken up. "We do." His tone was just as cold as Nimueh's. They were like ice statues, the both of them. Neither shifted any more than statues either, no movement but the opening of their lips. "And it is necessary."

"You have potentially sentenced every sorcerer who answers your call to death." Nimueh still stared accusingly at Arthur.

Again Merlin spoke before Arthur had the chance. "No, we haven't."

"You have potentially sentenced every sorcerer who answers your call to death." Nimueh still stared accusingly at Arthur.

"You have. Even the very prospect of sending out a telepathic message –"

"We have not threatened the wellbeing of those who don't wish to reveal themselves," Arthur interrupted her. "If they do not wish to answer our call then they do not have to. But we act with the best interests of beings of magic in mind."

"Sending out a telepathic message is dangerous in and of itself," Nimueh reattempted. Her voice was still cold, her expression still hard and eyes glazed to an icy chill. "What if it had extended towards those of non-magical status? What if it had been intercepted? You claim that a message directing
sorcerers to a place of meeting – to my own farmhouse at that – will be delivered?" She gave a small bark of laughter that held little amusement. "What if chance dictates it is misdelivered?"

"It won't be," Merlin said with such confidence that Arthur believed entirely all over again. "Mordred can't transfer his thoughts to anyone but a sorcerer, even with the amplification spell he's utilising."

At Merlin's words Nimueh's anger seemed to suddenly evaporate. Her narrowed eyes widened and she blinked in barely concealed surprise. "Mordred?"

Something approaching smugness settled on Merlin's face. He cocked his head slightly. "I take it you've heard of him?"

"Heard of him?" Nimueh shook her head. "Is there anyone from times of Golden Albion who hasn't?"

"He is rather infamous."

Arthur glanced between the two of them, likeminded thoughtfulness spreading across each and erasing the iciness. Surely they couldn't be referring to… to what Mordred had done. To what he'd done to Arthur. Surely they couldn't. Merlin didn't even know about that, so it couldn't be. Could it?

Gaius was the one who alleviated his foreboding speculations. He nodded his head sagely. "Perhaps not in this life but in many previous lives Mordred has indeed made a name for himself. It is acknowledged far and wide that he is a powerful if unconventional sorcerer, to say nothing of his unique abilities as a telepath." Gaius trained his eyes upon Merlin. "How he has managed to remain within the slums of London undetected for so long without discovery is indeed remarkable."

"Almost as remarkable as Emrys himself," Nimueh murmured. Any trace of her anger was entirely extinguished, replaced by hungry thoughtfulness. She appeared to be considering the situation with an entirely new set of eyes. Taking a slow, deep breath, she affixed Merlin and then Arthur with a stare. "You gave me three months."

"We did," Arthur agreed.

"It has not yet been three months."

"Well, we felt that the lack of progress made so far was indicative of your potential for initiating such in future."

Nimueh didn't even appear disgruntled by Arthur's words. "You will pursue this path, regardless of what I may suggest or how I may seek to dissuade you. You intend to launch an aggressive attack on the Facilities in order to free those captured."

They weren't questions but Arthur found himself nodding alongside Merlin anyway. "We do."

"And you intend to use my farmhouse as your base? You will draw hundreds, potentially thousands, of sorcerers into my secluded residence and arm them with nothing but confidence and tactical manoeuvres. And then attack the Facilities."

"We will." Arthur nodded.

"Unless, of course, you no longer feel inclined to offer us the use of your outer-city estate," Merlin added quietly. There was something close to a thinly veiled threat within his words but Arthur wasn't entirely sure what threat he posed. His magical knowledge? Was he enticing Nimueh, hanging it
over her head once more? Arthur wouldn't put it past him. Merlin had always been cunning, even if in the Past that cunning had been veiled by good-natured goofiness and an eternal clumsiness. "You would certainly be well within your rights. It will endanger you, threaten to expose you to the government, should anyone find out."

Nimueh stared at him for a moment. A long moment in which she regarded Merlin – not Arthur but solely Merlin – as though he were a banquet spread she longed to sink her teeth into. Finally, slowly, she shook her head. "No, I will not rescind my offer. My estate you shall have."

"It will endanger you," Merlin repeated, and Arthur had to fight the urge to roll his eyes. Why was he encouraging her to oppose them? "More so than your political manoeuvres have."

"I am aware of that," Nimueh replied, her voice rising in volume and determination. It was as though, with Merlin's offer of reprieve, she seemed to cling more firmly to her involvement in their actions, a fact that Arthur was grateful for even if he wouldn't admit it. They would certainly be in a fix if Nimueh sought to pull her estate from beneath their feet and leave them without a base. "But you are drawing sorcerers behind my walls."

"Sorcerers with knowledge," Merlin nodded. Nodded with a slight rising of his eyebrows that Nimueh returned in kind.

And finally Arthur understood the newfound hunger on Nimueh's. Of course she would consider her own agenda. Dangerous though it may be, Nimueh is a miser for knowledge of spells and magic. What better pool for fishing for that knowledge than in a clutch of willing sorcerers?

Nimueh gave a sharp nod of her head. She might no be entirely satisfied with the situation – Arthur had never known her as one for being satisfied with anything he put to her – but she was evidently bowing her head in acceptance. "Fine. If that is all, then fine. I will no longer object. But," and she held up a finger, "you will involve me in any and all tactical discussions in the future and I am to accompany you to my estate when you make your withdrawal." She shook her head with exasperation. "Heaven knows you won't make it out of this city without me."

And that was it. With a sweep of her wide skirt-pants, a flutter of billowing sleeves, she turned on her heel and departed the entrance hall and their confrontation. Arthur and Merlin were left blinking and exchanging glances in her wake. Gaius and Alice too, both of whom had appeared to want to say more but held their tongues. They exchanged glances much as he and Merlin did, seeming to hold an unspoken conversation between them.

"I do not believe that this is the wisest course of action," Gaius finally said slowly. Alice nodded at his side, a slight frown settling upon her forehead to replace her usual smile. "But I doubt I could stop you had I wanted to. So," Gaius gave a heavy sigh, sparing a small smile for Alice when she raised a hand to rest upon his shoulder. "I will support you. As best I can."

"We both will," Alice agreed.

Then they too had left Arthur and Merlin to their privacy. Arthur was left staring after them, at the hold that Alice had slid from Gaius' shoulder to the crook of his elbow, and shook his head. "I truly wish that Gaius would simply accept his feelings for Alice and to hell with his misgivings about age differences."

Merlin hummed his agreement. "It is getting a little ridiculous."

"You're his appropriated son," Arthur said, glancing back to Merlin. Merlin replied with a raised eyebrow. "You should be the one to push him into it."
"Mmhm. Whatever you say, sire," he replied with a shake of his head. Then they both turned and took their leave from the cavernous emptiness of the entrance hall.

The week following that confrontation had stretched so long that Arthur had difficulty believing it had only been seven days. The telepathic messages were sent every day or two, and only succeeded in building the tension within the walls of Nimueh's residence. In himself, in Merlin, in Gaius and Alice and the rest of the sorcerers who frequented the halls.

But alongside that tension came a growing excitement, an eagerness that was felt by not only Arthur and Merlin. Sebille for one seemed to have lowered her mask just slightly – Arthur had caught her staring at him at times with an unconcealed gleam to her eyes. Other sorcerers too, those Arthur happened across; they all paused to stare at him with approval, respect, and an eagerness that he hadn't beheld before. It only served to heighten his own.

Even Nimueh wasn't removed from it. Far be it from her attempts at reprimand, as she had assumed on the day of their return from the slums, time appeared to have manifested her greedy hunger for knowledge with the future prospect of sorcerers in her own home a prize banquet. She still expressed her scepticism, even her concern, for acting with any form of aggression, but the prospect of gathering magical lore, something that she had evidently been attempting to do her entire life, shunted aside those misgivings. It was her greediness as much as their initial agreement, Arthur suspected, which drove her into a more aggressive attempt at pushing for the rights and freedom of sorcerers in the conference hall. It wasn't going particularly well still, but had certainly made leaps and bounds on what it had been. She was motivated in an entirely new way. It was a little terrifying, Arthur would almost admit.

And now that determination was turned towards him, requesting input for something he hadn't been listening for. Something about altering the duration for consideration of criminal acts conducted by sorcerers from one day – if that – to one month. Personally Arthur thought that Nimueh was reaching a little high, but he could only approve of the attempt. Approve, just as he would care to voice. He would have too, turning towards the line of defendants facing his allies across the vast expanse of bare table. Except that any response he might have made was abruptly overridden by a blaring interruption.

The screens on both walls, the dark walls that depicted holographic projections of multiple images, of documentation, of ID files, were suddenly wiped clean. In its place arose a series of statements written in vibrant white scrawl that appeared sketched by old-fashioned hand rather than typed text. Arthur didn't get a chance to read them before a distorted voice read the words aloud, blaring them over the Comm system.

"We will come. We will support your cause. We will seek the end or die trying.

"One month. We will come in one month."

The words seemed to ring in the air. To echo, as though they rebounded off the walls, which they likely did given the nature of the conference room that projected sounds to be heard even in the furthest corners. Arthur felt himself freeze, his expression tense. He had to force it as such for otherwise the smile of triumph would rear its head once more.

The last message had been sent. And this one not to the sorcerers but to the world at large. Arthur knew even without the flash of his own Comm springing across his vision, the holographic words and echoing voice on repeat to give a personalised rendition of what he had just witnessed. Everyone would see it, would be sent the little automated Clips if they didn't possess their own Comms. Arthur wasn't sure if it was Mordred himself who had managed to infiltrate the system or whether he'd simply used the skills of someone he knew. He hadn't said a week ago which he would utilise –
perhaps he was as pervasive throughout communication technology as he could choose to be through physical minds? Arthur didn't know. And in that moment he didn't really care.

It was a declaration that might have been foolish for its revelation of the rise of the suppressed to finally, finally fight back. But it was needed. The government, the authorities, the Hunters and even the civilian non-magicals, had to know. They had to realise that magic itself wouldn't take such treatment lying down any longer.

And if it served to strike fear into their hearts… well, Arthur and Merlin had mutually decided that such wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

The Lords and Ladies across the table each wore expressions of mounting horror. Of fear that Arthur had hoped, just a little, to elicit. They deserved it, those who would shun the magical, that would disregard the basic human rights and freedoms of an entire people who had done nothing but struggle to survive. Even though Merlin had told him he could feel magic touching Arthur, he knew he was truly a part of those people himself – but he wasn't with them. And their fear was not his own. The distress that made itself known with sudden outcries, with starts to their feet and terrified turns and demands to their fellows, was not felt by Arthur.

If anything, he revelled in the mayhem that arose.

If nothing else, however, the communal rising to standing of every Lord, Lady and accompanier provided Arthur with one thing. A distraction. An excuse. He rose to his own and slipped out from behind his chair without a backwards glance. He knew his allies noticed him leave but none spoke. None moved to stop him, to ask him what the message had meant, even though they would surely know he had been a part of that which drove its inception. Not even Nimueh. Because the message was clear enough:

The war, their response – it had started. They were making their first move.

Arthur was running by the time he reached the entrance to the Castle. Running through the supposedly abusive sunlight that for some reason wasn't quite as abusive to slum-dwellers. He didn't care if it burned him to a crisp in that moment. He simply raced to the Skimmer he had arrived in, to where he knew Mascus the chauffeur waited and probably anticipated his arrival.

He was going to see Merlin. He had to. There was no one else he could even consider sharing that moment with.

Merlin had just seated himself in Gaius' infirmary when the message came through. Seated himself, tucked his legs beneath him into a curl – because he couldn't undergo the tests in other way but half withdrawn – and resolutely looking in the opposite direction to the poking, prodding and scanning that Gaius was conducting. It made him nauseous to watch, reminded him only too closely of the Pits and the Doctors' 'treatment' that had been afforded there. He was getting better at forcing himself not to think about it but it was a work in progress. Merlin congratulated himself on the fact that he no longer felt the nearly unstoppable urge to strike out at Gaius when he jabbed him with one of the hair-thin needles.

The giant Comms on the pale wall of the infirmary flared to life startlingly enough to snap both Merlin and Gaius' attention towards it. Comms riddled Nimueh's residence, and Merlin hadn't even known that the wall was installed with one. It disconcerted him, to know that there were thing around him that he hadn't perceive. He'd had too long of not knowing what was going on in his surrounds.
Thoughts of uneasiness faded, however, when the luminescent screen of the wall began to paint itself in a nearly illegible scrawl. A scrawl that was read out in a hollow, morphed voice a moment later.

"We will come. We will support your cause. We will seek the end or die trying.

"One month. We will come in one month."

The voice seemed to echo through the infirmary, rebounding off the high ceilings and bare walls like a volleying ball. Merlin barely noticed. His eyes were glued upon the Comms screen, fastened upon the scribble that he didn't recognise but feel the importance of deep within his bones. He couldn't blink to look away, not for a second, his eyes blown wide in a mixture of awe and rapidly rising euphoria.

It was happening.

He'd done it. Mordred had done it. Somehow, against all odds – for if Merlin was to be reasonable with himself, he'd hardly held hopes of it happening at all, let alone within days – Mordred's messages had flung far and wide, convincingly enough that someone, some ones, had responded. Had seen the proffered hand grasped it, for Mordred's message – it was supposed to be telepathically given but electronic was just as good if not better – told them just that. That Mordred had heard of a response through the minds he'd touched and that sorcerers would rise in support. Merlin and Arthur had done precious little since their visit to the slums with the exception of impressing upon Nimueh the sincerity of their need to access her estate. Even that hadn't been particularly difficult – Nimueh had accepted and even offered in her own way within a day.

Now… so quickly. For the first time, Merlin really considered that this was happening. That they were doing it. That they might be able to make some progress and finally, finally –

"Merlin, did you do this?"

Flinching slightly at Gaius' tone – it was that tone – Merlin glanced towards him. "What are you -?"

"Don't even think of lying to me. I'm currently reading your vitals and I am in the process of witnessing your heartbeat practically double." A heavy frown settled upon Gaius' forehead and, looming over him, Merlin was reminded just how tall Gaius had become in this incarnation. "Don't try and divert my suspicions as to your intervention. I am not a fool and I already knew of your intentions."

Merlin wasn't going to try. What good would it do anyway? Gaius did already know, even if, like Nimueh, he didn't have as of yet a grasp of the exact time frame Merlin and Arthur intended. Besides, for the first time in a long time Merlin felt the urge to blurt forth every thought that passed across his mind, every plan and every one of those intentions. His excitement was paramount, barely containable. Turning towards Gaius, even as he felt compelled to glance at the still-glowing screen of the Comm on the wall, he shrugged. "One week. That's the plan."

"I thought the message said one month?"

"It did. But we'll start in one week."

Gaius was silent. Slowly, he continued with his medical check, releasing Merlin from the grasp he held upon his arm when he was complete to conduct an in situ blood analysis immediately.

Merlin only made himself all the more excited as he sat in waiting silence, the situation all but erasing his unease at Gaius' testing. He couldn't leave just yet, not until Gaius had given him the all clear, but that knowledge did nothing for the adrenaline welling within him. Instead he speculated – of what
Mordred had done, how he had done it, how many would respond to the call for support and what
their next steps could be. An army of magicals, even of browbeaten, exhausted, harassed and
terrified, could make more of a dent in changing the world in their favour than could the politicking
of Nimueh.

But no, not an army, for they had no intentions to do more than defend and protect. They wouldn't
gather with the sole desire to fight and kill. They were a resistance.

Certainly, there would be challenges along the way – people would likely even die, which Merlin
struggled to acclimatise himself to – and they would most likely provoke as many problems as they
solved. But they were doing something. He and Arthur, they were finally doing something. And
something was always better than nothing.

Arthur. He had to tell Arthur, had to see him, had to revel in the excitement, in their victory, even if it
were only a mild pre-cursor to the actual event. Merlin abruptly desperately wanted to see him, to
discuss where they would go to from here, what their plans were. He was nearly shivering with
eagerness to be away.

When he'd finished his analysis, Gaius turned from the results of his sample towards Merlin with a
frown upon his face. For a moment Merlin was confused, almost worried and momentarily distracted
with the thought that they might have been something wrong with his readings – he'd been classed as
'healthy' for weeks now so there shouldn't be. But Gaius' words quickly allayed those fears to be
replaced with more important considerations. "I haven't said anything until now because I wasn't
entirely sure of the immediacy of my concerns but… you know this is dangerous, Merlin."

"Of course it is," Merlin agreed immediately. "When has it ever not been?"

Gaius folded his arms into his wide sleeves in a way that was almost eerie in how exactly the same it
was to how he had always done. His frown deepened. "I meant that leaping into violence and
activity might not be the best approach. If Nimueh's approach were to –"

"Nimueh's approach? Nimueh's approach?" Abruptly Merlin found his excitement shift into
vexation. Into something approaching anger. He unfolded himself from his seat, no longer struggling
with the urge to curl in upon himself. He clenched his hands as he stood tall and resolute before
Gaius. "Nimueh has done next to nothing."

"That's not true, Merlin," Gaius sighed. "Nimueh is moving forwards in the safest and most practical
manner possible. There is no better way to achieve our collective goals than through pacifism and
compromise." He sounded suddenly very weary, as though arguing the same words for the
umpteenth time. Which, Merlin considered, he likely had. Numerous such passive arguments had
been made between Merlin and Gaius, and he knew of Arthur conducting several more. Wearied
was how he appeared, and the frown rapid slipped and sagged from his face.

Only for Merlin to find himself assuming one. "Safest?" A snort drew from him before he could
contain it. Anger was an emotion he had difficulty suppressing when it came to Nimueh's
confederation tactics, in a way he knew that Arthur too struggled. "Safest for her, maybe."

"And for everyone involved with her," Gaius reasoned. "If we discard precautions, using violence to
combat violence –"

"So you admit that they are using violence then? That what the authorities are doing is wrong?"

Gaius sighed once more, a weary sigh. "You know I acknowledge that, Merlin. I have long become
accustomed to the workings of the government and its Facilities. Do not think me so heartless as to
overlook the reality of the situation."

For a moment Merlin felt guilty. He was able to quite easily thrust it aside, however, in the face of his simmering anger. "You think we should take the long road," he said lowly. "The long, slow road that might not even get there in the end. And during that time —"

"Merlin —"

"During that time so many of our people will be killed, captured, tortured and have their sanity torn apart." Merlin raised his voice to speak over Gaius. He loved Gaius, he truly did. Like a father in many ways, just as he had been so many lifetimes ago. But in this case Gaius was wrong. He was misguided. He believed there was a better way.

He was wrong. Gaius hadn't been there. He hadn't felt what happened, not like Merlin had. He didn't know what it was like to be unable to sleep for the sheer pain coursing through his body. He didn't know what it felt like to lose his grasp on sanity, to hallucinate because that was the only way that he could survive, to lie listlessly for hours, days on end with nothing to occupy his thoughts but the redundancy of his existence and the questionable mantra of "must survive, must survive" chanting through his head. A mantra that had lost its meaning over the years.

Gaius didn't know. He might know but he didn't know. He never would. He would always hold out for the possibility of there being another way, a better way, a way without violence or death for anyone involved. Not like Merlin, who had long since resigned himself to the reality that the government and their Hunters, that the authorities and most of the world, didn't want that so of course it wasn't going to happen. Not like Arthur who, when he must, could thrust aside his ideals of a truce, of reaching a mutually agreeable conclusion, to target his goal with an approach that wasn't wholly desirable but was necessary.

Gaius didn't know. Which was why Merlin needed Arthur.

"Merlin, I merely worry for you," Gaius was saying. "I don't believe that arming ourselves to attack the Facilities head on would end in a conclusion that would be beneficial for anyone, least of all the sorcerers that would lose their lives. You say you have called upon Mordred and Mordred in turn has contacted others?" He shook his head. "Who are these others? Can you trust them? Are they reliable? Are they of a stable mindset to help? What are their capabilities? You need to consider these factors, Merlin, if nothing else than for your own protection at least."

"I don't need protection," Merlin muttered, dropping his eyes to his hands clasped before him. His thumbs were running over the skin of his fingers unconsciously, like sandpaper scratching away at wood. "I can look out for myself."

"Then think of the others. The other sorcerers under Nimueh's care."

"I already have. Arthur and I, we've already talked to them." Merlin lifted his gaze and met Gaius stare for stare. He saw the momentary surprise before Gaius masked it behind a worried frown. "We've talked to them, and they agree."

"They agree?"

"That something must be done. That they'll act when the time comes."

"All of them?"

Merlin nodded curtly. "Without exception."
"Does Nimueh know about the immediacy of your intentions? Did she know before today?"

Merlin shrugged. "We haven't told her expressly when but she has accepted it."

"Expressly?"

"She has her own investment in the situation, Gaius. You know that. And as long as she stays safe while she can conduct her scholarly pursuits she doesn't care what happens to everyone else."

From the expression on Gaius' face, Merlin suspected that he was of a like mind. His frown deepened. "Merlin, this is unnecessarily dangerous."

"The world is unnecessarily dangerous, Gaius," Merlin ground out. He could feel his fingernails cutting into the skin of his hands as they scratched at one another in agitation. "And the longer we leave it the more dangerous it gets."

"If you could just wait a little longer, perhaps, instead of diving straight into danger," Gaius persisted. "Three months you gave Nimueh. Three months."

"Yeah, and in all that time she's done nothing."

"Your three months aren't complete yet, Merlin."

"And when they are?" Merlin raised his gaze to Gaius', wide-eyed and intent. He wanted Gaius to understand, but whether it was for a cautiousness of this life or a growth in wariness over his many lives, his old mentor wasn't budging. He looked faintly apologetic, as though he was sorry for upsetting Merlin but that he would stand his ground nonetheless. That he would stand by what he thought was right. Merlin hated to think it, but… but this time he knew – Gaius was wrong. "After the three months are complete and nothing has been done, then what? What about all of the sorcerers we've put off saving from the Pits because of Nimueh's promise? Her unfulfilled promise?"

"You don't know it will remain unfulfilled –"

"What about Freya, Gaius?" Merlin felt himself choke slightly on her name but he pushed through. "What about Morgause? Arthur said she was a broken shell already. What will happen to her if we wait any longer? Is the damage afflicted upon her even reversible?"

"Merlin –"

"And what about everyone else?" Merlin closed his eyes, squeezing them tightly to erase the faces every one of the people he'd watched captured on the streets from his hidey-holes, those he'd known had been abducted from their beds from nothing but their absence the next day. Or Morgana who could still be in the Pits somewhere that Arthur and Nimueh just hadn't found. Even now, even with Merlin's memories of what she'd become, of the madness that had consumed her and destroyed their past lives – even with all of that, he still wanted to find her.

Edwin's face rose to the fore, his sort-of friend who he didn't even know was still alive. Kip's too, who had been gone for so many years that Merlin had long lost hope of his continued survival. And Freya… "Everybody in those Pits, Gaius. They're being killed in the slowest, most painful way possible way."

There must been something in Merlin's voice. Something in the cracking of his words, in the slight, unintended whimper that made them sound almost like a plea. Gaius frown softened to be replaced by an expression of deep sorrow, of heavy sadness and regret. "Merlin…"
Abruptly, Merlin wanted to leave. He wanted to be out of there, away from Gaius and his excuses, and *doing* something. He wanted to find Arthur and talk to him, to discuss what they would do next, to... to...

To just be with Arthur. That was the crux of it. He simply wanted to *be* with him.

"I'm... going to go..." Merlin trailed off as he abruptly turned, striding towards the door. He ignored Gaius' heavy call of "Merlin" from behind him, pausing only to touch his fingertips to the ID-pad, to wait for the hissing door to slide open, before he stepped through. In moments he was nearly running along the hall towards the gym, the room that had become his and Arthur's meeting place of sorts.

It wasn't Gaius' fault, he knew. In his rational mind, Merlin knew that no one could really understand his reasoning, no one who hadn't been through the experiences he had for themselves. Even Arthur, as committed in his cause, in his determination, as Merlin was didn't truly know. Perhaps in another life, even before he'd been in the Pits, Merlin might have listened to Gaius. He might have put more hope in Nimueh's politicking, would have waited, bided his time, and taken the pacifist route.

But not now. Now, they had to act. Quickly. They had to erase the filth upon the world that the government had spread, remedy the destruction wrought, achieve some sort of freedom for those who possessed magic in a way that had never been witnessed before. Merlin would know. He could remember. It was just the how that was the difficult.

*It would be better if we all just went away*, a small voice said in the back of his mind. *It would be better if we went far away, to a safe haven that no one else could find. That no one who could hurt us could access. A different planet, maybe.*

That would be the ideal. For hate though Merlin did the government, resent though he did the civilians, the public, the average citizens who fears and subsequently hated sorcerers, he didn't want them dead. He didn't want anyone dead. He just wanted it to end.

He wanted peace.

Striding down the wide, high hallways, footsteps making barely a whisper upon the rich, synthetic carpet, Merlin thought. He pondered. He considered. As his anger died with the distance he drew from Gaius and his attempts at rationalisation, his determination and eagerness grew. He barely saw the doors he passed, his feet carrying him unerringly along the familiar path as his mind turned over possibilities. They would have to leave the city, something that would be a struggle for Merlin but he thought they could manage. They would have to make for the outer-city estate that Nimueh had provided for them – something that Merlin was still largely surprised they had managed to achieve permission to inhabit. They would have to meet with the sorcerers and magical being that sought to fight with them, would have to establish a plan of attack, to set a goal in mind and...

And...

Merlin's step slowed as his thoughts whirred. The sudden rise in excitement, the enthusiasm, the determination, it was still there. The resolution to find Arthur, to seek him and to discuss a plan of attack still hung suspended at the forefront of his mind. But right on the fringe of his awareness, growing more and more prominently, like a cloud drifting across the sun...

It was arriving. It was... there was another one. He could feel it.

Memories happened like that sometimes, the experiences Merlin had undergone in a parallel life at an identical age arising. At times, it would be as though they were never absented – that they simply integrated themselves into Merlin's mind only to be acknowledged days, sometimes even years later.
as originating from a Past life. Sometimes they would arise and play forth like a movie reel, momentarily stilling Merlin in his tracks until the memories completed their sequence and he assimilated them into his awareness. And sometimes, they crept up slowly. Like a half-remembered dream, rising to the fore and buffering into clarity. They were there, already remembered, but not quite visible. The clouds of fog would part and he would recall –

**Arthur**

Merlin felt his breath catch. His heartbeat in his chest seemed to take off, to soar in exchange for his absence of inhalation. He barely noticed but to hear the sudden increased thumping in his ears.

**Arthur was**

He felt his chest seize, and all too suddenly it became difficult to stand. Casting out a hand to the nearest wall, Merlin staggered into it, grasping for stability.

**Arthur was... he was...**

With a rising cry, a long, drawn out moan that grew into something of a wail, that sounded inhuman even to Merlin's own ears, he slid down the wall. Hands rising, he clutched his head in utter horror, the reality of what had happened instilled upon his mind. A realisation of what had happened…

**Arthur was dead. He had died.**

And Merlin had all but died with him.

_He clung to Arthur so tightly that the polished hardness of his armour bit into his skin, aching his bones. He was too slow. He'd been too slow. He hadn't made it and, sagging to the ground with Arthur's limp weight unresponsive, Merlin felt himself shrivel in defeat._

"No! Arthur!"

"Just... just hold me..."

_Arthur's voice was so weak, barely audible, and as Merlin gazed down upon him, eyes blurring, he could make out the paleness of his face. He was deathly pale, because Arthur was dying, he was dying and there was nothing Merlin could do about it. He had been too slow. He hadn't done enough. He hadn't been fast enough._

_The world was a haze around him. Merlin couldn't think straight for the sheer and utter grief that tore through him. As he slumped to the ground, supporting Arthur's limp, heavy weight, he clung only more tightly to the only thing in the world that mattered to him. Arthur, don't, please, you can't die, please, I'll do anything..._

_With a struggle, he dragged himself around until he cradled Arthur in his lap. Grasping a hand to his face, to his arm, to stroke across his forehead, Merlin panted desperately. He couldn't meet Arthur's eyes for the tearing of his own though he wanted to._

"There's something... I want to say..."

_A choke caught Merlin's voice in his throat but he pushed through it. He shook his head, denying what he knew to come. "You're not going to say goodbye." His voice was almost as feeble as Arthur's._

_Arthur gave a small sigh. The laxness of his face, of what Merlin could see of his face, was_
horrifying. "No, Merlin... Everything you've done, I know now... for me... for Camelot... for the kingdom you helped me build..."

His choking chuckle, hysterical, holding nothing but pain and misery threatened to burst forth from Merlin's lips. He clung only more tightly to Arthur's arm. "You'd have done it without me."

Something, barely the shadow of a smile, touched Arthur's lips. "Maybe... I wanted to say... something I've never said to you before..." His voice was breathy, barely audible. The last of it had nearly vanished entirely. He sighed out his final words. "Thank you..."

Merlin had felt him die. He'd had been there, had held Arthur when he had died. And after that, after Kilgharrah, after the lake when he'd laid Arthur to rest and watched his boat drift into the Mists of Avalon, he'd known.

Arthur had died. Kilgharrah's words swum resonantly to the forefront of his mind, that Arthur would return in Camelot's time of greatest need, but it hadn't seemed possible. Reincarnation hadn't truly been a part of magic then and even if it had been Arthur wasn't magical. Merlin would hold onto the faint spark of hope that the ancient dragon had given him, but even so he'd felt it. He'd felt Arthur die. He'd felt him leave.

Merlin had felt himself die along with him.

How did I forget? How did I never know? For even understanding how memories of the Past worked, how the chronology of paralleling events affected recollection, Merlin should have known. Tales of history hadn't prepared him, hadn't told him. He should have... why didn't he... how could he have just...?

Some things stood out from the memories of the Past. Some things more prominently felt, rather than just witnessed and recalled as though watching the events of a story unfold. For Merlin it was his sister, Kes. It was his love for his country, for Albion, if not always for the people. It was his affection for dogs, his faith in his daggers, in his own magic. And it was the understanding that his true life, that which was most important to him, had been in times of Albion.

With Arthur.

How have I been so blind?

The thought triggered at the same moment that Merlin became aware of his own sobbing. Of the cries that echoed in the emptiness of the hall, radiating from where he leaned forwards, pressing his head into the carpet. Of the tears that cascaded down his cheeks, that dribbled from his chin in an unstoppable torrent. He hurt in a different way to anything he'd ever felt before. Different to the pain he'd endured in the Pits. Different to the emotional trauma that only built and grew with exposure to the world. Different even to that which Merlin had felt when his father had died, for Kip when he'd gone, for Edwin when he'd been captured and for Freya as she gave up hope just a little more every day.

It was something other. Something different entirely. Nothing could hurt quite like it. Suddenly, not even the worries of the world, the destruction of magic itself, was as important.

How did I not even realise how much I loved him until I lost him?

Arthur was running through the hallways.

He felt excitement bubbling in his veins, spreading in a wide grin across his face. It had only grown
wider since the moment he had left the Castle of the Government, since he had slid himself into the Skimmer alongside a silently obliging Mascus and urged him to hasten to Nimueh's residence with all speed. He'd barely waited for the safety lock to allow him to open the door to the Skimmer before throwing himself out of it.

Arthur didn't know exactly where Merlin was. Not that it would take much of a leap – generally he was in only one of several places, most often with Gaius or Alice or, if not, then at the gym. It was the gym that Arthur headed towards first. He suspected that Merlin would want to see him, to share his excitement, to get things moving and changing just as much as Arthur did. They always met in the gym, more than they did in their own suites, in Gaius' infirmary, in the little parlours and sitting rooms dotted with unnecessary frequency throughout the estate. It was common ground, as well as being the one place that they could both truly stretch their wings.

He was excited. He wanted to see Merlin, to discuss their next plan of attack, to ready the trip they would take to Nimueh's outer city estate. There was no one else that Arthur wanted to share that feeling with because this was his and Merlin's endeavour, their mission, their quest of sorts – a quest to save an entire people. It was finally steading on its wavering feet. They were making progress.

Arthur raced down the corridors, feet thumping nearly inaudibly on the carpeted floors. Excited, eager, determined, driven – it all rose to the fore and hastened his step to a near sprint. They were getting somewhere, they were finally doing something. Arthur was being useful, he was finally making a change, he would find his sister and they would rescue the rest of those magical just as they were meant to –

He stumbled to a stop. It had taken a dozen steps down the hallway leading to the doors of the gym for Arthur to notice him. And when he did, the excitement, the euphoria, the adrenaline, dissipated immediately.

Merlin was collapsed on the floor. Onto his knees, back curved and forehead pressed to the ground. One hand cupped over his mouth while the other grasped the back of his head, bent arm nearly concealing his entire face. He was crumpled upon himself, folded to the ground as if in defeat, or exhaustion, or…

Utter grief.

Sorrow unlike any that Arthur had beheld upon Merlin's face – that he had ever perceived – was just visible around the bend of his arm, the press of the carpet into his face. His face was ashen, entirely devoid of colour as though he'd become a ghost, and that paleness was made shining and glistening by the tears that continued to pour from his eyes. Tears that slid unstoppably, shaking his shoulders in visible but soundless sobs.

Arthur had never seen Merlin cry. Oh, he'd seen him do so in the Past – Merlin from Camelot hadn't been one to withhold intense feelings of sorrow or anger or distress. But not this Merlin. Beneath the familiarity, the features that soothed Arthur with their very presence, this Merlin was stoic, was unforgiving of his deeper emotions and suppressed their existence and desire to arise. Merlin didn't even smile, which was a reality that had shaken Arthur to his core because his Merlin had always smiled. Forcing him not to smile had been the greater challenge.

But this Merlin didn't smile. It was almost as though he couldn't for the weight of his experience, the pain that afflicted him. And he didn't cry. That was just how it was.

Except now.

Arthur was rendered immobilised for a moment in pure shock. All thoughts of Mordred's message
fled his mind. After a moment, however, a moment of staring incomprehension and rapidly rising concern, in fear, in fierce worry for Merlin because had something happened? Was he sick? Injured? Had the effects of the trauma that he so desperately tried to conceal from Arthur, from the world, risen to the fore and assaulted him? He was running across the room once more, falling to his knees beside Merlin even as he reached out to grasp his shoulder.

"Merlin? Merlin, what is it? What's wrong?" He squeezed his shoulder, words blurring forwards without even waiting for a reply. "What happened? Are you hurt? Talk to me. Speak to me. Tell me you're alright."

He was bending over Merlin, head so close that when Merlin finally struggled to turn his face towards him he could see the miniscule droplets of tears that glued his lashes together in spikes. He could make out the redness webbing through his eyes that bespoke of long minutes in heavy misery. He saw the faint tremble to the hand covering his mouth, as though his chin quivered beneath. And he could just make out the nearly inaudible word he uttered. "Arthur…"

Arthur didn't know what was wrong. He didn't know why, quite suddenly, as though driven by the sight of him, Merlin's expression seemed to twist into even further pain. He could only grasp his shoulder, stare with wide-eyes with still-rising concern and only able to start backwards as Merlin abruptly pushed himself from the floor. To sit up on his knees. To lower his hands and to reach towards Arthur and –

It all happened so fast that Arthur didn't quite know how he ended up kissing him. Merlin's long-fingered hands grasped around the back of his head, locking into his hair and drawing him close. The press of his warm, damp lips against Arthur's was entirely unexpected, entirely outside of Arthur's thoughts even if he had been thinking about the soft curve of them somewhat more frequently in recent days than he ever had before. Ever since he'd had his attention forcibly drawn to them by Mordred. He didn't even have a moment to respond, to either draw away or return the kiss – he didn't even know which he would have done – before it ended. And Merlin was speaking, with eyes closed and still dribbling endless tears. His words were nearly inaudible once more, rippling through Arthur's shock and confusion.

"You died."

Two words. Two near-silent words that resounded like a gong.

Arthur was struck.

Immediately, his mind shorted. He was slapped into a mindless stupor, as though a bucket of cold water had doused his head. Thought of Merlin's tears, of his desperate desire to fix whatever had caused them rather than shun or dissuade them as he would have in the past, were shaken loose. Even his surprise and confusion, the arousal of something distinctly happy within him at the realisation that Merlin had kissed him ceased with those words. Those two little words.

You died.

You DIED.

A chaos of memories abruptly assaulted him. Memories that always arose whenever he thought of that. Of the stabbing pressure but not-quite-pain of the sword spearing into his chest. Of the blossoming agony that followed after, the searing ache that spread throughout his entire body. At the fading, the disappearing, the loss and the expression of utter anguish on Merlin's face that had been the last thing he had seen. The memories of what had come after, the haziness, the warmth and the radiance and the perfection that he couldn't quite recall.
Arthur had died. And it hit him every day, that he had died and somehow returned, but really had died. Had been killed. Had lost everything and everyone, even his own life and that… that his return was as utterly confusing as it was painful.

It was that abrupt assault of memories that unhinged him. That delayed his response to Merlin's words. He would recall later, that it was that which had slowed him when Merlin sprung to his feet. When he leapt bodily over Arthur with that uncanny agility he had. When he darted with inhuman speed – for it was inhuman, magical even – down the hallway in the opposite direction to the gym.

Arthur reached after him. He made a grab for his passing figure, only half realising what he was doing in the muggy confusion of his thoughts. Too slow, however. He was only just swimming back into awareness, only just lurching to his feet, when he saw the last of Merlin disappear around the corner.

Merlin had fled. Arthur had been too slow to stop him, his outstretched arm still reaching, and Merlin had fled. Because Merlin…

Merlin had finally remembered. He remembered it all.

Suddenly, the excitement of their encroaching struggle, of the potential loss of life to come, didn't seem quite as enticing to Arthur.
Chapter 18

He'd stopped crying. Merlin wasn't sure when but he knew he'd stopped crying. Mostly because he could actually see the roof beneath him, the ceramic white reflecting the wan sunlight with a glow of its own. His retreat of the roof of Nimueh's residence had been his for almost the entirety of the time he'd been awake. He'd needed somewhere to withdraw from prying eyes even though he knew with absolute certainty that his presence atop the house rather than in it was likely far from unknown. He couldn't do anything in Inner City without someone knowing where he was. Merlin supposed he should have just been grateful that it wasn't the authorities or the Hunters who knew.

No one would disturb him anyway. Try as they might to object to every instalment of the government, every rule and regulation supposedly in place for the public's 'protection', even the most rebellious adhered to some of them. Like not climbing onto the roofs of buildings. Like minimising sun exposure, as if the feeble light – even most likely cancerous as it had proven to be in the past – could really do all that much to anyone passing through the light for bare seconds.

Merlin had been on the rooftop for hours. Days, even, but he wasn't sure about exact times. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to care about his potential for cancerous contraction. He preferred to be outdoors than in the chemically sterile interior, so free of germs the air was almost toxic for it. Outside was better, though still held a hint of that smell in the air. Better, even if not necessarily good. Even the filth of the slums, the stench of people, of sewerage, of unwashed bodies and mud and stink, was better.

More than that, however. Merlin just wanted to be alone, away from Nimueh's sorcerers and attendants, away from Gaius and his attempts to implore him and Alice with her sympathetic smile but words mimicking Gaius'. Away from Arthur.

Especially Arthur. Even if Merlin wanted nothing more than to similarly be at his side.

He was so confused. Confused and heartbroken by the reality of what he remembered from centuries ago. From the reality that had recurred generation after generation – that Merlin loved Arthur. It had happened, time and time again with each life. When Merlin reached the age where he remembered, he would be broken once more. As though the countless lives he'd lived since times of Camelot took a back seat to that which he'd lived Arthur. Arthur, who had been his entire world, his life, his reason for existence. Arthur, who had died because Merlin hadn't been able to save him.

Merlin could be married and it would still break him. He could have endured nothing but loss throughout his entire life and the memory of Arthur's death would still leave him shattered. He could be wealthy, poor, a soldier and dying in a hospital bed or surrounded by family and still, every time it was the same. When Arthur died, a part of Merlin died with him, never to be retrieved again in that life. It was always lost, time and time again. Not even the love he held for his other lovers, his spouses, his parents and sister and friends, could quite compare.

Arthur had died. Merlin had lost him.

Each time, Merlin knew, would be just like the first. For days he would be lost to his thoughts, grief-stricken and sobbing, inconsolable. Then the hatred would rise, hatred for Mordred and Morgana that welled and then faded when Merlin realised that the people who had killed Arthur were gone, even if their reincarnations were still born and thrived. Then would come the reprimand.

Merlin should have been faster.
He should have saved him.

If only he hadn't let himself fall prey to Morgana's attack that had rid him of his magic. If only he had been more careful he could have ridden to war at Arthur's side. He could have stopped the death of so many and, when Mordred had faced Arthur and lifted his sword, Merlin should have struck him down before it could fall. With his magic he could have stopped it from happening.

No, that was wrong. Even without his magic Merlin should have been there. If he couldn't divert Mordred then he could have at least taken the blow meant for Arthur.

He didn't hate Mordred. Not really. Aching pain had built as raging fury within Merlin's chest but even with that he knew he didn't hate his Mordred, the Mordred he knew from the present. Just as, despite all she had been in the Past, he didn't think he hated Morgana either. Just as he didn't hate Nimueh, or no longer hated Uther, or any of the other foes he had faced in his lifetime long ago, or those since. If anything, the true person he hated was himself.

Not fast enough.

Should have saved him.

Not even the words that Kilgharrah had bequeathed him with fully eased the pain. "Take heart, for when Albion's need is greatest, Arthur will rise again."

Merlin didn't understand. What did that mean? Arthur had died, hadn't he? He had died and he'd possessed no magic of his own, held not the faintest trace of magic in him even for the incredible strength of the King that he was even if that was no somehow changed. And yet Kilgharrah had said he would return 'when Albion's need was greatest'. That he was the 'once and future king'.

What did that even mean? Albion's time of greatest need? What did that mean?!

"For an all-powerful dragon he seemed remarkably incapable of being useful when he was really needed," Merlin mumbled to himself. Even those short words were interspersed with sniffles, a hiccup, a feeble upwelling of tears. He didn't want to think about Kilgharrah either because maybe Kilgharrah should have done something. Maybe he should have stopped the war, stopped Morgana, taken them to the lake faster –

But no. That wasn't right. It wasn't Kilgharrah's fault, just as it wasn't the fault of the Present Mordred or the Present Morgana. If anything it was, "My fault."

"It wasn't your fault, Merlin."

The sound of Gaius' voice from behind him snapped Merlin's gaze over his shoulder. Gaius – tall, thin, weathered and ageing – stood at the top of the elevator trap door that led to the rooftop. The trap door that looked as though it hadn't been used by anyone but Merlin for years. He stood silent, his hands tucked into his wide sleeves, and stared at Merlin as though the sunlight strained down from overhead through the eternal blanket of clouds didn't faze him. Maybe it truly didn't.

Merlin could have gotten angry. He could have snapped at Gaius, rekindled his anger for his attempts to waylay the initiation of their rescue mission. But he didn't. He didn't have the heart. It was as though suddenly even his motivation to rescue his people had faded. All because Arthur had –

Dropping his gaze, Merlin turned back to face the floor beneath his shoes once more. There wasn't even an impression of his footprint, which would have been an impossibility in the slums should he happen to step upon a surface so white. Wrapping his arms around his legs, Merlin dropped his head
to his knees. "You knew?"

"That Arthur died?" Merlin didn't need to turn to know that Gaius nodded. He could feel it. "I have known for some time now. Forgive me for not telling you. I felt that, not only for the sake of tradition in remaining silent upon matters of the Past before remembered, but that you were better off learning in your own time." A soft sigh sounded from close behind Merlin, as though Gaius had taken steps towards him. His suspicions were validated when Gaius actually sunk to sitting beside him. "I am sorry. Perhaps it would have been better to have heard beforehand."

They stared for a time out across Inner City. It was so plain, so boring, and even though it was pristine and unbroken, lacking in the visibly, grimy pollution of the slums, Merlin despised the distinction. It was unnatural, too perfect. Just like the air. Just like the smell. So vastly different to the thoughts and the reality whirling through Merlin's mind.

"I don't think any way would be a good way," he murmured.

From his periphery, Merlin could just make out the slight bob of Gaius' head. "You're probably right." He was silent for a moment before he slowly spoke. "You love him, don't you, Merlin?"

Closing his eyes, as much for Gaius' words as to shut out the ugliness of what he saw before him, Merlin heaved a sigh of his own. "I guess it would be pretty obvious from my reaction." Less annoyed, Merlin felt more resigned to the reality of Gaius' perception than anything else. He couldn't seem to urge himself to put up a fight.

"Obvious? Perhaps to other people. Not to yourself, however."

"You realised when Arthur… when he… died?" Merlin swallowed, struggling to even utter the words aloud, before turned his head to rest his cheek upon his knees and glance towards Gaius. "When I returned to Camelot? Was it that obvious?"

Gaius stared at him for a long moment. Stared, and stared, and didn't reply. And finally Merlin gave a small nod of understanding. "Oh. I never came back, did I?"

Slowly, Gaius shook his head. "No. You didn't."

"I just left you all."

"It was understandable."

"How? How was it understandable?" Merlin shook his head as much as he could as it rested upon his knees. "I left everyone. I left you all because of, what, my grief?" Merlin squeezed his eyes together tightly for a moment. Even as he said the words he heard them ring true. Grief-stricken now as well as he had been then. Merlin doubted he ever would have been able to look upon Camelot again knowing that Arthur would no longer return.

"It was understandable," Gaius repeated. "Both myself and Gwen, we knew. We knew you loved him like no one else did, Merlin. I think perhaps even Gwen accepted that her own love for her king was seconded to yours."

Merlin peeped his eyes open and stared up at Gaius. He was a tall man in this incarnation and, evidently better nourished than Merlin had been in his childhood, he stood taller than him by almost half a head. Merlin had grown a little fatalistic for that fact in this life – he recalled how, in the past, he had been of the greater than average height, if lanky. Now he appeared to be of the middling
range. Funny, he considered. I hadn't even really thought about that until now.

And he barely spared it a thought then, either, for Gaius' words slowly unravelled themselves in his mind. "You mean… for years?"

Gaius nodded slowly. "It was evident to me at least, if not to you. To Gwen as well."

"… Years?"

Gaius gave a small smile. His hand squeezed just slightly on Merlin's shoulder, the impression of his narrow fingers pressing gently into the folds of his shirt. "Years indeed."

Merlin shook his head slowly. "I didn't even realise."

"Many people don't. Not until they're forced to come to terms with their feelings. Love that grows from friendship often has no definitive point at which one crosses the bridge towards something more."

"That's very deep of you, Gaius," Merlin murmured. He sniffed, wiping a hand across his nose and tucking his knees into his chest more tightly. Talking… he hadn't wanted to talk, but it seemed to be working a little to drag Merlin's attention from the gaping wound in his chest. From the guilt that nagged at him like a baying mule. "This is hardly the context for such meaningful proclamations."

Gaius gave a chuckle. "I hardly consider it particularly deep and meaningful. I speak only from observation."

"Are you spouting the 'old and wise' card, now?" Merlin asked, glancing back up at him.

"Hardly. It has only arisen from one observation." He paused, raising a meaningful eyebrow. "You, Merlin."

"Me?"

Gaius nodded. "I told you, it was evident to me for years, even if you didn't realise it for yourself. You and Arthur, you are joined in a way that even Gwen could not hope to attain. A different way entirely, through a means that diverges from the normal realms of paralleling love and affection."

Merlin blinked up at him slowly. Mention of Gwen filled him with a wistful sadness, of something approaching guilt for his feelings, but it was secondary to Gaius' words. "A love that surpasses the boundary of time and space?" He couldn't help but give a faint snort. "That's terribly poetic of you, Gaius."

"You were the one who said it, not I," Gaius chuckled in reply. "Though that doesn't mean I agree any less. It's true, Merlin. You shared something special, the two of you. And even had you not pursued the life of lovers, I believe that your friendship would have flourished into something more."

Sighing, Merlin turned his head so that his chin rested upon his knees once more. He drew his gaze back out to Inner City and all of its stale, pristine grandeur. "Something more…"

"Some friendships, some relationships, do indeed pervade many lifetimes."

"Like yours and Alice's?" Merlin murmured, glancing at Gaius sidelong.

Gaius' expression didn't change but his hand tightened just slightly on Merlin's shoulder. "Not you too."
"What?"

Gaius shook his head. "Nothing. But yes, perhaps like mine and Alice's."

"You should do something about that."

"We're not talking about me, Merlin. We're talking about you."

"Well, maybe we should talk about you," Merlin suggested quietly. "Maybe you're long past due, Gaius. Alice loves you, and you love her. Why don't you just accept the happiness that could come from that?"

Gaius fell silent again, his gaze fastened unblinkingly upon Merlin. Finally he spoke, and it appeared to be with a deliberate divergence. "Arthur died, Merlin." The bluntness of his words caused Merlin to flinch, but Gaius continued before he could say anything. "He died, but he is dead no longer."

"I know that," Merlin muttered, turning his gaze away from Gaius once more.

"No, I do not think you truly do. You are focusing upon the past, upon your perceived failings, and entirely forgetting the present. That is not the way of the magical, Merlin. We cannot linger in the past, not when there is so much Past to be had."

Gaius' words rung in Merlin's mind, the sound of a reprimand ringing even if Merlin didn't entirely understand the meaning of it. He pressed his lips together for a moment before speaking. "So what? You're saying I should just forget about what happened? Forget that Arthur died, and that if it hadn't been for my stupidity, my inadequacy, then he would have remained the King of Camelot for years to come?" Merlin shook his head. "That's not possible, Gaius. Arthur died."

The words were bitter upon his tongue, but before Merlin truly got a taste of them Gaius was speaking once more. "That is what you do not seem to fully comprehend, Merlin. Arthur did die, yes, but he has returned."

"I know that –"

"And upon his return he was in possession of magic. Of magic, Merlin. He cannot use it but he is a being of magic." Gaius hummed for a moment. "I wonder, was it the power of Avalon imbued within him or something else? Did he have just the faintest spark of magic within him beforehand? I wonder…"

Merlin turned to frown up at Gaius once more. His self-loathing was shunted to the side momentarily by confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I am saying, Merlin," Gaius said with a touch of exasperation, "that Arthur was indeed killed by the wound inflicted upon him at the Battle of Camlann, but against all odds he is here. Now. And that is what you do not seem to fully realise." He turned to face Merlin more fully, his second hand reaching forwards to settle gently, almost supportively, on Merlin's leg. "He's come back, Merlin. He has returned. I do not know how, and I do not know why, but somehow he has returned, and touched with the magic of Avalon at that." Gaius stopped, an expression of uncertainty crossing his face only briefly before it was swept aside by decisiveness. "I hesitate to speak with utter certainty but I believe, or perhaps I hope, that such means he shall return as himself once more. Maybe not entirely the same, maybe not where you could find him but –" "He'll come back." Merlin felt his eyes widen as understanding finally dawned. "He'll... he has come back. Just like every other sorcerer. Just like the Sidhe and Freya and –"
Gaius' smile drew across his face once more. "Yes. I do believe he will. I hope. It does not erase that which happens in the Past, that which has been inflicted upon us in lives gone by, but it does ease some of the pain. It does reassure."

Merlin was staring. He couldn't blink, couldn't look away from Gaius and what his words meant. Arthur wasn't magical, no. He couldn't use magic if his life depended upon it, Merlin knew. He wasn't a sorcerer, possessed a different feeling to those who were, much as Freya did. As a pixie would, or a changeling or, as Mordred had supplied, a troll when they chose to exhibit their own magic. But he had magic nonetheless. It coursed through him like the blood that pumped through his veins.

Death was ultimate. It was enduring. It was the end. For most people. Not quite for sorcerers, not for the magically sustained. Not in the same way because they remembered. Slowly, incrementally, as though living a hundred lives in one, they remembered those that had already passed. They would remember the people they had long lost. In some cases, some lucky cases, they could even find them again. As Merlin found Edwin and Mordred. As unhappy circumstance had him finding Freya.

Now Arthur was a part of it. Now, if not before, somehow he had truly joined them. Was Gaius right? Had he once, long ago, possessed just the faintest spark of magic that had enabled him to be reborn? Or had it solely to do with his presence in Avalon? Was it the magic of Avalon, that which had turned him from the lake to stagger into a world unknown, that had so gifted him?

Merlin didn't know. He didn't know and for that moment he didn't care. He had failed Arthur in the Past, failed him irreparably with never the chance to right what he had so wronged. Until now. Now he'd been given the chance. He might never find Arthur again, even if they were both reborn in future lives, but there was the possibility. There was the chance. And, even though it didn't erase his failings at Camlann, his failing of Arthur, in that moment Merlin felt a glimmer of hope rise.

Hope. There was possibility. And Gaius was right, because… because Arthur wasn't dead. Or he might have been, but now.

"Why are you telling me this?"

The words slipped forth quite without Merlin's intention. He didn't even care much for Gaius' answer but found himself raising his gaze towards him when Gaius hummed for a moment before speaking. "For a number of reasons. Firstly… I hate to see you grieve Merlin. It pains me just as much as it does to consider that Arthur died, that you were so torn apart by it. I would do whatever I could to alleviate whatever pains rested upon you that I could." His double handhold squeezed again just slightly.

Merlin felt a lump settle in his throat, a different kind of choked up this time. Gaius would still and always be Gaius, regardless of his ignorance in certain matters, and ignorance that might so frustrate Merlin at times. Just as Merlin would always care for him in turn.

Before he could speak, however, Gaius continued. "In much the same way, I speak so that, when this happens again in future you will not be destroyed by it irreparably once more. That you will have your hope that disaster can be remedied." His brow wrinkled slightly but more with sadness than reprimand. "I do not know what happened to you after Camlann, Merlin. I had hoped one day to see you return – myself, Gwen, Leon and Percival; we all did, but…” He trailed off and shook his head. A deep, undying sadness filled him that Merlin couldn't quite fathom the cause of. Not until Gaius continued in a murmur. "Truthfully, none of us even knew if you still survived to endure past your king."

For a moment, Merlin was rendered speechless. When he choked out a sound it was faintly garbled.
"What, you… you think I'd… that I'd kill –"

"Such has happened to many before and to those who have lost less," Gaius said, his tone so grave it was as though he spoke to Merlin's headstone rather than himself physically. His eyes met Merlin's and there was a touch of glassiness within them as his hand rose to cup the side of Merlin's head just lightly. The sight almost drew tears from Merlin once more, prone as he had been in the past few hours. Or days if it had truly been that long. "I knew not what happened to you, Merlin. None of us did. We hoped for the best, but –"

"Prepared for the worst," Merlin finished. Not for the first time he cursed his past self. Could he not have left a note if not to actually stop by and visit those he cared for? So much in the Past he longed to remedy but would never get the chance to.

Gaius nodded. Then he seemed to make a deliberate effort to thrust the melancholy of the Past from his mind. He painted another smile on his face that rapidly faded from strained into something almost mischievous. It was such a drastic shift in persona that for a second Merlin was slightly unhinged. "That, and because I wished to encourage to towards that which you have been avoiding because of your brooding."

"My brooding?" Merlin frowned. "Excuse me, but I –"

"You and Arthur both, it would seem."

At the mention of Arthur, Merlin stuttered to a halt. He stared at Gaius warily. "What about Arthur?"

Gaius heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Only that he too is far too caught up in his own thoughts to recognise reality when it stares directly at him."

"What –?"

"Arthur is horrendously confused," Gaius explained. "When he'd overcome what I understand as being a particularly nasty bout of nostalgia – I'll consider you at fault for that, at least; bringing up his death and not even remaining by his side to console him for the reminder." He raised an eyebrow that made Merlin cringe, even considering the foolishness of his scolding. "But quite aside from that, Alice and I found ourselves assaulted with a rather frantic Arthur asking where you'd gone, that you appeared unwell, that he had to talk to you about something but that he couldn't explain it to us just what it was." Gaius' eyebrow crept higher. "Merlin?"

Merlin finally raised his chin from his knees to turn back towards him. To stare and consider just what it was that Gaius was talking about. Other than his blurted, thoughtless eruption of hysteria, when he'd basically accused Arthur of dying before fleeing…

He'd kissed him. Merlin had kissed Arthur, because he couldn't not. Because even in the depths of his grief he had seen Arthur and it was his Arthur, and he suddenly knew he loved him and he simply couldn't not.

Merlin felt a touch of warmth flush his cheeks. A flush the likes he hadn't felt for years. Gaius' raised eyebrow shifted into a faintly knowing smile. "Ah. I see. You realised your own feelings for yourself, perhaps?"

"Might've just," Merlin winced. "And I might've sort of spewed them all over Arthur."

"Spewed them?" Gaius' nose twitched slightly as if in distaste. "Delightful, Merlin."

"It's the most accurate description I could think of."
"And what do you propose to do about this?"

"I…” Merlin trailed off, biting his lip. "I don't know. What do I say? What do I -?"

"Telling him would be a good place to start."

"What are you, a relationship therapist or something?"

Gaius shrugged, his hands finally dropping to settle into his lap. "In a past life, yes. But only briefly."

Merlin found himself staring once more for a moment before he slowly shook his head. "Lucky guess."

"Quite."

"Regardless, I'm not going to do that. Arthur has enough on his plate without having to deal with my feelings for him. He doesn't need that."

"Your feelings for him?" Gaius cocked his head like a thoughtful bird. "Do you so believe that they should be kept hidden?"

"Seriously?" Merlin raised his own eyebrow at Gaius. "Definitely."

"And what of Arthur's feelings for you?"

"Arthur's feelings for me –" Merlin stuttered to a halt as his second eyebrow rose to join his first. "What was that?"

Gaius' knowing smile had become frustratingly wide. "You didn't realise that either, did you?"

"Didn't realise? Gaius, what are you -?"

Gaius sighed loud enough to override Merlin confusion. "He didn't fully realise it either, you know, if it makes any difference. You were both as oblivious as one another. But I do believe that, whatever your little revelation may have entailed, Arthur has suddenly undergone an epiphany of sorts to the likes that you too have undertaken."

Merlin went right back to staring. Gaius' words… they didn't make any sense. Perhaps Gaius was confused. Or mistaken. Or teasing him, which would have been a low blow considering that Merlin truly did not feel in the emotional state to handle such in that moment. It was impossible. Inconceivable, even considering the absence of Gwen who had certainly been the love of his life, of the kingdom that he had always put first, of variable social standing that had always, always been there.

Of their friendship that Merlin wouldn't have traded for the world.

Now Gaius was saying… he was saying that Arthur… that Arthur, just like Merlin was… that he was…

"What?"

"So eloquent of you, Merlin," Gaius said with a smile. He even went so far as to give him a fond pat to the shoulder. "You truly are both as blind as one another. Perfectly suited, in my opinion."

"Gaius, I don't –"
"Do I perhaps need to spell it out for you, Merlin?" There was the raised eyebrow again, pointed and distinctly amused. The solemnity of their discussion had taken a very deliberate turn for the opposite. "Perhaps it is easier to witness in others than to recognise in yourself."

"Gaius –"

"I believe that Arthur is in love with you too, Merlin." Another pat on the shoulder accompanied the softening of his smile. Merlin barely noticed either for the ringing sound of Gaius' words. "Perhaps not in the Past, perhaps not initially more than with the affection of a dear friend, but certainly now." He shook his head, chuckling slightly. "I do believe it hit him just as hard as your own revelation hit you."

Merlin was hardly listening anymore. It was… it seemed… it was hardly possible. Inconceivable. Arthur? Arthur loved him? That wasn't… it shouldn't be… it wasn't possible. And yet, if Gaius' diagnosis was correct, he did. Merlin didn't think he would go so far to tease him like this. Not now.

Somehow he'd risen to his feet. Merlin didn't remember when or even how – he'd hardly felt capable of moving since he'd sprawled out onto the roof. But suddenly he was towering over Gaius as his old mentor and friend peered up at him, smile still affixed. He was itching to leave, desperate to thrown himself down the trapdoor and race to Arthur's room now.

Arthur. Arthur loved –

Did he? Was it even possible?

How was it possible? For Merlin to have been given not only the gift of knowledge that Gaius had afforded him, the gift of hope, but this too?

It couldn't be -

It shouldn't be –

"Go, Merlin." Gaius nodded his head sagely. "I believe you'll have much to talk about.

Merlin went.

Climbing from sleep had always been a struggle for Arthur. On campaign, of course, he leap from his bedding with the best of them, sword in hand and ready to strike at a potential enemy before his eyes had even opened. But when cocooned in the comforting embrace of thick, soft blankets, reclined upon a mattress so plush it almost seemed to swallow him whole – no, Arthur was not inclined to drag himself from the depths of his sleep. It was far too comfortable to sink into unconsciousness, to revel in the beauty of the dreams that slumber presented.

Except that today… today was different. Today was no choice – he would have woken himself up had he been bereft of sleep for years hitherto.

The last forty-eight hours had been hell. Hell because, firstly, Arthur had been afflicted by a bout of ‘remember you died and how painful it was and that you lost everything?’. That was never a good start. But secondly was because of Merlin.

It hadn't hit him until Merlin had disappeared. Until he had vanished and Arthur had been struck with the urgent desire to follow him, to be with him, to soothe his distress, even if that distress was driven by the same that had momentarily driven Arthur to losing grasp upon reality. Because in the aftermath, staring at the empty expanse of hallway down which Merlin had fled before lurching into
a run himself, Arthur had realised.

Merlin remembered. Finally Merlin had remembered that Arthur had been killed. That he'd died even if somehow he was dead no longer, and that Merlin had been the one with him when it had happened. The expression on Merlin's face when Arthur had found him rivalled only by that he could hazily remember from his last moments of pain and the encroaching darkness. Merlin's face as he'd bowed over him, cradling him and ordering him not to die.

Arthur had run after Merlin. But Merlin – the bastard – was fast. Faster in this life than Arthur could recall him being before. He'd known that from their practice sessions in the gym, but the reality of it, of Merlin truly fleeing from him and just how effectively he could do so, hadn't hit Arthur until that moment.

Worse than that, Arthur had no idea where he'd even gone. Still had no idea after raking the entire residence with the keen eye of a captain, of a knight, of a strategist and a war leader.

Merlin appeared to have somehow disappeared from the house entirely. It reminded Arthur all too much of those times in the Past when Merlin had 'disappeared'. To the tavern, as Gaius had claimed, though Arthur began to rapidly deduce in recent years if not at the time that at the tavern Merlin was not. He had a knack for vanishing into thin air, a skill that only seemed to have become more refined for his years in the slums. On the streets. In fleeing from Hunters and fellow slum-dwellers alike, scraping to make earnings enough to be afforded even the most minimalistic of resources and –

Arthur always ground his teeth at the thought. It was just so wrong.

He found himself at Gaius' infirmary hours into his searching. Gaius, who appeared to be in solemn conversation with Alice over something he found evidently concerning. They both ceased their exchange as soon as Arthur stepped through the doors.

Arthur didn't realise how worried, how frantic he must have looked until he saw the arousal of a frown upon Gaius' face. "Arthur? What is it? What's wrong?"

"Are you alright?" Alice asked, crossing the room towards him with worry creasing her own brow.

Arthur glanced between the two for a moment before shaking his head fervently. He might look terrible – he didn't feel particularly well after the remembrance he'd just endured, not to mention what must have been an hour or two of fruitless searching afterwards – but he didn't care. He felt wearied, strung out like an old dishrag to dry, but he didn't care about that either. In that moment he didn't really even care about the provoked memory of his own death. He just wanted to know where Merlin was. To see if he was all right. To ensure he was all right. To soothe the pain he evidently felt and…

And maybe just to discuss the meaning behind that kiss.

"I'm fine," Arthur assured them both. "I'm fine, but I'm just – have you seen Merlin, either of you?"

An expression of sorrow and regret flashed briefly across Gaius' face, but before he got a chance to say anything Arthur found himself blustering out his own desperate query and striding halfway across the room. "You've seen him? What's else wrong? Other then – is he hurt? Did something else happen?"

With a heavy sigh, Gaius shook his head. He crossed the rest of the distance between them and patted Arthur on the shoulder as though he were a boy again. "A misunderstanding between us, unfortunately. Perhaps more my fault than his."
"When? Just now? When did you see him?"

"Calm down, Arthur, truly, calm down." Gaius patted his shoulder with slightly more force. "No, it was not just now. When the message - I'm assuming it was from Mordred - was announced, we discussed some mutual... issues." He heaved another sigh. "I have been meaning to hold discussion with him, with both of you, but it did not go as well as I had hoped it would."

"The message?" Arthur repeated, the only spark of information that he'd really heard. "That was nearly three hours ago. So he hasn't been here since?" Growling his frustration under his breath, Arthur turned to leave. Only for Gaius' grasp upon his shoulder to tighten slightly and hold him in place. He was surprisingly strong for his thinness.

Arthur glanced back to him to meet his deepening frown. "Arthur, what is it? What happened?" Then, with more concern, "Is Merlin alright?"

Arthur felt his frustration only grow, not so much at Gaius but at the situation itself. He felt himself bodily twitch with the urge to turn from the room and cast another sweep throughout the entire interior of Nimueh's residence, suppressing it only because he suspected Gaius' grasp upon his shoulder wouldn't be shaken quite so easily.

Scowling towards the door for a moment – Merlin shouldn't have run off; Arthur could have helped him, dammit – Arthur turned back to Gaius. His voice was lower than he'd expected when he spoke. "He found out about me."

"About you?"

"That I... that I died." Even saying the words seemed to numb Arthur's tongue.

Gaius's face froze. Then it crumpled. The frown caved into sorrow and for the third time he heaved a sigh. "Ah. I see. That would be... upsetting, I assume."

"Upsetting." Arthur couldn't help but repeat. Upsetting? Arthur's death was upsetting? Yes, that could be one way to describe it. Just as one could call the depths of the winter 'a bit nippy', or a mountain 'quite tall'.

Gaius pinned Arthur with a stare. "I did not mean it like that, Arthur—"

"Of course you didn't. I know you didn't." Which he did, truly. Just not right now.

"I only say as much because a Past death, to a sorcerer at least, is always in the Past. That we, as ones who have both experienced and witnessed countless deaths ourselves, are forced to simply accept it. Without the upset." Gaius frowned at Arthur reprovingly. "If Merlin is 'upset' then it would mean that he was so distressed by what he knew as happening in the Past that he forgot entirely that it was something that had long since occurred. And that, by and large, it should hold little meaning for him in the Present."

Arthur opened his mouth to reply. Little meaning? Little meaning? How was it possible that Arthur's death held little meaning? But then he paused as the full weight of Gaius' words settled upon him.

Merlin had died too. And Gaius. And Alice. Nimueh, Sebille, Mascus, even Morgana, each many times over. Arthur had never quite considered that. He knew they'd been reincarnated, true, but he'd never quite considered that each of them had died and that, in perhaps more cases that he knew of, they recalled them. Had Merlin been aware of his own deaths already? Had he, in some of the lives he'd lived, died at such an age that, at not even thirty years old, he remembered them? That he'd relived them to an extent?
Arthur felt a touch of nausea building in his gut. What would that be like? To remember, to feel one's own death, not just to speculate and not just once but to know in reality and to have known numerous times. Arthur couldn't conceive it. He recalled his own, remembered the pain, the agony, the desperation as he knew it was the end yet strove to push himself to last just a little longer. To hide from Merlin – Merlin, who had stuck by him the whole way, even when he had shunned him, even when he had ordered him to leave – just how terrified he was. And that was only once.

Merlin had endured it countless times. He likely remembered enduring it a number of times, too, even if such Past memories were 'hazy' and 'detached'. But despite that, he'd demonstrated such pain, as though physically wounded, when he'd recalled Arthur's death. As though it was that death he'd felt rather than his own. Merlin, who had slogged through the mud of the slums his entire life, who had endured the tortures of the Facilities – the Pits – who had faced the oppression and targeting focus of the government, the authorities, the threat of the Hunters his entire life. Somehow, for some reason, it was Arthur's death that had hurt him. That had made him cry as Arthur hadn't seen him do once in his current life.

The revelation rocked Arthur on his axis. It meant… what did… it could mean that…

"He kissed me." The words spilled out without Arthur's intention. He didn't know why, but it somehow seemed relevant to his subconscious mind.

A slight inhalation from behind him told him that Alice was standing closer that he'd realised. He barely even noticed. Instead, he blinked slowly and raised his gaze instead to Gaius. Gaius, whose face had eased of its frown, had even lessened in its sorrow slightly, to stare at him with nothing if not deep thoughtfulness. "He kissed you?"

"I…” Arthur didn't know why he'd said that. Alongside everything else it shouldn't have been relevant, but now he couldn't stop thinking about it. He couldn't shake the sight of Merlin's tear-streaked face from his mind, his sobbing breaths, the sudden lunge towards Arthur to throw himself upon him and wrap his arms around him. The press of his lips against Arthur's, so brief and chaste but so warm, soft, memorable. And then he was gone. "Yes, he –"

"Perhaps he's finally realised, then," Gaius murmured. He'd turned from Arthur, meeting what Arthur could only assume was Alice's gaze over his shoulder with something approaching coddling sympathy. "I had wondered if he ever would."

"What? What are you talking about? Gaius, what do you mean? What are you saying? Are you -?"

"Arthur, calm yourself. Honestly, I don't think I've ever seen you quite so hysterical before."

"Hysterical?" That word, if nothing else, quelled Arthur's urge to blurt forth a continuing torrent of questions. "Me?"

Gaius' gaze settled back upon Arthur's. His eyebrow rose in that way he had that could still a charging bull. "Yes, hysterical. Calm yourself. It is not a drastic situation."

"Not a drastic situation? What are you -?"

"Does it bother you, Arthur?"

Arthur stuttered to a halt in his protests. Bother him? What, did Merlin's kiss bother him? In an instant Arthur found himself on the verge of denial. Of course it didn't bother him. Not only was he more concerned about Merlin – he'd just taken off, and he'd seemed so upset and dammit, Arthur didn't even know where he was – but why would it bother him? Not when… well, not when…
"I don't – "

"Perhaps this isn't the right time to discuss this, with all things considered," Gaius overrode him, shaking his head. "What with Mordred's message, and Merlin's realisation of your death and –"

"It didn't bother me at all," Arthur found himself saying. His tongue seemed to have taken control of his mind, speaking for him. "Not at all. Rather…" He trailed off, feeling a frown settle upon his brow. Rather… If anything, it had just felt right.

Merlin was his friend.

Merlin had been his manservant.

He was Gwen's friend, had always been nothing but supportive of their relationship, of their marriage, of their unity.

He was Arthur's companion, as he was his a ruler, warrior, and fellow quester.

And Merlin was the most important person in the world to Arthur right now.

That reality had been slow in dawning, but Arthur had accepted it readily enough. He knew now. Merlin was important to him in a way that made it impossible to live without him. Arthur needed him, more than he'd ever realised, and maybe it was simply because he was one of the last ties to the life and kingdom that Arthur had once lived and ruled, but he was… he was Arthur's everything.

It was Merlin as much as Morgana who drove Arthur to seek out the sorcerers.

It was Merlin and Morgana both whose very existence had urged him to align himself with Nimueh and fight against the government and the suppression of sorcerers, even when centuries before it had been the other way around.

It was Merlin, more than Morgana, who had driven him to pursue that cause proactively, to infiltrate the Facility and get him out.

And it was Merlin who had urged him to fight back. To retaliate. Who had been the linchpin in encouraging Arthur towards actually doing something. Because if it was Merlin who was doing it, then Arthur would accompany him. Would follow him. Would stand by his side and fight. Because… because Arthur cared for him.

He cared for him. More than he had ever realised. As he had only just begun to realise. And in the last week he had come to suspect just how much he did mean to him. That Mordred's presence, his intervention, however unintentional it might be, had alerted him to reality.

Merlin was Arthur's. His friend, his companion, his comrade. The thought that Mordred – Mordred, who had killed him, even if it was a different Mordred – would have claim to him more than Arthur, had kissed Merlin before Arthur –

He'd kissed Merlin before Arthur. And in a very large part of his mind, Arthur was coming to the realisation that such an occurrence had discontented him as much as anything else had. Almost as much as the fact that it had been the other Mordred's blade who had killed him. How that was possible, how it was even conceivable that those two factors were on par with one another, baffled Arthur, and yet…

It was true.
"I think I… maybe I just… that I…” Arthur was stumbling over his words. Stumbling as he never did; he was an eloquent speaker, an orator, one who had been trained in the ways of enticing the masses and inciting his armies with a brief word. Now he was stuttering and fumbling those words, and the sole reason for that lay in that his entire mind was revolving in that moment around Merlin. Merlin, and their brief, tearful kiss, and the fact that his sorrow for Arthur’s death was more pronounced than that he felt for anything else in the world.

Arthur should feel guilty for that. Probably. He knew he should, but he couldn't help but feel a rise of something – of a longing welling within him.

Gaius’ hand patted onto his shoulder once more. Arthur glanced up at him to see a strange smile quivering his lips. Strangely knowing, as though he suspected something that Arthur himself wasn’t entirely sure of. "Take yourself to your room, Arthur. Or to the gym, perhaps. I’ll look for Merlin, try to calm him down some. And, if he feels to inclined, I'll urge him to seek you out."

"Gaius," Arthur began.

"Arthur." Gaius raised his eyebrow once more and Arthur had quelled. There was really no fighting with Gaius when he sought his own way, and in that moment Arthur just couldn't bring himself to try. To try and fail. It had been an emotional storm that day, of excitement that snapped into worry and fierce concern, then into confusion that was chased away by mind-numbing horror. And then even more confusion, and frustration, and the unnerving feeling of truth and understanding slowly dawning upon his ignorant mind.

Arthur didn’t like to be ignorant. He liked it almost as little to realise he had been ignorant and for that ignorance to slowly fade into awareness that made him feel the fool. For he did feel the fool, at least a little. Utterly foolish in that he realised he had feelings – feelings unlike any he would have anticipated and far deeper than he could have expected – for Merlin and that it was only when Merlin had expressed such overt emotion that he had realised.

Utterly foolish.

So Arthur ceded. He didn't want to, but he bowed his head and accepted Gaius' instructions. And leaving the infirmary with only the brief urge to bypass the entire rest of the house in another sweeping search, he’d retired to his room. He hadn't thought he would sleep but he must have done.

The knock on the door was a foreign sound in the New World. When one arrived at a closed door, a touch to the ID-pad on the other side would alert anyone to their arrival before they entered. No one knocked anymore. It was that as much as anything else that cause Arthur to rise from his seat before the holographic screen at his desk. He hadn’t been doing anything of import anyway, nothing besides flicking through messages, through plans, through pilfered maps of underground canal routes and architecture that he'd long since committed to memory. He’d simply been waiting.

The door slid open with a hiss to reveal Merlin on the other side.

He looked pitiful. Or he would have done if Arthur had been the sort of person to view someone as pitiful anymore. He had grown past that to see that where sorry and ‘pathetic’ could be perceived was just as likely to be exhaustion, sadness, hopelessness and resignation. Just as he saw in Merlin.

No, not quite hopelessness but there certainly was exhaustion in the paleness of his face, in the heaviness of his eyes, as though he hadn't slept once since Arthur had last seen him. There was sadness too, the slight redness of a nose wiped to rawness. And yes, maybe a little resignation but not quite hopelessness. More acceptance.
Merlin visibly swallowed. He didn't step into the room and Arthur didn't cross the distance towards him, regardless of how much he wanted to. It was a struggle, but he settled for folding his arms across his chest. Not in objection this time, but more in an attempt to quell the urge to reach towards Merlin just to make sure that he was really there. That he was really okay.

With evident struggle, Merlin spoke. His voice had a slight croak, hoarse. "I'm sorry I upset you."

Arthur blinked. That hadn't been what he'd expected. It wasn't what he'd expected at all. "What?"

"Gaius, he said..." Merlin paused to clear his throat. "He said that you seemed upset. When you came to see him. I'm sorry I did that."

Arthur found himself leaning forwards to take a step towards Merlin and had to abort the motion halfway through. He wasn't sure if Merlin even wanted him anywhere near him. Maybe he had just come to apologise, misguided as that apology might be. Merlin was just the sort of person who would do that—for even if he had changed throughout his lives, even if in this life he was more ruthless, merciless, more cutthroat, he was still Merlin enough that he would consider other people's feelings above his own. He likely always would.

"You have nothing to apologise for," Arthur found himself saying, and even unintentional as they were he recognised his words for truth. "Gaius told me that sometimes the resurfacing of Past memories can be confronting. Painful even."

It wasn't entirely the truth. Gaius had vaguely mentioned something of the sort a long time ago, but never in so many words. Never so literally, as Arthur had come to discover that most sorcerers were at times quite defensive of their memories and the process of how it all worked. Though sometimes they would offhandedly refer to the Past, sometimes even explore more deeply with a touch of nostalgia if Gaius' and Alice's demonstrations were anything to go by, it was more often than not kept under wraps.

Merlin didn't visibly withdraw by mention of the Past. If anything he seemed slightly self-deprecating, as though reprimanding himself for a foolish response, however warranted Arthur might feel that response to be. "Maybe. But just as much as that, I feel like I have to apologise for... for, um..."

"What?"

"For kissing you," Merlin blurted out. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, but that was the only indication that Arthur had of his embarrassment. "It was presumptuous and spontaneous. I shouldn't have done it."

Arthur stared at Merlin for a moment. Stared as a sinking feeling of regret swept through him. Oh. Merlin was sorry. It was simply in the heat of the moment, 'spontaneous', just as he had described Mordred's as being.

He tried not to be disappointed by that fact. He tried to see it from an alternative perspective – at least Merlin wasn't hiding anymore in whatever nook he'd secreted himself into, and he appeared to be unharmed, if exhausted – but Arthur couldn't help himself. He'd had more than enough time to think over the past days of wait, of forced wait in which he'd nearly bitten the head off anyone he saw and paced more treks in the synthetic carpet of his room than a caged tiger.

In that time, Arthur had reached a conclusion. He didn't quite know how it had happened and at what point it had arisen, but he had concluded: he loved Merlin. Perhaps it had once been a platonic love, driven by friendship and companionability, but not anymore. Arthur couldn't ignore
reality any longer, not after how he'd felt seeing Mordred kiss Merlin. Not after Merlin had kissed him. Even looking at him across the room he just saw him as different. Arthur couldn’t shake the thought from his mind, and the longer he stared the longer it set its teeth into him.

It was different to how it had been with Gwen. Different, but not greater or lesser – Arthur had loved Gwen and still mourned her loss, despite knowing that she had been gone centuries past. But Arthur and Merlin shared something that surpassed that in entirely different ways. Ways that seemed to expand, grow and morph into shapes Arthur hadn’t even conceived before.

Arthur had concluded he loved Merlin. And now Merlin was apologising for the act that had driven his understanding.

Clearing his throat, his hands tightening on his biceps to quell the urge to strike out at something, Arthur shook his head. "You don’t have to apologise for that, Merlin."

"Yes, I do." Merlin shook his head, replying almost before Arthur had finished speaking. "I do. Because I should have explained myself to you before doing something like that." With a deep breath, Merlin finally lifted his gaze to meet Arthur's. What he saw caught his breath for the depth, the imploring regret but the heartfelt compassion that welled within them. "I love you, Arthur. And I'm sorry I acted as I did, but after… after remembering you died, I… couldn't help it." He closed his eyes once more, his face tightening with pain. "I'm sorry."

Arthur barely heard the apology. For once he hardly even heard mention of his own death, that which always filled him with a physical nausea that manifested as dizziness, throwing him back into his final moments. His arms slipped from their fold and slowly but without his intention, he began to cross the room.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Arthur. For everything." Merlin was speaking with his eyes closed, his teeth biting into his lip and that pained frown only growing on his forehead. "I was too slow. I wasn't good enough. I didn't make it in time. And I'm so sorry. I love you, and I couldn't save you –"

Arthur was reaching for Merlin before he even realised it. With gentle force, he raised a hand curl around Merlin's arm, the other to rest upon the back of his head. It was presumptuous of him perhaps, but in barely a moment, a second after Merlin blinked his eyes open with sorrow flickering to surprise, Arthur drew them together.

It was a different kiss entirely. Different because Arthur pressed them together, slowly and gently, and would have struggled to let himself allow Merlin to retreat had he wanted to. Merlin didn't, blessedly, he didn't seem to object at all.

It was brief, however, and just as chaste as their previous kiss in the midst of sadness and weeping. When Arthur drew away, the taste of Merlin upon his lips, he met wide eyes. "I love you too."

Merlin stared at him. Stared with eyes widening even further, growing reminiscent of a cat for their size and the angular features of his face. He blinked slowly, in faint awe, and whispered just audibly, "Gaius was right."

"What?" Gaius? Gaius was right? About what?

But Merlin didn’t speak, and a second later Arthur didn’t care about the failure to reply. Instead, he raised his own arms, looping them around Arthur's neck to pull them together once more. Their third kiss wasn't quite as chaste.

Dreams. Dreams of reunion, of confession, of that final, long awaited admission that Arthur hadn’t
even known was long-awaited. Of a touch, a closing of distance between then, a locking of arms to
cleave together and erase what distance had sprung even momentarily between them. Arthur could
only close his eyes and inhale the richness of those dreams with a hungry ache, blotting out the
physical world to immerse himself in longing.

Dreams were so tantalising. So perfect. Impossibly perfect.

So tempting.

*The shedding of clothes, the touch of smooth, warm skin against his own...* Arthur couldn't get
enough of it. *He wanted more, needed more.* His hand grasped at the back of Merlin's head,
drawing an arm around his narrow waist to hold them closer as they pressed their lips together. *He
wanted more, needed more, wanted the feel, to smell the scent, to taste him upon his tongue. It was
intoxicating, sending his thoughts into a spiral...*

Those dreams... they could sustain Arthur for an eternity, he could swear, without the barest touch
even if they only fuelled his longing. Except that they didn't need to. Because the dreams that swum
to the forefront of his mind, that were so tantalisingly delicious that it was almost sinful to consider
and even greater than the half formed desires, weren't dreams at all. They were memories, and
memories most recent. They weren't what Arthur had *wanted* to happen, but what had happened in
actuality. When Merlin had come to his door, had drawn him from his brooding frustration, and had
admitted all of it. Arthur, who had only just realised how much he wanted, how much he needed,
how he longed and hadn't even realised it, had grasped that which was offered him with both hands.
Grasped with the intention of never letting go.

It was those memories that actually urged him to awaken fully, without a grumble of disinclination
for the need to claw his way from groggy sleep.

*Merlin clung back to him fiercely. Unyieldingly. As though he planned to never let go, his arms
wrapping and locking around Arthur's neck to draw them together even as Arthur did the same. He
could feel Merlin's fingers in his hair, grazing along his scalp in a way that sent shivers of pleasure
coursing down his spine to flood into his groin.*

"*Merlin..."

His eyes peeled open to the memory of his own words. He blinked up at the ceiling above him; the
high ceiling, as all ceilings in Nimueh's residence were. Pristinely white walls, bare and of the sort
that showed not a hint of woodwork or stone beneath, reflected a warm, sleepy orange glow. That
glow always arose within the room to sing of morning come in a way that wasn't too bright as to
awaken sleeping occupants. It was like the sun itself, acting in the absence of windows.

The wide room was largely empty but for the impressive bed – impressive in more than just size but
in softness and sheer number of pillows and blankets. Dark floors pooled around the bed like a black
moat, and Arthur didn't need to touch a toe to them to know that they radiated a gentle, warm heat
that pulsed just enough throughout the room to maintain a static, comfortable temperature. There
wasn't all that much to see, and Arthur had seen it all before anyway. With barely a handful of blinks
to restore clarity to his vision, he drew his attention towards the true beauty in the room.

Merlin slept alongside him. Half shrouded by blankets, his long frame stretched like a cat for the
dipping arch of his back. Bare shoulders hunched slightly, his arms curled upwards, one pulled into
his side with hand gently curled while the other tucked beneath his cheek. His eyelashes left dark
shadows on his cheekbones, his mouth parted just slightly with nearly inaudible inhalations of his
breath hitching in soft, shallow gasps. For the first time that Arthur had seen him, for the first time
since his return, Merlin looked utterly relaxed and content.
And he slept next to Arthur. Right next to Arthur. Arthur didn't know how many times in his life he had woken to the sight of Merlin beside him, the countless quests and nights huddled together to preserve warmth. But this was different. It was so different as to be incomparable. And it wasn't because he was unfamiliar with being with a man – he'd been on more than enough campaigns for that particular alternative to be explored, just as all of his fellow knights sought on a cold, uncomfortable night – but he'd just never considered Merlin in that way before.

Why had he never considered it?

_In a flurry of stumbling movement they staggered towards the bed. It would have been embarrassing, to nearly trip over his own feet, to be so distracted by Merlin that he could hardly even see, but for once Arthur didn't care about that. He didn't care at all. His focus was trained entirely on Merlin, upon the sight of his flushed cheeks, his lips that demanded to be kissed once more in the bare seconds that Arthur drew away from him. The long length of him, the hardness of muscles beneath his hands, the softness of skin, the shivering, enticing caress of Merlin's own fingers._

_It was all he could do to maintain his head. To urge Merlin onto the bed even as Merlin drew him after him. The press of naked skin to naked skin set Arthur's nerves on fire. He pressed himself against Merlin, sinking onto him as their legs tangled about one another. His fingers seemed unable to hold still, to grasp, to stroke, to touch what he hadn't realised he needed to touch until it was afforded of him. The only thing that could have stopped him in the world was Merlin's voice, and when he did speak…_

"Arthur…"

_The sound was like morning bells, was like the first hint of sunlight, the sinking heat of falling into a warm bath or the embrace of a cool, smooth, silken robe. Arthur heard himself utter a groan at the fractured word, could hardly contain his need to touch Merlin, to press his lips against his once more to taste him upon his tongue…_

He'd had suspected even before Merlin had kissed him that he felt something more for him than he previously had. It was a suspicion aroused by a number of things, the kiss Mordred had impressed upon Merlin one of them. It had shocked him, yes, but more because of the thoughts that it provoked, the possessiveness, then the understanding that had finally clicked into place. For before that he had begun to suspect. It was in the way that his eyes would always drift towards Merlin, the way his thoughts would wander in a similar direction when Merlin wasn't beside him. Not to think untoward thoughts, but just to think of _Merlin_, of what he was doing, of where he was, of what he was thinking. Of why he wasn't with Arthur.

There was the upwelling of protectiveness that rose within Arthur whenever the thought stuck that someone, anyone, might even be thinking of doing Merlin harm. It was different even from the protectiveness that was elicited when considering the mistreatment of any sorcerer, for this was personal. Arthur felt that, should any harm actually come to Merlin, it would be as though that harm itself were inflicted directly upon him. He'd felt it before, when he'd first seen Merlin in the Pits. It had been physically painful.

He didn't want to protect Merlin in the same way that he did other sorcerers. It might have been wrong, but he wanted to do more. He would take an arrow, would take a hundred arrows, for Merlin if he had to, because he couldn't stand the thought of any harm coming to him. Or any more harm. That desperate need was greater even than that he felt for his sister, for Morgana was not yet found, was still out there somewhere and possibly even in the hands of the authorities themselves. Arthur wanted to find her, needed to find her, and yet that urgency had dimmed slightly. And it was simply because he'd found Merlin.
How did I never realise it before? Arthur pondered, self-deprecation thickly enriching his thoughts. I knew he was important to me – he’s always been important to me – and after discovering his magic…

Arthur remembered only too well when he’d discovered Merlin had magic. He had felt horrified, betrayed, lost. No, like he had lost. There had never been anything quite comparable to the ache that struck him at the thought that he had lost Merlin, that his magic had divided them irreparably. It was only in his final moments that he had fully realised how foolish such a notion was.

He was never lost to me. It was only my own stupidity that made me think so.

How could he have been so foolish? Merlin had never been lost. He'd been forced away, pushed, and even then he hadn't left. Even with Arthur's withdrawal from him, Merlin hadn't left. He'd stayed by Arthur's side until the very end, fighting the entire way. For Arthur.

And Arthur… perhaps it had even been then that he had realised he loved Merlin. Even with Guinevere as his wife, even with the love of his country and his people that would come foremost, Merlin had always been different. Had always meant something different. How was it possible that Arthur only realised so recently that 'different' meant 'more'? That he had only come to suspect when he saw Mordred, when he saw him steal Merlin's kiss, when he saw him with his Merlin, that he'd realised. That only when Merlin had first pressed his lips against Arthur's had he truly understood.

And now, without the heavy weight of a kingdom resting upon his shoulders, with the long absence of a wife he still cared for but incomparably…

Turning onto his side, Arthur slid closer to Merlin. Not that there was all that much distance between them, despite the expanse of the bed. He felt almost as though he could lie alongside Merlin eternally, simple lost in studying the contours of his face, once so disconcerting in their slight differences to the familiar but now so precious. He could listen to the soft reassurance of his breathing, for it was a reassurance, of presence and life both. Arthur would revel in the thoughts and the understanding that had been so long in coming but always there, buried just out of sight.

And he would smile, would flood with warmth, at the very idea that Merlin was his. That notion, validated by the previous night of heated passion, of intensity, of desperately clutching fingers and equally desperate pleas, and lips and tongues and bodies pressed together – the very memory awoke a gentle warmth within Arthur, flooding through his chest and into his belly, sending his heart quickening and invoking the urgent need to touch. The memory of the previous night, of the throughs of passion that have overwhelmed them both, rose within him at the barest hint of a reminder.

Merlin was warm. He was tight and encompassing, ready and willing, raising and pressing his hips back as Arthur worked his way inside him. Within seconds Arthur was fully seated, breath gasping at the building of pleasure in his groin, coursing along his spine to pound into his temples. Hands grasping Merlin's hips as he settled himself, he leaned forwards to press another kiss along the back of his neck, the side of his head, his cheek when Merlin turned his hooded, long-lashed eyes upon him. He'd always had ridiculously long lashes.

"You just… going to… sit there all day," he gasped. The teasing tone was somewhat lessened by his breathlessness.

Arthur chuckled anyway, a tight sound that did interesting things to his body and trembled his thighs as he held himself on his knees. Reaffirming his hold upon Merlin's hips, he drew back slowly. "I'm you command, sire."
“Sire?” Merlin gave a slight chuckle of his own – he actually laughed – that sent jolts of pleasure through Arthur's arousal, urging him only higher. "I don't remember you being so kindly and lenient in the past."

“Well, then I'll have to be remedying that, won't I?” Arthur replied. And without another word he drew back his hips and thrust forward.

Making love with a man was entirely different to that with a woman. Entirely different, but Arthur had never found he had anything to complain about for the fact. In moments, hands grasping Merlin's hips, he set about working up a rhythmic, snapping pace. Withdraw and thrust, in and out, again and again, and only speeding his pace with each bout of rising pleasure. The sounds Merlin emitted, the groans that were muffled none by the pillow as he arched into the mattress beneath him, when straight to Arthur's groin, hardening him only further alongside the sharp pangs of pleasure that erupted within him at every thrust, at every slide of skin along warm, slick, forgiving skin.

Withdraw and thrust, again and again, and whether it was the fact that it had been so long since he'd found relief in another or if it was Merlin – for God, the sight of him reaching for himself to ease his own hardiness was captivating enough, the feel of his hand grasping his shaft as Arthur leaned forwards once more, wrapping his own fingers around Merlin's shaft... He would never have considered to gaze upon Merlin before in such a way before, to feel his arousal build almost painfully at the sight of his bare shoulders tightening and the surge of his hips back into Arthur's, his head rocking backwards with a groan.

Appealing? It certainly was. Another understatement of the millennium.

For whatever reason – for countless reasons – he found himself climaxing quickly. With sharp jerks of his hips, driving himself forwards again and again and panting, gasping, chanting Merlin's name just because his mind could think of nothing else to say. Pleasure built within him like a rumbling volcano, sending his mind into spiralling deafness and sparkling blindness, and with a heavy groan he came hard and fast in a firm thrust of his hips.

Merlin moaned beneath him, a sound that he felt more than heard for the pounding of release in his ears. His hand continued to work at Merlin's hardness of its own volition, following Merlin's own motions, and then he too was coming. The sudden squeezing tightness around Arthur's length, upon the thrumming aftermath of his climax, only intensified his pleasure as he rode out the waves of heat and dizziness and gasping release.

Panting, leaning over Merlin and still grasping his hips to hold them together, Arthur lowered himself down on top of him. The feel of Merlin's heaving breathing, of his own panting heaving his chest beneath him, was intoxicating. The press of skin on skin, sweaty and smelling of clean exertion, quivered through Arthur's senses and set them alight. It had been so long since he'd touched anyone, but more than that, it was because it was Merlin. He wrapped his arms around his waist, unwilling to put any distance between them.

It was clingy, Arthur knew but Merlin wasn't complaining. Thank God he wasn't, because Arthur didn't know if it was possible for him to let go.

Drawing a hand from the blankets, Arthur reached to stroke gentle fingers across Merlin's shoulder. Just slightly, butterfly light, but anything to simply make that contact, to reassure him further with the emphasis of the tactile that what his eyes insisted was reality upon was truly real. Smooth, warm skin, the warmth that Arthur had come to associate with sorcerers as being even warmer than was normal for non-magical people, rippled into his skin. It was a feature that Arthur found at once fascinating as well as wonderful.
He shouldn't have done it, Arthur realised a second after his fingers had made contact. He should have known that Merlin would have felt even the barest of touches. His skin twitched in a sudden shiver, and in an instant that peaceful calm of his expression was lost to the tightening of a frown, to the slight, further hunching of shoulders and the brief, even further curling inwards of his sleeping stretch.

Arthur cursed his stupidity. He knew that Merlin didn't like to be touched. That though he was making an effort to feel otherwise, it was still sometimes a struggle to even allow the gentle contact of a hand on the shoulder, of a grasp upon the wrist or fingers briefly tugging through his hair. The previous night had been a whirlwind of intoxication, of passion that forbade conscious thought, but outside of that mania Merlin was guarded. Arthur was surprised that the dropping of his walls had even allowed for their previous night's intimacy. And though Arthur cursed the reality that had made Merlin so tentative, he knew he shouldn't have pushed that boundary.

And yet, as he withdrew his fingers, they were immediately captured by Merlin's suddenly raised hand. Tightly, unwaveringly, as though grasping onto a lifeline. He only held on more tightly as Arthur gave another hesitant tug in an attempt to withdraw his hand.

Merlin's eyes fluttered open, blinking with startling clarity considering he had been so comfortably and apparently deeply asleep but moments before. "Don't."

Arthur ceased his attempts at withdrawal, slowly settling himself into the mattress once more. He lowered his head upon the pillow beside Merlin's. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

Merlin shook his head slightly into his own pillow. "I didn't mean that. I meant don't stop."

Slowly, Arthur released the tension of his arm that had persisted with the urge to continue to draw his fingers away. "I shouldn't have. I apologise for that. I know you dislike being touched."

"It's not that. You just caught me by surprise."

"You still don't like it."

"Only when I'm caught by surprise."

"Still, I shouldn't have --"

"Arthur." Merlin's tone was gentle but forceful. Arthur clamped his lips shut with an obedience that surprised him. "I don't dislike you touching me. I don't. I thought I made that pretty clear last night."

Despite himself and the guilt that persisted within him, Arthur couldn't withhold his smile. "I had noticed that."

"Well, I would be a little miffed if you overlooked that fact."

"It didn't trouble you?"

Merlin stared at him for a moment with an unreadable expression. Then he shook his head. "Far from it. I don't think you realise just how long I've wanted it. In spite of everything, even with all that's going on and all that's happened, I do want it."

And then he smiled. For the first time, he actually smiled.

Arthur's breath ceased at the sight. It wasn't a wide grin of merriment, not like those Merlin used to wear in the Past. It wasn't condescending or teasing as they had exchanged so often once upon a
time. It was both smaller, a gentle curling of the lips like the unfolding petals of a flower, and yet impossibly greater, deeper, more. A full smile of gentleness, of adoration, of faint amusement. Of love. And even more beautiful because it was for Arthur entirely.

How Arthur knew it was flooded with love he wasn't sure – he'd never seen such a thing from Merlin before. But that was certainly what it was, without a doubt. He couldn't help the inclination that arose demandingly within him. Interlocking his fingers into Merlin's he drew himself towards him once more and pressed his lips against that smile. Merlin responded with all of the love his smile promised. Then, because Merlin murmured his assent, Arthur unlocked his fingers and drew them to Merlin's shoulder once more, stroking along his skin and eliciting a trail of goosebumps and shivers in the wake of his caress. Not a withdrawal, though. If the expression on Merlin's face was any indication, he was nothing if not captivated by the touch.

His fingers brushed in a gentle caress across smooth skin. Smooth, paler than Arthur had known it in the Past, and yet familiar nonetheless. He couldn't get enough of the softness, of the hardness muscles in his sinewy arms and tight across his back, as he trailed down the hard bumps of his spine that ran down the centre of his back, the curve of a hip explored beneath the soft fall of the blanket.

Merlin. His Merlin. His best friend, his once-most loyal servant, his comrade with whom he had shared so much. And now his lover. Arthur never would have expected, never would have considered, nor seen it as a possibility.

Now, he realised he may as well have been blind. He said as much, and that admission in itself was something that Arthur knew he would never had made before.

Merlin tilted his head slightly to peer at Arthur more fully. The smile was still upon his lips, the love still gently adorning his features. He shrugged a shoulder. "There's nothing wrong with taking your time to understand."

"Easy enough for you to say."

"Not really. I certainly didn't realise my own feelings with any particular promptness." Merlin shook his head slightly ruefully. "Really, we're both as blind as one another in this instance. I never would have expected in the Past to have been able to share something like this with you. I doubt I even realised how much I wanted it. Probably just accepted it was impossible before I let myself, you know?"

Arthur paused in his gentle stroking. Something in Merlin's tone suggested that it wasn't his past in this lifetime to which he referred. That it was before, in Camelot, in Albion. In a time when Arthur had been married, had ruled a kingdom, was fighting a seemingly endless war against his sister. And loathe as Arthur was to admit it, he had to agree; even if he had realised he felt such a way for Merlin he likely wouldn't have acted upon those feelings. He couldn't have.

Sliding across the last of the distance between them, Arthur pressed himself against Merlin's side and shifted to wrap an arm around his waist. He had always felt the need to tactilely reassure himself of the presence of those around him, even more so for those he was concerned about, protective of. Just the touch of warmth, of a body in his embrace and grasp, seemed to soothe him mind and body.

Thankfully, once more Merlin didn't draw away from him. Instead, he turned into him, rolling over so they were face-to-face rather with his shoulder pressed into Arthur's chest. The warm length of their bodies sent tingles along Arthur's skin, rippling in shivers. It had been long, so long since he'd shared such intimacy, such contact, with anyone else, and that it was Merlin of all people…

He couldn't be happier for their circumstances. Even if, by and large, it was fairly poor timing.
"It would probably have been better if we'd made such a discovery before pursuing Mordred to relay the messages," Arthur murmured. His hands had unconsciously taken to stroking Merlin's back once more. He liked the feel of the overwarm skin beneath his fingertips. Arthur had always been the sort of person to express fondness through touch. He was simply relieved that, at least for now, Merlin let him.

Humming, Merlin drew his own arms around Arthur, holding them together even closer. There was a moment, a brief moment of tension that Arthur felt in Merlin's shoulders, running down his back, before it eased. As through he had deliberately forced himself to ease it. Arthur tried not to feel too guilty for the fact that he was relieved he managed to. "True. But then, better now than later."

"Why?"

Arthur felt more than saw Merlin shrug. "It's always best to air thoughts and feelings rather than wait until it could be too late."

"Do you speak from experience?" Arthur asked, just faintly teasing.

"Yes."

That word, that one word, was enough to still Arthur's rising humour. He felt his smile die upon his lips as he turned his gaze directly upon Merlin's eyes. Merlin, who was staring at a point around his neck, gaze lowered and lips bereft of the smile they had once held. If anything, it seemed as though that smile had subverted itself. A wistful sadness, not quite as profound as Arthur had witnessed days before, settled there instead. He couldn't help but ask. "That's happened before, then? In the Past?"

Merlin was still for a moment before he nodded slowly, almost regretfully. "Yes."

"Will you tell me… what happened?"

Lifting his gaze, Merlin met Arthur's unblinkingly. Wide, deep blue, so familiar and unchanged even when the rest of the word, when even parts of Merlin himself, were different to what Arthur knew. It felt so comforting to stare into such a gaze, even if it was swimming with faint sorrow. "Would you like to know?"

"What, hear about your Past?"

"My past lives," Merlin said quietly. "I never knew if you… if you actually wanted to know."

"I've always wanted to know," Arthur assured him, prodding gently at Merlin's back in reprimand. He should have known that, surely. "I just didn't know if you'd be up to telling me. You sorcerers are a bit of a secretive bunch when it comes to such things."

A touch of a smile returned to Merlin's lips and Arthur couldn't help but congratulate himself for invoking it. "We are at that. Secretive, I mean. But not to people we care about. For those we are truly close to. It's just… it feels strange, sometimes. And I often don't know how people will respond to it."

Arthur felt a touch of jealousy rise within him. Someone else – even if that someone was long gone, a figment of the Past that Merlin had experienced in an entirely different lifetime – had known of him. Had heard stories of his experiences, of his lives, had learned more about Merlin than Arthur knew. He had to shake himself from his disgruntlement; it wasn't a worthy thought. Merlin was entitled to share with others, even if it did rub Arthur the wrong way because he wanted to be the one to know, he wanted to be the person that Merlin shared his stories with.
Instead of admitting as much, Arthur settled for drawing himself just slightly closer to Merlin and tucking his chin to his shoulder to press lips to skin. "I do. I do want to know."

Merlin murmured something inaudible, then sighed. "Alright, then. I'll tell you. But not now."

"No, maybe not now."

"In the future."

"After everything has been sorted out."

"If it get's sorted out."

Arthur pressed another kiss to Merlin's shoulder before drawing back to meet his eyes once more. "It will. We'll win, Merlin. We always do."

It might have been the wrong thing to say. Especially in light of the past few days, for what Merlin had suddenly remembered and the knowledge that yes, in the Past they had won – at Camlann they had been victorious. But at a price, one that cost both Arthur and Merlin dearly.

Merlin made a visible effort to shunt such considerations aside, however. "Of course. We always do. Live by experience, right?"

Arthur nodded, and settled for leaning into Merlin and capturing his lips in a brief kiss. His lips, on his Merlin, as he had never before considered yet seemed to fitting. So right. This was his Merlin.

Maybe it was poor timing. Maybe they should have waited until after they fixed the world – if the world could ever be fixed. And maybe the fact that, as Sebille had told Arthur only that morning, they were going to leave London for Nimueh's outer-city estate should have urged them to wait. But Arthur couldn't bring himself to regret their mutual confessions. Their realisations. Not for a moment.

They had a war of sorts to wage. A people to save, a government to undermine and battles to fight.

And they would do it together.
The compartment quite literally inside the engine was small. It was stuffy, humid, too warm, and Merlin already struggled with claustrophobia. The tightness only made it worse. Almost as bad, he didn't dare use his magic to ease some of the humidity or to cool himself down. That would entirely defeat the purpose of closeting himself in the compartment in the first place.

"I must say, this was not exactly what I had in mind when you told me we would be sneaking out of the city."

Merlin glanced across the small compartment towards where Mordred squatted, hand resting upon Cerdan's panting shoulders. Sweat slicked his brow, running in visible trickles down his cheeks. Even if Merlin had been unable to see the evidence of his overheated state for the dimness of the compartment he would have been able to smell him, and not only because Merlin had always possessed a particularly keen sense of smell. In this case at least it was to his detriment.

He raised an eyebrow. "Must you?"

Mordred gave a small smile. "Well, I suppose I don't have to. But it's warranted."

"Can you really complain? We're not microchipped so we effectively don't exist. The only ways to get out of the city are like this or in a Ghost Ship. I know which one I'd prefer."

Mordred grimaced at the mention of the transport vehicle that carted bodies of the dead from the city to the outer-city mass graves. No one could consider the Ghost Ships with anything but distaste and wariness. "I suppose you're right on that count at least."

Merlin settled himself back against the side of the compartment, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath while trying to ignore the scent of sweat, of the metallic pungency of the room itself, the sparking electricals that would set the nerves of anyone fraying. It was uncomfortable, the transport vehicle that Nimueh had hired to move the majority of her sorcerers to her outer-city estate. Uncomfortable, but not intolerable.

"At least it won't be a long trip," Merlin murmured. Mordred only gave a mental hum in reply, though as if to punctuate and express their mutual misgivings for such speed Cerdan gave a faint whine.

They were finally making their move. It had been barely three days since Mordred's last message – the likes of which they had already briefly discussed the nature of to Mordred's impish and grinning glee; apparently he 'knew someone' who was a bit of an expert with that sort of thing, which Merlin didn't find hard to believe. Anyone could find anyone in the slums. It was impossible to consider that in the short time that Merlin had been away from it that much had changed.

They were finally initiating their movement, finally making a change. Within an hour they would be touching down at Nimueh's estate and reoutfitting the premises, altering it to welcome any and every sorcerer that sought both the protection offered and to pool their resolve and determination to save their people.

And within another week at most they would finally be acting. The messages had been successfully translated and sorcerers and magical beings were responding.

Merlin felt like he'd been given the world.
It was one thing to have his sorest wishes fulfilled in the form of finally opposing the government. Not to attack – he didn't want to attack; no one wanted to attack, to wreak havoc, to pose magic against electrical weapons and face possible death – but to rescue. To infiltrate the Pits and save those that were within the grasp of the so-called Doctors. That had been what Merlin had hoped to achieve, and even if he hadn't entirely believed it would come about, and certainly not so quickly, he had hoped.

What he hadn't dared hope for was Arthur. Arthur, who had stood silent and unobjectionable as Merlin had declared his feelings for him with a physical cringe. Arthur, who had crossed the room without a moment of hesitation, who had, without a word, wrapped his arms around Merlin and pressed their lips together.

Arthur, who had told him that he loved him too. That, Merlin hadn't fully expected, even with Gaius’ words ringing in his mind. He hadn't even dared to hope. With everything else that had happened, arriving right on the heels of all that Merlin remembered from his life in Albion, he truly did feel like he'd been given the world.

It was stuffy, and humid, and too warm in the engine compartment – it had to be, to mask their presence for infrared cameras that scanned for stowaways, scans that would pervade any magical masking or glamors that would otherwise deceive the eyes. It was uncomfortable, and a several hours felt like far longer. But Merlin didn't mind quite so much. He had more than enough to fill his thoughts. He had something perfect to consider.

The trip didn't last terribly long, though Mordred's complaints might have suggested was at least ten times the duration. He complained with a sense of entitlement that was exceptional even for him.

"It's hardly fair that we have to be closeted back here when everyone else is cloistered in comfortable seats."

Merlin didn't open his eyes to turn to him. "That's because, for all intents and purposes, they're supposed to be on the Barge," he said, referring to the giant transport vehicle by its common name. "They're allowed to leave the city with Lady Nine."

"Everyone knows they're sorcerers," Mordred grumbled. "It's obvious. I wouldn't be surprised if the world suspected that Nimueh – Lady Nine, whatever – was a sorcerer too."

"Maybe," Merlin shrugged. "But they can't touch them, not when they're so high up. We've got that to be thankful for at least. And we should be thankful." He cracked open an eyelid. "If they weren't then there would be no getting out of the city at all. Don't tell me it would have been safe for you to remain there much longer. 'Friend' he may have claimed to be but you know your tech-help would have routed you out for posting that message through the Comms fast enough."

Mordred only grumbled in reply.

A little while later and he was complaining again. Merlin had deduced that it was more of a nervous response than an actual complaint but it didn't alleviate his faint annoyance for the fact. "Do we even know if this compartment thing will work? We could be sitting in here for nothing. There's been no message to indicate that we've even left yet."

"We've left."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've been counting the minutes. We'd have left by now."
"Unless the authorities caught a scent of us. The engine heat masking our presence? Really? You don't think they would have thought of that?"

Merlin cracked open an eye once more. "Someone's in a happy mood today."

Mordred scowled. "I'm hot, Cerdan's hot, I really don't have any idea where we're even going —"

"Yes you do," Merlin interrupted him. "You were the one who sent the message to every sorcerer to give them directions."

"Yeah, but I've never been there myself." Mordred's scowl did become faintly nervous then. "I've lived only in the commune and then the slums my entire life. I've never even been to out of the city before."

"Neither have I," Merlin said quietly.

"So then why aren't you scared?" Mordred's words were a faintly desperate plea, and in that moment Merlin realised he was looking for some sort of reassurance. He was barely twenty himself, and though children and young adults were forced to grow up fast in the slums, Mordred had always been different in that regard. Even if he wasn't, though, Merlin suspected that most would be just as frightened as he.

Stretching his leg out before him, Merlin touched his booted toe to Mordred's leg gently. A small tap, a gesture of reassurance. Mordred glanced down at it and flicked it with his finger. "Nice boots."

"I'm sure Lady Nine, in all of her generosity, will see to outfitting you with an entirely new wardrobe yourself. No need to be envious."

"I'm not envious. You look like a prat."

"Really? Good to know."

"Seriously, you do." Mordred flicked his boot once more, but Merlin didn't miss the momentary glance he cast down at his own clothes. They really were little more than rags that, though they were the custom uniform of every slum-dweller, stood out starkly against those of Merlin and Arthur, against the rest of Nimueh's Confederation members in the brief moments they'd stood alongside one another. In the brief seconds before Mordred with ushered under cover when he'd been picked up off the streets. Mordred didn't comment, but Merlin wasn't stupid. Everyone who had lived with next to nothing expressed the same unrestrained longing when beholding such luxuries. "The style's all weird, too. You almost look like you're wearing the same sort of clothes from back in times of Albion."

Merlin allowed a small smile. It was an actual smile this time, one that had seemed somehow possible to surface over the past day or so and just happened to sync up with the times Merlin thought of Arthur. He knew Mordred noticed at the very least, even if he didn't know the motivator driving its appearance. He'd stared at it incredulously enough the first time Merlin felt it touch his lips. "That would be Arthur. Apparently he considers modern style to be ridiculously inhibiting."

"Can't say I disagree with his sentiment," Mordred muttered, and his mental tone was somehow reluctant. As though he regretted agreeing with Arthur over anything. "It looks even more ridiculous than you do."

"Well, thank you."

"I don't want those sort of clothes."
"Then you won't get them. You'll get something else." Merlin pretended to believe that Mordred's words were actually genuine.

"What, just like yours?"

"If you'd like."

"I don't much like yours either."

Merlin smirked. "Then here, you can spend the next half an hour creating your own. Meghan's been a seamstress in most of her lives; I'm sure she could tailor to your needs." And pulling his Comm – an impersonal one, of course, because he wasn't foolish enough to tag his own identity to a piece of technology – he pulled open a holographic drawing pad and tossed it to Mordred. Mordred caught it easily, quirked his lips thoughtfully for a moment, then shrugged and set to fiddling. He was distracted like a child with a puzzle.

Only for about ten minutes, however, before he was complaining again. Complaining, and then grumbling to himself when Merlin ignored him entirely. And with each passing grumble, his tone began to change. Merlin barely noticed at first, but when a particularly loud mental sigh sounded in his mind he couldn't overlook it any longer. Peeling his eyes open, he caught sight of Mordred actually staring directly at him. His expression had shifted, fallen from petulance into something almost melancholic. Cerdan had swung around to rest his head sympathetically in his lap despite the heat that spurred his panting. "What?"

Mordred shifted awkwardly, dropping his gaze and plucking at Cerdan's head. "I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"About what you said before. Merlin, do you – do you really mean that?"

It didn't take Merlin more than a second to realise what Mordred referred to. The thought had nagged at Merlin on more than one occasion throughout their trip, in their waiting in relative solitude but for one another's company. His mind drifted briefly back to the conversation they'd shared and he very deliberately shook his head. "I mean it, Mordred. Stop overthinking this."

"How can I not?"

Merlin sighed. Instead of poking Mordred with his foot again he skirted around the stuffy, too-small compartment to wedge himself at Mordred's side. Then, just as Cerdan did, he disregarded the heat to lean against Mordred. "I don't hate you."

"How?"

"Because it's in the Past, Mordred. And considering who you are now, that Past is someone else entirely."

"But I killed him, Merlin."

Mordred's tone was so feeble, so shameful, so expecting of reprimand that had anger and hatred really welled in Merlin he doubted he would have been able to unleash it. He hated what had happened to Arthur in the Past, at the Battle of Camlann – even now, three days after remembering it, it hurt with a sharp, painful ache to consider. He hated what Mordred had done, too, and yes, he even hated him for it. But not this Mordred. He was a different person entirely. To hate his friend, his little brother of sorts, for what had happened centuries ago with him another person, in another life, would be… it would be wrong. It was the unspoken code of sorts amongst sorcerers and magical
beings alike: the blame was not laid.

"You know, I've killed more people than I can count."

"Not in this life, I'd wager," Mordred murmured, shifting slightly so that his head actually dropped onto Merlin's shoulder. It really was too hot in the engine-side compartment, but Merlin didn't push him away, even if he did consider they'd likely have some adhesion issues when attempting to disembark. "You haven't killed that many people."

"But I have killed some," Merlin replied. "But I was talking about other lives."

"You can't be blamed for that."

"And neither can you. We've all done things, made different decisions based on different reasons and founded from different experiences. Sometimes they were necessary, unavoidable, and sometimes they were for stupid reasons."

Merlin shrugged, jostling Mordred's head slightly. "You can't try and take the blame for all of them, Mordred."

Mordred was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his tone was reminiscent, slightly detached, and Merlin knew immediately that he would be speaking of the Past. "I've fought in more wars than I can count, you know."

"Me too."

"I was at the Battle of Hastings. Killed a whole bunch of people before I died, actually."

Merlin nodded. It was strange, a disconcerting experience, to speak of the Past even with other sorcerers, but sometimes it was necessary. It settled uncomfortably in Merlin's gut but he spoke anyway. "I was at the Siege of Orleans, you know. Saw Jeanne d'Arc and everything, though I never met her in person."

Mordred glanced up at him, meeting Merlin's gaze with raised eyebrows. "No shit. You did?"

"Honest."

"Did you survive it?"

"Yeah. Outlived her and everything that life." Merlin shook his head. "I lost count of the number of soldiers I killed in that war."

Mordred gave a faint huff of laughter that was more sorrowful than amused, fell silent for a moment, then continued. "I fought in World War One, you know."

"Yeah? You died?"

Mordred. "Yeah. Bullet wound festered." He shrugged as though it was no matter. "I fought in the second one too."

"Did you survive that one?"

Mordred nodded. "Lost my leg in... think it's called the Battle of Britain nowadays."

"Huh. I fought there. You must have been young in both wars if you can remember them."

Mordred nodded. "Yeah, I snuck in underage in the first. Stupid of me really. The second one I was eighteen." Then he paused and quirked an eyebrow at Merlin. "How about you? You survived that
"No."

Merlin shrugged as though the thought didn't twinge him just slightly. He'd been barely twenty-four at the time, young just as he had been in each of the battle's he'd mentioned to Mordred. He didn't much like to recall the times he'd died, even if they were less painful than considering Arthur's death. "I was a fighter pilot. Went down."

"Shit. That's rough." He paused for a moment. "Were you... were you with the Brits?"

Merlin nodded. "You?"

Mordred shook his head. A touch of shame coloured his face. "No. Sorry."

"Why are you apologising?"

"Well, I was kind of the one who killed you."

"Oh, so you're taking responsibility for World War Two now, are you?" Merlin snorted. "That's a little presumptuous of you."

Mordred didn't crack a smile. He only looked guiltier. "I killed a lot of people in the first two world wars. A lot of people in the third one too, before I died." He heaved a mental sigh, pressing his lips together. "I seem to be pretty good at that. Maybe I am just born to be a killer, no matter what."

"You were a soldier," Merlin pointed out. "You were enlisted."

"Still."

Merlin fell silent for a moment, pondering. A slight jostle to the Barge, unexpected given how stable they usually were, caused both he and Mordred to raise their heads. They subsided a moment later, leaning back against the too-warm metal wall.

"You know," Merlin finally said, his voice low. "The fact that you even recognise killing as wrong says something about you."

"That I've seen too much of it? What, that I'm a murderer?"

Merlin shook his head. "That's not what I meant. I mean that you still have empathy enough to realise that it's wrong."

"Doesn't make me a better person, though, does it?"

"Maybe not, but it certainly proves you're not a murderer. I'd know."

Mordred frowned up at him, drawing away from Merlin's shoulder slightly. "What does that mean?"

Merlin shrugged uncomfortably. This was one of many reasons he didn't much like talking of the Past. But Mordred had needed it and Merlin recognised that need. He'd had the same before – it was part of the reason that he and Mordred had first developed a friendship, why he had become friends with Edwin, with Freya. But some things... some things weren't as glowing and admirable as some of his actions in times of Albion had been. "I think it was about... probably around the Renaissance period. It would have been one of the couple of times I was born so far from the United Kingdoms – in Roma, or Italy I guess it was then. In Venetia. I was a hired mercenary."

"A mercenary?" Mordred blinked wide eyes, eyebrows raised.
Merlin twisted his lips. "Assassin is probably a more accurate term to use."

Mordred's eyes widened further. "How... how did that even happen?"

Merlin shrugged sheepishly. "I've always been good with knives. I can barely remember a life other than that in Albion when I wasn't. I guess it stuck."

"Jesus Christ..."

"Oh, don't go getting all religious on me now."

Mordred's lips twitched in a faint smile that looked unintentional. "That's kind of..."

"Yeah." Merlin nodded. He didn't like to think of that life, of how many people he'd killed – he couldn't remember all of them, and few had been in anything but cold blood. It was... it had been a dark life. Merlin drew a deep breath and turned a his gaze towards Mordred. He didn't think he fooled either of them with his farce of nonchalance. "So, next time you call yourself a murderer, just think: at least you've never actually been one."

Mordred nodded slowly. For a moment Merlin thought he might have pushed him just a little too far, that Mordred might even be scared of him. Only for a moment, however, for after a brief pause Mordred slumped back into Merlin's side, head falling once more onto his shoulder. "We are so f***ed up."

Merlin uttered a humourless chuckle. He couldn't agree more. Reincarnation, the remembrance of past lives lived, wasn't all it was cracked up to be. "Tell me about it."

They didn't speak again for the rest of the trip.

When the door opened it was with a sliding hiss that was far more clunking and straining than those Merlin knew of pervading the buildings of Inner City London. It was only to be expected, really; Barges were built for transport but not in luxury – even if he was sure that Nimueh would have ensured she maintained an adequate level of luxury regardless – but even aside from that, the compartment so close to the engine that it was practically inside it was an area that wouldn't be afforded the finest of features. Still, even that was better than the near absolute absence of mechanisms entirely in the slums, so Merlin could hardly complain.

Arthur was striding through the doorway as soon as there was enough space for him to do so, reaching out a hand to pull Merlin to his feet in an instant. Merlin couldn't suppress a small smile. One day it had been since they had mutually declared that they loved one another. One day and Merlin was already noticing differences. Nothing overt, and nothing negative in the slightest, but little things nonetheless. Like how Arthur seemed to make an effort to offer him a hand of assistance, as he did now. How he seemed inclined to just reach out and touch Merlin, even if he did withdraw his hand a moment later with an expression of apology, as though he feared that Merlin couldn't stand to be touched even that much. The fool. It was entirely different when Arthur touched him.

Still, small things though they were, Merlin couldn't help but notice. He even commented on them ponderously and loudly enough that Arthur heard and, in a return to their typical bantering camaraderie, would butt him with his shoulder, or roll his eyes, or snort and turn away from Merlin as though he was disgusted with the sentiment. Not for long, however. Arthur seemed to have all but decided to glue himself to Merlin's side in the past twenty-four hours, the trip to Nimueh's estate evidently trying for him because of the momentary separation.

Merlin would have thought it amusing if he hadn't desired such proximity just as much. He
wondered if it was just the newness of it all, if it would fade soon, and couldn't help but think of what he would ask Gwen if she were here. Which drew forth an entirely new kind of guilt that made Merlin quickly bury such thoughts. Perhaps it would be better not to consider such just yet. It really was too new.

That, and the situation. Their current circumstances. The encroaching danger that the infiltration of the Pits – of all of the Pits – posed to them. Merlin couldn't help himself; just this once he wanted to cast aside his misgivings and remain by Arthur's side just as much as he could. Who knew what the future would hold?

Still, it didn't stop him from staring pointedly at Arthur's proffered hand, his smirk widening. "Thank God you offered me a hand. I wouldn't be able to stand up without it, what with my dainty and feeble constitution."

Arthur, expectedly, rolled his eyes, clicked his tongue and abruptly dropped his gentlemanly manner. Reaching forwards with contrasting roughness, he bodily hauled him to his feet. Merlin actually chuckled, which served to replace the smile from Arthur. "Come on. It's ridiculously hot in here."

"You don't say," Mordred drawled from behind them as he clambered to his own feet. Cerdan was practically dancing with his eagerness to be out of the room, an odd sight for the giant of a dog who was so often so solemn. "We haven't just spent the last three hours stuffed in here. Thanks for noticing for us."

"It was only two hours, you drama queen," Merlin said, quirking an eyebrow at Mordred over his shoulder. "Learn to count."

"It felt like three hours. Longer, even."

"The Pass from Inner City did take longer to check through than we'd anticipated," Arthur nodded, turning to lead them from the room. The hallway of the Barge beyond was narrow, white walls of some metallic substance Merlin didn't recognise and with ceiling low enough that he could have brushed them easily with his fingers had he reached overhead. "The guards at the Inner City wall were suspicious."

"Of course they were," Merlin muttered. "They were letting a party of over thirty people highly-suspected of being sorcerers out of their direct line of sight. I'm actually surprised they didn't say to hell with public face and the uproar it would cause and snap everyone in chains."

"Do they still actually do that?" Arthur asked, raising an eyebrow as he glanced to Merlin.

"Do what?"

"Clap people in irons. I would have thought they'd use something a bit more modern."

"It's a turn-a-phrase," Mordred sighed with exasperation. Apologetic he may have been for his actions in the Past but that apology was evidently reserved for Merlin and Merlin only. Arthur he still appeared to view with thinly veiled contempt, resentment and wariness. Even more disgruntlement when he'd seen the hold Arthur had – apparently unconsciously – maintained upon Merlin's arm when they'd first gone to retrieve Mordred. He hadn't appeared terribly impressed with the insinuation such a gesture suggested but he didn't comment. The unvoiced "idiot" still resounded in the echoing silence of Mordred's voice as he regarded Arthur sidelong, however. "Of course they don't use actual manacles. They're electrically-charged reinforced insulated bindings. They chafe like a bitch."
"I'm sure you'd know that, would you?" Arthur turned his raised eyebrow upon him. "I was under
the impression you'd escaped the notice of the authorities and the Hunter."

"I have," Mordred replied snidely. "But I'm a telepath. I know these things."

"I'm sure."

"Oh, sod off."

Merlin couldn't help but snicker at that. They sounded like nothing if not a pair of schoolboys
bickering. It helped, as it happened, because both silenced when they noticed his amusement. They
didn't speak again as they made their way from the Barge.

The sun was comparatively bright when they stepped outside. Glaring and still thin, not at all as
bright as Merlin knew it truly was behind the clouds, but it looked all the brighter for the dimness of
the inside of the Barge. Stepping onto the platform that would lower them from the hulking transport,
Merlin turned his attention to his surrounds. In doing so he couldn't help but stare with wide eyes.

Mordred had never been out of the city before but for the commune, which wasn't truly 'seeing
outside the city'. He'd been nervous, wary, uncertain of what was to come, and Merlin had reassured
him – even when he'd been just as nervous in many ways. Merlin had never been outside of London,
had never had the inclination or the time – nor the stupidity – to do so. It was, after all, dangerous for
a sorcerer to be noticed at all, and in anywhere less populated the chance of being noticed increased
exponentially. That didn't mean Merlin didn't want to see, just that he couldn't.

He drew his gaze around him, eyes wide and staring. Not in awe but horror, if anything. Merlin had
lived on more farms than he could recall, in little townships, in castles nestled in mountains and
hamlets buried within the depths of forests. Isolated he had experienced, but what he saw put such
isolation to shame.

There was nothing. No trees, no greenery. There were no houses, no evidence of life but for what
looked to be an old-fashioned road of grey bitumen in the distance that was so crumbled and pitted
that it couldn't possibly serve as a platform for road travel any longer. It was like a vast, jagged plane,
broken by rising hills and haphazard piles of rock that looked taller for the surrounding barrenness. It
was monochromatic, coloured only in varying colours of greys and maybe a touch of brown, but
otherwise… otherwise it looked dead.

"God, it's miserable."

Arthur made a shuffling motion at his side, briefly drawing Merlin's attention towards him. They
shared a glance and in it Merlin saw the same pain, the same horror, that he himself felt, even if
Arthur did try to hide it. He slowly nodded his head. "I had no idea what had happened to the world
when I first happened upon it. It felt like I'd awoken on a different planet."

Merlin nodded his own head in reply, glancing towards Mordred as he stepped forwards with
Cerdan. Mordred looked, if anything, disgusted by what he saw. As if the destruction that
surrounded him was a fault of someone else's doing rather than the result of centuries of negligence
and the draining of resources. "I didn't know it had gotten this bad."

"This bad?" Arthur asked, raising an eyebrow. "Did you witness it when it was declining?"

Merlin dropped his gaze to the ground. Yes, he did recall. He remembered when he'd taken part of
the rallies, the environmental movements promoting the use of sustainable resources, the end of fossil
fuels, when he'd been amongst the masses that preached for change, that demanded it of a resistant
government. When Merlin thought about it, he had to wonder – the government had always been a
problem in some way. Not internationally, but enough that the world suffered from the stupidity and
stubbornness of a select few.

"It was getting worse even before World War Three. Environmental damage, pollution, mass
production of agriculture and horticulture spreading and destroying and the economic divide
becoming only more pronounced. But all of that seemed to take a back seat when the 'issue' of
sorcerers and magic was discovered." Merlin drew his gaze across the empty planes. No, not quite
empty; he thought he could see some sort of building, perhaps an estate of sorts, in the distance. Only
just, however, and it was likely further flung than he realised. "Most people truly only care about
what happens now, about instant gratification, rather than concerning themselves with a possible and
increasingly probably future."

Arthur made a sound at Merlin's side that sounded halfway between a sigh and a growl. When
Merlin glanced towards him he was shaking his head, lip curled and an expression of disgust twice
as pronounced as Mordred's had been upon his face. "Honestly, you'd think they'd realise they were
fucking up the world."

"Obviously not."

They stared for a little longer before Merlin managed to shake himself from his despondent stupor.
Taking a deep breath, he stepped off the elevator platform and onto the hard, dusty ground. His jump
emitted a faint plume of dust into the air. He turned towards Arthur as he stepped down to join him.
"I assume Nimueh and everyone else is already at the estate?"

Arthur nodded. "I figured that you'd rather take your time with this sort of thing. You – and
Mordred, I suppose – have never been outside of the city, have you?"

Merlin allowed himself a small smile, which, to his amusement and widening smile, seemed to
delight Arthur to see. Not obviously, but his face eased of its hardness and his eyes crinkled slightly
with a return of his own smile. "Thanks, Arthur. I'm sure Mordred appreciates it too."

"Hm," was all Arthur said in reply to that, before reaching out to Merlin's arm and leading him with
determined steps in a loop skirting around the Barge. Mordred, Cerdan shadowing his heels with ears
pricked and a guarded solemnity in his eyes, followed behind them.

The estate, as it turned out, had simply been hidden on the other side of the Barge. How it had been
hidden at all Merlin didn't know, because it was absolutely huge. It put Nimueh's Inner City
residence to shame, more closely resembling a castle and fortress of olden times than the simple
'farmhouse' that Nimueh referred to it as. Tall stone walls, smooth and perfectly joined as if to
dissuade potential rock climbing, were adorned with what was evidently electrically-charged barbed
wiring curled over the top. An arching gate of similarly smooth doors slid half open was the only
break in the vast stretch of curving fortification, and Merlin couldn't help but shake his head as he
walked through the shadow of the entrance. The doorway, hinged upon runner that were evidently
mechanically powered, was at least twice as tall as he, and the wall itself thrice as high again.

"Well, at least it will keep out anyone on foot who attempts to invade the estate," Mordred murmured
from behind Merlin. He actually sounded as though he was attempting to grasp for some positive
feature and his struggling with coming up blank.

Merlin nodded his agreement. "Though I can't imagine the people we'd be most worried about would
come on foot. If anyone unwanted tried to enter I can imagine they wouldn't be using the doorway."
He paused, then glanced to Arthur. "Nimueh never did tell us if she had a Protective Dome, did
Arthur shook his head. "Not since you asked. I don't know whether she was avoiding the question because she didn't have one or because she was embarrassed that she did.

Merlin could only agree to Arthur's sentiment. A Protective Dome would be likely unnerving to the guests that they were expecting to arrive any day now. An electrical field that would arc from the top of the wall and dome in a cocooning shell to stretch towards the opposing wall, that would effectively keep out any intruders mechanical or organic. For the prospect of what was to come, of the potential response of the authorities should they discover just who was doing the infiltrating, despite the discomfort of the sorcerers, Merlin felt that such a precaution was nothing short of necessary. "We'll have to get that out of her."

"Her reluctance comes from electricity, yes?" Arthur asked, turning to Merlin expectantly a the more knowledgeable of the two in such a situation.

Merlin nodded. He himself couldn't help but glance uneasily back to the wall after he'd passed through the doorway. No sorcerer would feel entirely comfortable being confined by a Dome, even if it was for protection. His attention was distracted, however, when he turned back towards the estate that loomed over him.

"She doesn't do anything small, does she?"

Arthur shook his head slowly at Merlin's side. Even he appeared faintly incredulous. "That she does not."

It was indeed a castle in the starkest sense of the term. Matching the wall in size and grandeur, it was constructed of some pale stone, apparently seamless and of squarely shaped. Vast, block-like walls, towers of rectangular prisms, wide windows that likely didn't actually look into the interior of the building but were merely for show. The courtyard that Merlin found himself in the middle of was paved with similarly pale stone that looked and felt like sandstone, stretching at least a hundred paces in radius and most of that was shadowed by the building itself. The spread of wall that confronted them, doorway of polished, artfully inscribed metal directly across from the entrance through the wall, stood wide and atop a short flight of wide, shallow steps. Nimueh's sorcerers were making their slow, ponderous way across that courtyard, alighting those steps, as though they had seen the residence hundreds of times before. At least for some of them Merlin expected they had.

"Well, at least it should have enough rooms to fit an army in it," Mordred murmured from Merlin's side. He held a hand upon Cerdan's head, stroking in something of an anxious response while his eyes darted around him as though undecided whether to be awed and appreciative of their surrounds or distrusting and wary.

"Do you have any idea how many sorcerers will be coming?" Arthur asked, not for the first time.

Similarly not for the first time, Mordred turned a frown upon him. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to try and link with so many minds, even with an amplification spell? How am I supposed to try and hear all of their responses in the brief seconds when I'm relaying the messages?"

"I didn't mean to sound assuming," Arthur sighed, more long-suffering than annoyed. "It was just a question."

"A presumptuous question. Can't you just wait and see?"

"Mordred, please," Merlin murmured, casting him an imploring glance. Though Mordred didn't drop
his frown and his strokes across Cerdan's head became a little more forceful, he quelled. "Shall we go and check it out, then?"

"Check it out," Arthur echoed with a slight shake of his head. "May as well. See what Nimueh has in store for us. Besides, I doubt we'll be having anyone arrive just yet anyway. Maybe make the most of the relative peace before the storm arrives."

Merlin could only agree.

As it turned out, the first of the sorcerers arrived the very next day. A trio of them from up north in the old Scotland region. Arthur was surprised to see them, surprised that it had been they who had arrived first from such a distance, but only for a moment before the apparent leader of their party explained.

He was a tall man, but only tall in the way that most people of the New World tended to be. His face was hard, weatherworn, and there was a mottling of white scars around his left ear that seemed to have stemmed the regrowth of some of his hair. Arthur barely saw it for the strength of character that the man bared. "We set forth for London as soon as we heard the first message. Didn't wait even a day before we were packing and heading down – it was necessary, coming on foot and all."

That first party seemed to have established a precedent for those to come. They weren't the first to arrive that day, and Arthur was abruptly relieved that they had tripped to Nimueh's outer-city estate when they had. By nightfall of their second day, more than a score of sorcerers had arrived, each warily passing beneath the wall of the estate with a glance over their shoulders similar to that Merlin and Mordred both had given the previous day. That in itself was a learning experience for Arthur; while at times electricity did unnerved him for the sheer capacity of what it could do, he was never really scared of it. But the sorcerers, Merlin and Gaius and even Nimueh at times, appeared to be actively wary of it, as though it was a live animal bordering on rabid and threatening to lash out and bite. Even if, in instances such as the Dome that Arthur and Merlin had validated the presence of, it could be used for their protection.

By the third day there were forty sorcerers arrived. By the fourth, seventy. It was a good thing that Nimueh's fortress of sorts was indeed so large – truly, it would have been large enough to hold a small town in itself, all wide, windowless rooms and tall ceilings as was the fashion of modern architecture in a different way to how it had been in the past. There were countless bedrooms – quite literally countless as, in a count to discern just how much space they would have, Arthur and Merlin had treked the length of the fortress entirely on the first day and Arthur didn't believe they had seen every room. There were four storeys, each with numerous actual bedrooms and more than that, there were countless sitting rooms, parlours, studies, dining halls and recreation areas riddled with Comms, gadgets, even some old books that both Merlin and Gaius had sighed over because apparently – as Arthur himself had witnessed – actual books were almost an extinct species.

And gyms. There were gyms, too, filled with practice weapons, boxing dummies, targets and rope climbs. Arthur even saw a pool in one room, at least three times as large as that which had been at Nimueh's inner city estate. It was as though the castle had been built for a community, to supply everything they could possibly need, which Arthur had come to suspect that perhaps it was.

Arthur and Merlin greeted each sorcerer as they arrived. Each as they hesitantly crept up to the walls of the estate as though suspicious of the validity of the message that Mordred had sent them. Rightfully enough, Arthur thought. How were they to know for sure that it wasn't a trap, even if the message had been delivered telepathically? Merlin had considered aloud on their second day, as the fourth group had entered the confines of the walls, that he was almost surprised that any had come at all. "It wouldn't have shocked me had no one responded to our call, really."
Arthur had turned towards him, frowning. He hadn't let himself consider otherwise, had only hoped and maintained that such hope would transform desire into reality. But Merlin he had assumed entirely believed in the future success of their endeavour. Apparently he had been mistaken. "And yet you still maintained that we would strike at the Pits?"

Merlin had nodded. His expression closed for a moment. "Of course."

"Even without support you would have continued?"

Another nod. "I would have gone in myself if no one would come with me." There was hard determination in his tone that enforced to Arthur that he definitely would have done just that. He would have likely been charging to his death, but he would have done it anyway.

"You wouldn't have been alone," he'd found himself saying. "I would have come with you at the very least."

Merlin had turned towards him then, and afforded him his small smile. The smile that Arthur couldn't help but warm beneath, reminding Arthur every time once more of the beauty of what they now shared. "Thank you."

It was he and Merlin who greeted each of them, he, Merlin and, more often than not, Mordred, at times soothing the wariness of the arriving sorcerers with his mental voice. It seemed to act as reassurance that they weren't lying, that the message had been genuine, that they weren't approaching their deaths. For approach they did, in trickles that grew into rivers, expanding wider and wider. As the end of the week drew nearer, their numbers grew – after six days they were numbered nearly three hundred.

Not all of them would be capable of assisting Arthur and Merlin in their infiltration. As many were children as there were adults, one arrival in particular on the fifth day composed of a slight woman barely older than twenty with a clutch of seven younger children. The oldest couldn't have been more than ten. It was something of a common trend, and Arthur had come to realise that, more than magic, sorcerers shared a number of other features.

They were generally young, most younger than Arthur and quite a portion ranging between Merlin's and Mordred's ages. It didn't take Arthur much of a leap to assume why that was – the longer they existed, the greater the probability that they would have been discovered.

They were all thin, a little ragged, worn and generally filthy, as though they had tumbled straight from the slums. Those few that weren't seemed to have come from one of what Arthur could make out was only three sorcerer communes that hadn't been routed out as of yet. Hungry, they were, feeble, exhausted, as though the weight of the world settled upon each of their shoulders.

They all looked frightened, wary and defensive. Pervading that was an air of resignation about them, as though even having sought out the speaker of that telepathic message, they had already resigned themselves to their fate.

Yet in spite of that, there was determination. Strength. Resolution. Something that Arthur watched grow through the sorcerers with greater and greater speed as the week drew on. They might believe in their own demise, feel assured that they would meet their doom at the hands of the government and, from what Arthur had heard, that they only hoped they would be killed before being dragged off to the Pits. It was heartbreaking to behold such resignation, and Arthur was nothing if not angered by it.

The only balm to soothe his anger was that single fact: they were ready. Ready to fight, ready to pool
their strength and retrieve those who had been stolen from them. To retaliate.

It was strange. Arthur considered it from his stance upon the top of the stairs before the front door, as he watched a quartet of young men and women who had arrived the day before circle around Merlin as he approached them at their call. Their faces were set, and from their stances he could almost hear what they were saying.

We will accompany you.

We will fight alongside you.

We will retrieve those of ours.

It was as though they had just needed someone. As if they, the sorcerers, those gifted with magic or living it, had caused them to be so shunned, so torn, so ripped apart, had simply needed *someone*. A leader. A cause. An idea or a mission. Something to back and to pool their efforts behind.

They would fight. They just needed someone to lead them.

Arthur had seen it before. He'd seen it may times. Even those terrified of war, those who feared the blade, the heat of battle, the near certainty of death, had followed him to war when he had requested it. Because it was for their kingdom, for their country, for their families.

The sorcerers were like that. From what Arthur could discern, from the words he'd overheard, the resentment, the pain, the build-up of desire to *do* something had spawned so greatly that it had almost imploded upon them. They as a people had merely needed some direction. A channel to pour that heartfelt desire into.

Arthur would use that desire. He would use it to help the people that he now stood to represent. Strange, how so long ago he had been so steadfastly opposed to the very people he was now willing to risk his life to save. A people who, at first, had even been wary of him and his intentions.

It was to be expected, Arthur supposed. They were sorcerers, beings of magic, touched by a power that the majority of the world knew not and feared them for possessing. They cringed from those who resented them, who feared them, who *hated* them for that power. Why shouldn't they be similarly resentful of Arthur, who showed no ability to wield magic of his own?

Except that, but for a brief initial wariness, that uncertainty had faded to thoughtfulness. Arthur didn't think it was only Merlin's presence at his side, his almost-glare towards anyone who audibly whispered their distrust of him. The reason for that presented itself to Arthur on the third day.

The elderly man who approached him was one of the oldest he had seen. More than that, half-bowed as he was and face a disconcerting mish-mash of bulbous and twisted features, he appeared to be at least half troll. The stench that emitted from him in a near-visible cloud only enhanced his suspicions. Arthur had to bite back the urge to withdraw from him at his approach.

"You, boy," the troll-man said, raising a gnarled hand to gesture towards Arthur. Arthur would have disputed his use of the term 'boy' had he not been uneasy enough as it was. "At first I was suspicious for I could barely even feel it but… you have an interesting aura to your magic."

At his side, Merlin had turned towards the man curiously. "You can see it, then?"

The troll glanced back to him. "%See it? Of course I can. As I said, it took me a moment – I had to actively look for it – but yes, I can see it." He leant forwards slightly in a waft of pungent air and seemed to peer more closely at Arthur's face, as if scanning his features for something. "Yes, a
strange aura indeed, but definitely there."

"He does have magic, then?" A girl from behind the troll asked, stepping up to his side with wide, dark eyes staring at Arthur with thinly veiled wariness. "I couldn't see it and I was worried that… that he might have been…"

The troll shook his head, reaching a hand out sidelong to pat her arm. She hardly seemed to notice, expressing none of the repulsion that Arthur knew would have accompanied a gesture from such a person back in times of Camelot. "He does. Can you not see it? Look just a little harder. Turn your gaze sidelong, see? Just at the edges? It's so pale as to be nearly white, but it's definitely there."

Throughout the troll's explanation, a small clutter of newly arrived sorcerers had drawn around them, each frowning slightly and peering at Arthur with heads tilted. He felt like a horse taken to market for auction for the intensity of their studies. Or at least he did until they each started to nod slowly, satisfaction and even ease settling upon their faces.

"Ah, I can see it," the first girl said. Then, with a curt nod of her own, she turned, grasped the hand of a boy who must have been at least a half-brother for his resemblance to her, and hauled him towards the castle. And that, at least for then, had been the end of that.

Arthur had asked Merlin about it later, as they lay alongside one another in the sparse room Nimueh had allotted them. "You can see magic, then?"

Merlin hummed thoughtfully. "It's not really seeing so much feeling."

"But that man today who looked like a troll – "

"He was a troll."

"Right. Well, the troll said that if you looked out of your periphery that you could see it. That it looked sort of white."

Merlin turned towards him, and to Arthur's eyes his gaze appeared to grow distant, as though he were looking at something through Arthur rather than directly at him. "Yeah, that could be a description of it. It looks different to what I've seen before." He paused, then, with an expression that was faintly apologetic, said, "It's definitely there, though. I didn't even really see it at first, but maybe that was just because I wasn't expecting to."

"All sorcerers can see it? Or feel it?" Arthur asked.

Merlin nodded slowly. "Yeah. Sort of. I mean yeah. Just about. Only those of magic, though, and we generally have to teach ourselves to see it."

Arthur, his arm slung loosely around Merlin's shoulder even as Merlin's was around him, stroked idly at his arm. "Huh."

"Does it bother you?"

"What, that sorcerers can see this – this magic that I have? I'm assuming it's only sorcerers or magical beings that can, right?"

"Yes, it is. And no, that's not what I meant." Merlin paused, chewing on his lip for a moment and drawing his gaze to the side. "I mean does it bother you that you have magic? Even if it is magic that I don't think you could use."
I can't use it?"

Merlin shook his head slightly, glancing back towards him. A faintly worried frown touched his forehead. "I don't think so."

"Huh. Well, that's a little redundant then, isn't it?" Arthur sighed, frowning in consideration as he stroked at Merlin's arm. His warm arm, the sort of warmth that was comforting for more than just that it was the heated contact of skin. "What's the point in me having it if I can't even use it?"

"Well, I guess the same could be said for a troll. Or a changeling. You know they can't use their magic themselves?"

"So you're saying I'm some sort of magical creature?"

Instead of smiling at Arthur's casual, joking tone, Merlin's frown deepened slightly. His gnawing on his lip grew more pronounced. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"That you've been bequeathed with magic. I know that most of the world sees it as an affliction, and you've been basically as opposed to it as they come for most of your life, so —"

"Merlin." Arthur turned slightly so that he was facing him more fully, his other arm reaching to Merlin's opposite shoulder and adopting a frown. Merlin turned his head and met his gaze. The apology with evident in his eyes. "Why are you apologising for that?"

"I just said —"

"That's utterly ridiculous. Really, do you consider me so prejudiced?"

Merlin's lips quirked slightly as he raised his eyebrows. "Well, considering the past —"

"I changed my mind," Arthur interrupted. "Don't answer that." With a sigh, he shifted closer to Merlin's side, drawing him closer into his hold. "That's not me anymore, Merlin. The sorcerers, those with magic – I fight for them now. And I couldn't be prouder to do it. I'll admit I was wrong in the Past for my perspective, my opinion. But that's changed now. I've seen the error of my ways. I've changed, and I will stand for the sorcerers of the world."

Merlin stared at him for a moment. His expression was tugged into something unreadable, but Arthur detected something of surprise, a little disbelief, maybe even a touch of respect. Then his smile, his small smile that Arthur had already grown to love, drew across his face. "What's this? You admitting you were wrong?"

Arthur snorted, rolling his eyes as the heaviness of their conversation abruptly lifted. "Don't get too used to it. It doesn't happen often."

"What, your admissions?"

"No, my being wrong, you idiot."

Merlin actually laughed at that, a soft laugh that held genuine laughter. Arthur was growing to love that, too, almost as much as he did the kiss that Merlin drew him into a second later.

By the end of the week, they had decided. They would stick by the ultimatum that had accompanied their message – not one months but one week. It would be foolish of them to wait any longer. They
would begin in one week, would initiate their rescue of those that were captive in the Pits. Arthur began to lay out the skeleton of his plans to all who would hear them, all who would contribute, who would accompany himself and Merlin in their infiltration. The gathered sorcerers, the magical beings, appeared to grow nothing if not more determined by the minute as Arthur hashed out those plans.

It was received well. Arthur even thought the plans seemed to bolster the enthusiasm of the men and women gathered. That everything was going to plan.

And it was. At least until the dragon arrived.
"It would make sense to go at night. Magic gives most of us a bit of night vision, and those that don't have it could be helped by people strong enough to offer it."

Arthur glanced up at the voice that called across the great hall. The hall itself was jam-packed with just about every sorcerer and magical being that now resided at Nimueh's estate. Nearing four hundred, now, even if at least half of them wouldn't be able to actively assist the infiltration. The hall itself was the largest room in the Fortress, as Arthur had heard it being called by the residents. An apt name, he considered, both in appearance and potential function.

The majority of those gathered before Arthur where he stood at the head of the room, stationed alongside Merlin before the holographic screen depicting the largest Pits in London, were looking a sight better than they had even only several days before. Arthur hadn't really come to fully appreciate Nimueh's wealth, the weight of her name to access resources, until he saw her capable of re-outfitting, of feeding, of supplying with every need they should require, everyone who passed through her doors. And just as surprisingly, Nimueh herself was more than likely to be found wandering amidst those who had arrived. Or perhaps unsurprisingly, given that, at a passing, overheard conversation, Arthur could discern she was already cataloguing the skills and abilities of those gathered. For her own purposes more than for their infiltration endeavour, he would wager.

Not that he could complain. He might dislike the woman, but she had been nothing if not generous with the resources she offered. Arthur knew what it took to supply an army and, minute as his current allies were, so too were the resources available to them. It must have been a struggle to so supply them.

Scanning the sea of determined faces, tilted towards the holographic screen, Arthur caught sight of the man who had spoken. He was raised slightly in his seat, a frown of consideration upon his face. Arthur nodded. "Yes, we had considered that. One point of discussion would be that we would pool our opinions to deduce when would be the most appropriate timing to launch an attach. You consideration is appreciated, sir. Thank you."

The man nodded his acceptance of Arthur's words and seated himself. There was a faint murmur throughout the hall, but not loud enough to disrupt the proceedings. Such was their approach, as was encouraged by Merlin – everyone should have a say, should not be ordered what to do, should not be forced to act in a way that they opposed. That included partaking in the infiltration, even for those that had taken the sanctuary the Fortress' walls offered.

Not that there were many who sought not to. It was more of a struggle to impress upon the youngest of the new arrivals that it would perhaps be better for them to remain behind safe walls than to accompany the undercover forces. Just yesterday Arthur and Merlin had been forced to confer with a boy of barely six years old who had demanded – demanded – that he accompany them when they made their move towards the Pits located down in south Cymry. His sister had apparently been taken by the Hunters in that region not a year before and he was determined to get her back.

He wasn't the only one driven by such motivation.

It wasn't the usual approach to a war meeting that Arthur took. He had to actually remind himself on multiple occasions that it wasn't really a war meeting at all. That they weren't truly an army, they weren't attacking to lay their lives on the line with the high chance of never making it back out of the Pits again. The preservation of lives was at the forefront of all of their minds, impressed by more than just Merlin. It was what they were striving for in the first place.
Turning towards the screen once more, to the floor plan layout depicted there, Arthur gestured with a hand. "The entry points will be even less noticeable at nightfall than even during evening so this will work to our benefit. Points here and here," he gestured again, "will require temporary submersion to access, so teams will have to possess basic swimming skills to take such routes.

With a nod towards one of Nimueh’s sorcerers – Skye, from Arthur's memory – the holographic floor plan immediately brightened with a series of map-like contours trailing along the lines of the projected walkways. "From here, the four teams will progress down the anticipated routes post haste. Access for entry point three is still debateable, given that as of yet our knowledge of that region of is incomplete."

"Will we know anything further before we're set to infiltrate?" An woman towards the back called forwards. She didn't stand but Arthur could still make her out amidst the focused faces. "How likely is it that more information will be gleaned?"

"Is that intel even reliable?" Another woman, seated not far from the first, spoke up. "I can't imagine that the authorities would allow anything compromising to be easily accessed."

"I've a knack for breaking through firewalls, if I can be useful." The young man who spoke up right on the woman's tail couldn't have been far out of boyhood. "Can pretty much tell if the intel's true or been tampered with from the original, too. I could lend a hand?"

Not for the first time Arthur had to admire the ingenuity of some of the sorcerers. They weren't fighters, and most couldn't have had even a minimalistic education save for that which they could recall from their Pasts. And yet here they were, expressions unwavering and hashing out the basics so as to further acquaint themselves with their responsibilities, the plan, what was expected of them. Arthur had long since valued the opinions of multiple commanders, of his knights, even – it was why he had the Round Table installed in the first place – but he had never quite considered to look further afield, into the lower ranks. He was proven foolish for such a dismissal once more.

Settling his gaze upon the boy who had spoken, who had risen to his feet to call out over the heads of his fellows, Arthur nodded his head. "Our team of technicians have been at the intelligence for over a week now, so we're fairly certain it's clean. But," he turned a brief glance towards their head technician, Borus. The heavy man even then held a data pad and his Comm pulled open before him, fiddling away. Borus raised his eyes briefly as though feeling the weight of Arthur's attention upon him and gave a minute shrug. Arthur nodded, turning back towards the expectant boy. "Your assistance would be appreciated. Any assistance would be appreciated." Then, to the sound of hushed voices, low and considering, as though his words held a deeper meaning than intended, Arthur turned back to the screen. "From our previous infiltration, we have discerned that the security system is based successively along these points here." Glowing yellow dots lit up the screen, in such surplus that the floor plan looked to have contracted the pox. "Our primary goal, before anything else, will be to disable the alarm system."

"Disable or destroy?" A voice called.

Arthur gave a small smile, exchanging it with Merlin's own faintly amused smirk. "Same thing, isn't it? It's not like they'll have a need for them when we've left."

His words actually elicited a chuckle from the room at large, excitement and eagerness driving the voices. He turned back to the screen once more. "Now, with the aid of magic the proceedings should take place at a much faster rate than if such dismantling – or destruction – was conducted manually. We'll need to –"

*BOOM!*
A loud, earth-shaking clap of thunder quaked the room. It was so heavy, so monstrous, that Arthur actually felt himself waver on his feet. The vibrations coursed through the stone floor, shaking up the walls and even wavered the ambient light that Arthur still hadn't been able to pinpoint the source of.

In an instant, everyone fell silent. That in itself was telling. Far from screaming in fear, expressing their utmost terror at the possibility of an intrusion, an attack, something coming for them, they were utterly silent. Eyes widened, fear palpable, tension rippling through every seated figure as though they would spring into flight but…

Silence.

Another boom, slightly less earth-quaking this time, shuddered through the room and slowly, slowly, those seated in the room rose to their feet. More silence until, like pattering footsteps, a series of thud-thud-thuds. Then nothing.

Arthur was as frozen as the rest of them. No. It couldn't be happening. Surely not. They had expected to be found eventually – it would be idealistic to assume otherwise – but surely not yet. Not before they had even attempted one breakout, before they had relocated to the considered northern base that Nimueh's less obtrusive contacts were already establishing for them. They couldn't have been discovered before they'd even begun –

"No way."

At the sound of Merlin's voice, Arthur dragged his gaze from the distant doors of the great hall. The closed doors, that were all that stood between them and whatever attack was being launched at the Fortress. At the sight of Merlin's widening eyes, not in fear but in distinct awe, Arthur felt his foreboding shift to confusion. What?

He didn't get a chance to ask, however. That very second Merlin was leaping from the dais at the head of the room and darting towards the doors. Fast. Too fast to be humanly possible, which meant he must have been using magic – something that Arthur was familiar with from their practice sessions but still awed him at little. Only for a second, however, before he was throwing himself down after him with a cry of, "Merlin, wait!"

Suffice it to say, Merlin didn't wait. Neither did anyone else, for that matter. For Merlin – Emrys – had become something of a figurehead to those who possessed magic. Not formally, but Arthur had seen it. Merlin, or Emrys, was known amongst sorcerers and magical beings alike. He was powerful. He was experienced and he knew. And, alongside Arthur, he was the one who had instigated the retaliation. If Emrys was charging towards the doors, charging to face the intruder whether they were friend or, more likely, foe, then he would instantly draw the rest of his people with him.

Arthur spilled out onto the steps above the courtyard just as everyone else did, struggling to force his way to the front not because no one sought to get out of his way – which they did – but because as soon as they poured through the front doors of the Fortress alongside the great hall they skidded as one to a stop. It didn't take Arthur long to realise why. He found himself stumbling to a halt.

A dragon.

There was a dragon. In the middle of the courtyard.

A dragon who, even in that moment, was staring unblinkingly down at Merlin stopped directly before it with piercing gold eyes.

It was a monstrous beast. Huge, bigger even than that which Arthur had faced so long ago, the
dragon Kilgharrah who he had thought he had slain but Merlin had rather sheepishly told him he hadn't. The dragon loomed nearly as tall as the the Fortress wall, neck arching and stretching as its long snout tipped downwards, the whiteness of its scales reflecting the wan sunlight in a myriad of beaming shimmers. The fleshy beard around its jaw, the long, tentacle-like tresses, swayed with the slightest twitch of its head. And at its sides, shifting and rippling and undulating like a puppet on strings, wings. Wide wings, leather-like skin stretched thin between folded bones so that even crumpled as they were in a half fold the light could be seen filtering through them.

Had Arthur not encountered mechanics as large as the Barge before, he would have been rendered immobilised at the very sight of it. Or her, as a pixie-girl at his side whispered, "A queen."

Arthur didn't know all that much about dragons. What little he did know was purely negative, knowledge assimilated from his Past in times of Camelot. He would be a fool to consider such knowledge unbiased and in any way accurate. But even so, he was fairly sure that Merlin should not be within lunging distance of the creature. Of the queen. A darting snap of her jaws and the dragon could swallow him whole. Not that she looked inclined in that exact moment, but Arthur didn't want to tempt fate.

Against every one of his subconscious urges that screamed at him to "stay away!" Arthur started forwards. He pushed through the ring of silent watchers, leaping down the shallow steps in two bounds and hastened to Merlin's side. With each step, the dragon queen loomed taller and taller and by the Gods she was enormous. He could barely meet her gaze when he reached Merlin's side.

Merlin was silently. Silent and staring, as though he were holding an unspoken conversation with the dragon. That conversation, if it had been occurring at all, seemed to cut itself short upon Arthur's arrival, for the dragon turned her attention upon Arthur instead. Her head swung towards him and it took every ounce of Arthur's self control not to hasten a step backwards, to reach for his sword, as her head lowered towards him. She paused when her snout was barely a horse's length from him.

A deep hum thrummed from her throat, so loud and resounding that it seemed to tremble the very earth beneath Arthur's feet. "Ah, I should have anticipated." Her voice was just as deep at her hum, almost inaudible for its depth, and swept over Arthur with an acrid scent alongside her puffing breath. Then she…

Laughed?

That was the only word that Arthur could think to describe the sound that the dragon queen emitted. A deeper rumbling, but hitching and jumping with stops and starts, almost like hiccups. Her golden eyes closed briefly, her head nodding up and down so that the beard upon her jaw fluttered with the movement. Then she drew her head back slightly, enough that Arthur felt himself able to breathe properly again. Her neck arched up once more. "You do indeed keep some unusual company, Dragonlord. A child of Avalon, and a Pendragon at that?" She gave another chuckle, her wings shifting in wide, sweeping scrapes across the sandstone pavers ground.

Arthur was immediately confused by the words. Baffled enough that his fear was slightly overwhelmed. Pendragon was obvious enough – he hadn't been a part of the New World for long enough to forget his name – but child of Avalon? His recollections of Avalon, if it had indeed been such, were hazy at best. What exactly did the dragon queen mean, child of Avalon?

And Dragonlord? What Dragonlord? As far as Arthur was aware, the last Dragonlord was lost long ago. What was the queen referring to?

He'd just turned towards Merlin, just caught sight of the similarly confused frown upon his face, when a voice caught his attention. From the dragon but not of the dragon. "Pendragon? A
Pendragon? What do you mean?"

Out of nowhere – no, not out of nowhere; she must to have climbed down from the dragon's back itself – she appeared. Sliding to the ground, her patched boots slapping the pavers and equally patched cloak whipping around her like wings of her own, she fell into a crouch to ease her landing before standing tall. Very tall. Taller than –

Taller than Arthur had ever seen her.

He felt his eyes widen in synchrony with his sister's, widen as they fastened upon familiar pale green irises that were so similar as to be identical to those from the Past.

"Morgana."

For the second time in as many minutes, Merlin was rendered speechless. Not only had the dragon – her, she, she was back, and more than that she was still alive – but the words she uttered were astounding. Three little words that left Merlin more confused than understanding.

*Child of Avalon.*

He'd never heard the term used before. He didn't know what it meant, nor exactly why it was used to describe Arthur. But he could guess. He could guess that it had something to do with the fact that Merlin had sent his body – his dead body but no, don't think about that, he wouldn't think about that – to Avalon so many years ago in the hopes of saving what little of him still remained. Of preserving him so that, in the event Kilgharrah's words should prove truthful, Arthur could indeed return. He hadn't held high hopes, but hope he still had.

That, alongside Arthur's magic. The magic he couldn't use yet brightened his core like the enzymes and light-emitting pigments of a firefly. The magic that Merlin had just begun to suspect – only just, even though now it seemed to make so much sense – was sourced from Avalon itself.

Arthur had magic. And it was a gift from Avalon. And if the dragon queen Aithusa's words was any indication, Avalon had, in doing so, made Arthur one of its own. A child of Avalon? That was what it was?

That revelation in itself was shocking. But Merlin's surprise wasn't given the chance to dampen any for an instant later Morgana sprung from her seat on Aithusa's back. Morgana herself, for it couldn't be anyone but.

She was different. Different as every sorcerer reincarnated was, but similarly the same in key features. Her skin was the shade of walnut hardwood, slightly reflective as though it were polished by seat. Her dark hair fell in messy curls to the small of her back, and Merlin wouldn't have been surprised to see twigs or a bird's nest embedded in there somewhere. She was tall and slender, as most people not of the upper class were, but even taller still than Merlin or Arthur, suggesting she hadn't lived quite as impoverished as most slum-dwellers. The effect was only enhanced by her clothes which, while patched, were layered and looked warm enough to withstand the approaching winter.

But her eyes. Her eyes were the same, as Merlin knew that just about every reincarnated sorcerer's were. He didn't know why it happened, but they were always the same. And Morgana's eyes, their familiar, vivid green bright and clear of the insanity that had plagued her in her later life, were trained directly upon Arthur.

She couldn't have been yet sixteen. Young, and made even younger for the wide-eyed stare she
turned upon her brother that was entirely that of a younger sister meeting her long-lost kin, even if she didn't know him as such just yet.

In an instant, Morgana threw herself at Arthur. Merlin saw it, the moment that Arthur nearly snapped, where his own memories, not quite as distanced as those every sorcerer experienced, rose to the floor with a scream of "defend from attack!" But he managed to suppress it. He managed to shunt that inclination to the side, just in time to catch his tall, spindly sister when she crashed into him.

"Arthur. Arthur. It's really you, isn't it? It really, truly is?" Morgana drew away from Arthur, clutching his shoulders, then reaching up to cup his face, to pull at his cheek, to tug at a tuft of hair. Then she gave a gasp of laughter and folded back into him in an embrace. "How is this even possible?"

"I… I don't know," was all Arthur seemed capable of managing. That, and a return of the embrace that Morgana seemed intent to crush him with once more. He glanced over her shoulder towards Merlin for a moment, and there was a touch of confusion, a touch of concern. But both were nearly smothered completely by the sheer relief that was spreading more and more pervasively across his face.

Arthur had his sister back. His sister, who he had been longing for as just one more thing to tie him to everything that he had once known. His sister who had effectively killed him so long ago but that he still cared for, still loved nonetheless. That he had hoped to find before infiltrating the Pits but had determined he would rescue when – not really if but when – he found her there. Merlin saw it all play out across his face, and couldn't help but give a small smile at the sight of it. Arthur looked, if anything, the most liberated he had since Merlin had first seen him.

Relief. It could do that to a person.

Morgana drew away once more, seemingly unable to keep her eyes off her brother for long. The smile that spread across her face was unlike any that Merlin had seen upon anyone in years. Sorcerers rarely had a reason to smile like that. "How is this even possible?" She repeated, shaking her head.

Arthur shook his own head in reply. "I don't know. I don't understand it anymore than you do."

"But you remember, don't you? You remember me, and Camelot and Albion, and Uther and everything, right?" At Arthur's nod, she continued before he could speak, overriding any words he might have voiced. "But that shouldn't be possible. No one but a sorcerer, or one bequeathed with magic could…" She trailed off and Merlin saw her adjust her gaze, shift her view so that she was peering at Arthur not with her eyes but with her magical senses. Then her eyes widened and the expectation of absented magic morphed into realisation. "How is that even possible?"

"I –"

"You have magic, Arthur. How is that -? How –?"

"I don't know," Arthur said with a shake of his head. "Truly, Morgana, I don't know. I cannot use it, but I do know I have it." He spared a glance for Merlin and Morgana turned to him for the first time. For the very first time, it would seem, because Merlin registered no recognition in her gaze as she peered at him.

"Was it you?" She asked, raising an eyebrow. "Did you do this?"
Merlin shook his head. "No one can gift another person with magic. I would guess that what Aithusa has said probably holds weight. Something about Avalon, perhaps."

Morgana spared a questioning glance over her shoulder to Aithusa – the sort of glance of a confused child to their mother – before turning back to Arthur. "But I… I don't understand this. You've always hated magic. You would have hated the thought of possessing it yourself. And now this." She made a gesture over Arthur's shoulder towards the swarm of watching, waiting, silent sorcerers atop the steps. "You're working alongside them?"

"More than that, he's leading the rebellion," Merlin murmured.

Morgana spared him a wide-eyed glance, eyebrows rising. Then she snapped her attention back to Arthur. "It's you leading them?"


"Merlin…" Morgana slowly turned back towards him and this time she seemed to take keener notice of Merlin. "Aithusa was right? You are the Dragonlord?"

"He is," Aithusa rumbled, drawing all eyes back towards her. And suddenly, Merlin could see only her. He didn't know how he had been distracted from her at all – from a dragon, from the dragon, the queen herself. She suddenly became the sun to the many-eyed planets that beheld her.

Merlin could remember first meeting Aithusa. He could remember appropriating her egg – appropriating in the loosest sense of the term – and coaxing her into life with a name. Her name, the one that Merlin himself had given her.

He recalled that, just as he recalled that Aithusa had been smitten with Morgana. That she had obeyed her command and attacked Merlin, Arthur and Gwaine under her command, and even later when she had once more flown on the offensive when they were in the company of Mordred and a disabled Gwen. And then at Camlann again.

She had been a crippled hatchling due to her imprisonment, but even at the battle that crippling, twisted disability had been beginning to smooth, to ease and loosen its grasp upon her. As she towered above Merlin in all of her regal glory, there was not a touch of that crippling to be seen. There was strength, power, and alongside that, wisdom, a wisdom that Merlin hadn't beheld in the younger dragon in the only time that he had seen her, in times of Albion. He had thought her dead, perhaps, hunted down, and his role as a Dragonlord rendered redundant by the absence of both she and, millennia ago, the death of the elderly king Kilgharrah.

Apparently not. And apparently she remained as closely tied to Morgana as she had once been. Except perhaps without quite the blind adoration, the almost compulsive following or orders. She truly had grown into herself as a dragon.

Aithusa was staring at him with a slight tilt to her head. A tilt and a vivid gold to her visibly shining eyes. Merlin could almost swear she was smiling. "It has been too long, young warlock."

Merlin felt a different sort of smile settle upon his own lips. "Is it habit that you call me that, as did Kilgharrah, or does it have some deeper meaning?"

Aithusa chuckled just as she had before. She seemed in an unconscionably good mood for some reason. Dipping her head down, she leant forwards so that her snout was nearly touching Merlin's face. "A term of endearment, perhaps."

"Endearment?" Merin raised an eyebrow. "You don't hate me quite so much anymore, then?"
"Hate you?" Aithusa gave something of a snort that Merlin had to squint into for the force of the wind that struck him. "No, Merlin, I do not hate you. I have never hated you, merely been somewhat confused." There was a faint, barely noticeable flicker of her gaze towards Morgana and Merlin didn't need her to expand to know of what she spoke. Similarly to know that her brief mention of the Past was not permission to pursue that Past further. Merlin understood that, at least; Morgana was barely older than a girl. She wouldn't recall any of what she had done in her Past life in Albion. Merlin was surprised that she was with Aithusa at all, considering she couldn't possibly recall their first meeting yet. But then, perhaps it was Aithusa who had sought her out?

"Besides," Aithusa continued, drawing Merlin from his thoughts. "How could I hate the one who so named me?"

"So it was you?" Morgana managed to unwrap herself from Arthur for long enough to turn fully towards Merlin. There was something very like respect in her gaze as she stared at him. "I've heard stories of Emrys, and that it was him who hatched Aithusa, as only a Dragonlord can. That was you, then?"

Merlin opened his mouth to reply but in the last second caught sight of Arthur's expression. He looked baffled. No, such was to mild a term – shocked was more correctly. There wasn't a hint of betrayal on his face, but Merlin was still concerned that such was yet to arise. He bit back his words, simply nodding in reply to Morgana's question. They would have to have words, he and Arthur.

Later, however, for right now Aithusa was speaking once more and her glowing radiance drew his attention like a magnet. "It has been too long, I should think."

"Too long," Merlin agreed. "Centuries, even. I thought you were dead."

Aithusa gave a rumbling hum of disagreement. "No, not dead. Merely hiding. Much as every other being of magic has been forced to do over the years with increasing frequency." "And yet you've come here?"

"And yet I've come." Her tone was sombre, solemn in a way that resounded with the wisdom of age and long experience. "How could I not? You pool around you, Dragonlord, that largest sea of free magic that I have experienced in years. And without the aim of open warfare, at that. I have never witnessed that."

Merlin frowned. Years? Perhaps she referred to the Third World War? But then… never? So many sorcerers, so many beings of magic, had never gathered in such a place before without the drive of aggressive warfare? It wasn't until that moment, until Aithusa's words rung forth, that Merlin truly caught a glimpse of the vastness of what they were doing. There were hundreds of creatures of magic, of sorcerers reincarnated and beings shunned for the power that coursed through their veins, and they were working together with a common goal. More surprisingly than that, it had taken precious little effort on their part to invoke such a communal response – an amplification spell and Mordred's telepathy was all. It was almost as though they had been waiting, had been holding out and longing for the moment when someone would incite them into action.

Merlin could only curse himself for that. If so, why hadn't he done it sooner?

"Do not so reprimand yourself, Merlin," Aithusa murmured, though that murmur likely carried across the entirety of the courtyard and rippled through the walls. "It was not your fault."

Merlin glanced up at her from where he'd dropped his gaze to his hands. His hands, that plucked at one another in frustration for his stupidity. "Is that a dragon thing, or just a you and Kilgharrah
"What thing would that be?" Aithusa asked, her head cocking slightly like a curious bird.

"You seem to read my thoughts without me saying anything."

A sort-of-smile twitched around Aithusa's muzzle once more. "Of course. We are kin."

"Kin?"

"And as kin, Dragonlord, I will so stand by you." Her gaze drifted briefly towards Morgana. "We both will."

Merlin glanced back towards Morgana, towards Arthur and – yes, Arthur still appeared shocked. Floored, even, though he was making an attempt to hide it. He met Merlin's eyes with incomprehension yet still absent of accusation. Confusion. Utter confusion. Yes, he and Merlin would have much to talk about.

Morgana was stepping towards him, however, and Merlin's attention locked on her immediately. It was hard to not look at Morgana when she was making herself apparent – she had always been of the bossy, prominent, demanding kind, even if in the kindest sense of the terms. She stepped up towards Merlin with her arms crossed, apparently disregarding Arthur for the moment. The pose was so reminiscent of Arthur's, even in this life, that Merlin wondered how anyone could not guess they were related, even Morgana herself.

"I will fight with you, Emrys. Or Merlin, or Dragonlord. Whatever name you go by." Her gaze hardened with a touch of the coldness Merlin recalled from long ago. It unnerved him just slightly. "They took my sister. A long time ago, but… they took her. I want her back."

There was no uncertainty in Morgana's tone. From her words, Merlin knew she would not accept that her sister had died in the Pits, that she wouldn't be able to rescue her. Which was perhaps a good thing, considering that Merlin knew Arthur had seen Morgause. He would leave that revelation up to Arthur however.

Instead, he inclined his head in a single nod. "Then I suppose welcome aboard."

The smile Morgana gave him bordered on feral.

As though a switch had been flicked, the tension rippling statically throughout the courtyard seemed to snap. Their audience gradually rippled down the steps, tentative at first but then picking up speed as awe replaced hesitancy. Because Aithusa was a dragon. A real live dragon. There would not be a creature of magic alive who wouldn't stand star struck in her presence. Merlin fathomed that the only reason he'd gotten off so lightly was because he was a Dragonlord, or perhaps because he'd known both Aithusa and Kilgharrah from the Past. Everyone else was not so lucky. Even Nimueh, descending the steps all of her regal aloofness, stared up at Aithusa with her own adoration visibly surfacing. Dragon-struck, it was called. It appeared to have infected everyone just a little.

Merlin found himself drifting to Arthur's side, retreating slightly. They couldn't really speak for loudness of the rising chatter, the exclamations of wonder and the excitement that was building because Aithusa was a dragon, a dragon queen and she was here!

Eventually, though, Merlin found himself caught on the arm. Arthur, silent and waiting as he had been throughout the entirety of their people's excitement, had evidently felt he'd waited long enough. Leaving Morgana by Aithusa's towering side, he led Merlin by the arm, not dragging but with determined steps nonetheless, away from the milling masses.
As soon as they'd drawn up alongside the wall, Arthur turned towards Merlin, head bowing towards his, and voice lowered. Surprisingly, there didn't seem to be all that much by way of disgruntlement in Arthur's expression. "A Dragonlord?"

Merlin squirmed slightly beneath his attention but accepted defeat readily enough. "Yes."

"Really? A Dragonlord?"

"Yes, really."

"You didn't think to perhaps tell me that?"

Merlin shrugged as nonchalantly as he could. Still there was no reprimand, no accusation in Arthur's tone, but he felt it himself anyway. Perhaps he should have told him. Arthur was being remarkably lenient – had been lenient, and understanding, and impossibly fine with everything – and Merlin should have done better than he had. "There seemed no need. Until now, I didn't believe that any more dragons even existed."

Arthur stared at him for a moment. Stared and stared, his hands holding unshakeably but not too tightly to Merlin's arms. Not tight enough to be distressing nor even mildly uncomfortable, even if Merlin would always be hyperaware of any kind of touch. Then, in a slow, steady spread, a smile drew across his face. "This is fantastic."

Merlin's eyebrows jumped in surprise. "What?"

"Fantastic. This could be just the back-up plan we need."

"Arthur, I really hope you're not thinking Aithusa should come to the Pits. She can't – that would be foolish, and too dangerous for her as possibly the last dragon in existence. Not to mention there would be no way to manage it covertly if we –"

"Yes, yes of course," Arthur interrupted him, his smile still fierce. Then he leaned in to Merlin slightly until their foreheads were nearly touching. "But think, Merlin; if we really need the support of simple presence, if we ever need to defend with our entirety, we have a dragon on our side."

"I had noticed. I was there when she told us, in case you hadn't realised."

"Arthur, I really hope you're not thinking Aithusa should come to the Pits. She can't – that would be foolish, and too dangerous for her as possibly the last dragon in existence. Not to mention there would be no way to manage it covertly if we –"

"Yes, yes of course," Arthur interrupted him, his smile still fierce. Then he leaned in to Merlin slightly until their foreheads were nearly touching. "But think, Merlin; if we really need the support of simple presence, if we ever need to defend with our entirety, we have a dragon on our side."

"I had noticed. I was there when she told us, in case you hadn't realised."

"I did realise," Arthur smirked. Then, in a motion so fluid that Merlin didn't even know how it quite happened, he turned to his side, slipped an arm around Merlin's shoulders easily, and began to lead him back in the direction of the great hall. The direction that everyone, including Aithusa – though Merlin sincerely doubted she would be able to do more than stick her head through the doorway – where headed. He hadn't even realised that they had begun to make a move, but the sight of Nimueh – because of course it would be Nimueh – gesturing for everyone to return back in doors was explanatory enough. "Just as I realised that she would do anything to save the sorcerers, the magical beings, magic itself." He grinned at Merlin sidelong, looking more enthusiastic and confident than he had since they'd first decided upon their plan. "And with her as a last resort, just in case, we could actually do this, Merlin."

It wasn't until that moment that Merlin realised Arthur had been having doubts. That he, just like Merlin, was driven more by hope, determination and sheer desperation than by confidence in their capacity for victory. It would have been disheartening to realise, except that, in the moment that he understood, Merlin similarly understood that such uncertainty was vanquished. Arthur held all the confidence of a king that knew he could win if he rode into battle.

It made Merlin smile, just a little bit. Warmed him enough that he felt the urge to wrap his arm
around Arthur's waist in return and shake his head as he felt his own resolve harden once more. "That is the intention, yes."

"We could win this."

"And rescue everyone."

"Without losing everyone in the process."

"That's the plan," Merlin nodded, and turned his smile upon Arthur. Arthur returned it twice as wide before leaning in to press a kiss upon his lips. Merlin allowed it for just a moment before drawing away and picking up his step. "Come on, then. We've got a people to prevail a plan for rebellion upon."

Arthur immediately tightened his arm around Merlin's shoulders and picked up his pace alongside him. "That we do."
It was strange, how the months seemed to compress, for time to be erased entirely, when comparing like situations. Arthur could swear that he had been in the watery tunnels snaking beneath the Pits only days before. The darkness of the glistening walls reflected what little light the sorcerers surrounding him emitted from the glowing orbs resting in their palms. The water lapped quietly with each stroke of oars, the swish of small waves against the hull making soft slapping sounds. It resurfaced memories that Arthur would rather not think about and he found his gaze drawn unconsciously towards Merlin.

Merlin, who looked, acted, was so different to how he had been when he and Arthur had last been in the tunnels. If nothing else, that reality eased Arthur of just a little of the tension tightening his gut.

It had taken but a day since Morgana and Aithusa had arrived for them to adapt their plans. They hardly needed much adapting; Aithusa had agreed with less objection than Arthur would expect from a dragon – a dragon, by the Gods it still astounded him to even consider it – and Morgana had leapt upon whatever plans for infiltration they had with an enthusiasm that seemed to invigorate every other person in the room. Arthur himself had even felt his eagerness rise at the fierceness of her verbally-acclaimed commitment, at her encouragement and her certainty that they would achieve success.

Morgana had always been like that. Bossy, yes, but she could inspire, could incite enthusiasm and commitment into the hearts of men and women with a simple word. That was the Pendragon flame erupting within her, Arthur considered. Not that he would ever voice his considerations aloud – or at least not for many years to come. They had spoken, the two of them, but precious little. There had hardly been the time, and though Morgana had expressed her ecstasy for her discovery of Arthur's existence, her commitment to the cause and motivation to rescue her sister had overwhelmed even their reunion.

Morgause. Her sister. There was a story there that Arthur would have to discuss with Morgana in the future, he would make sure of it. Just not now. Not yet.

Morgana was drifting on a boat just alongside that which Arthur and Merlin paddled. Magically paddled, Arthur had noticed, because the sorcerers seemed discontented to use manual labour when they could use magic, even for such a mediocre task. As though their turnabout commitment to pursuing liberty was abruptly pervading every aspect of their lives rather than just their cause. Arthur couldn't exactly blame them – after being suppressed for so long, it was as though they were bridled horses abruptly let loose to leap and bound, relishing in their freedom. And besides, it meant he wouldn't have to paddle himself.

Arthur cast a glance over his shoulder to the other boats. To Morgana's boat, and the glance she spared him as though feeling the weight of his gaze upon her. To the trio of smaller boats drifting behind. Five in total, each with less that half a dozen sorcerers in them. They were small squad, but the other three were hardly much larger. Even with nearly three score more sorcerers arriving just the previous day, not even half of their total number were physically able to put their efforts towards fighting. They were too young, were sick, injured, emaciated, exhausted. Arthur wouldn't push them, not when they couldn't even find the energy to push themselves despite evidently wanting to. He would make do.

They would make do. Or Arthur hoped so at least.

"Stop thinking so much."
Merlin's voice drew Arthur's attention back to where he sat at his side. Merlin, who was the picture of calm and composure in a way that Arthur hadn't anticipated him to be in such nervous circumstances. He could only be thankful for it, however; Emrys – the Emrys that the rest of the sorcerers seemed to look up to with almost idolising worship – similarly drew the attention of even their small party. With his ease and stoic readiness, everyone else seemed to calm slightly too. Even Morgana, who Arthur had doubted even knew the meaning of calm in this incarnation. She had glanced towards Merlin more times than Arthur could count, and he would swear she'd even attempted to emulate his cool, poised calmness.

"I'm not thinking too much. I'm preparing myself."

"Well, stop it." Merlin's murmur somehow managed to reach across the distance between them without echoing from the walls. "We have a plan. We have a back-up plan, and a back-up plan for that, too, should it be necessary. You'll just stress yourself out more if you keep thinking so much."

Arthur couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at Merlin at that. "Oh, and you'd know all about that? So much experience on undercover missions, have you?"

From the sidelong glance Merlin sent Arthur, he knew he had been a fool for speaking such words aloud and mentally chided himself. He and Merlin still hadn't spoken all that much about Merlin's Past lives – Arthur didn't want to push him given that he knew that sorcerers were often hesitant to voice such experiences. For all Arthur knew he could very well have experience in covert operations.

Merlin only shrugged, however, disregarding Arthur's thoughtless remark. "I've picked up things here and there."

Arthur pressed his lips together for a moment before he couldn't help but speak once more. He was more than capable of remaining silent when needed, when his silence was necessary, but leading up to it his mind had always been assaulted by concerns, by misgivings, by 'what if's and 'maybe's that were hard to ignore for the degree and persistence of their nit-picking. "I worry about the other squads."

"They'll contact us if something goes wrong."

"The communication devices are definitely working fine?"

In answer, Merlin raised what looked to be a palm-sized orb of perfectly rounded crystal. It emitted a faint light that seemed dim in the face of the mage-lights that surrounded them, raised in the hands of the rest of the sorcerers. "They're fine, Arthur. We've checked more times than I care to count."

Arthur bit back on his disgruntlement, on the frustration that urged him to claim that 'they could never check too many times' and 'was he sure they were still working now?' Merlin would be sure. Arthur knew it was just his own concerns, his own lack of experience utilising magic, that caused him to doubt.

"If you have such worries, Arthur, then perhaps you should disperse myself and Emrys amongst the squads next time."

Arthur glanced towards Morgana, because of course it would be Morgana who would speak to him so derogatorily, despite the fact that he now more than doubled her age. Her expression was touched visibly with humour, however, apparent even through the dimness, and the glance she spared Merlin over Arthur's shoulder was very knowing. Arthur wouldn't be surprised if, even at fifteen, even without him expressly telling her anything, she knew he held feelings for Merlin. Very strong
feelings at that.

He felt just a touch of guilt at her words, however. Maybe he should have dispersed them. He trusted Merlin more than he trusted anyone else in the world, and despite only knowing Morgana – this Morgana – for barely a day, he trusted her too. With the absence of her insanity, with her youth, with her attitude that was so much like how he recalled it from their shared childhood in spite of the trials and horrors he knew she must have faced in the New World, he trusted her. Somehow, impossibly, it was almost like their animosity had never been. Strange, considering it had been she who had killed him.

And yet, even after barely a week of Merlin knowing of Arthur's death, of Gaius prevailing upon him the true reality of sorcerer reincarnation and altering his perspective entirely, he found it somehow less painful to consider. Almost as though the pain itself had been slightly dimmed. Arthur wondered if that was how the rest of those reincarnated felt.

It was because of his returned affection for his sister – well, his sort of sister – and his desire to keep Merlin close to his side now, even if that desire may dim slightly in future, that they three were in the same squad. Arthur couldn't help himself. He had so recently gotten them both back. It seemed all too risky, like playing with fire, to tempt fate by separating so soon. Maybe in future but not now. Not yet. Not when they were so close to danger.

As if responding to his thoughts, the boat beneath him abruptly stopped. He glanced over his shoulder to Tia who had been in command of propulsion, then drew his attention overhead. There it was. Through the dimness, he saw the black mouth of the chute he himself had escaped from but months before with Merlin in tow. It really did only feel like days since he'd last been here.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Arthur rose to his feet, shifting his weight to balance in the rocking boat. He glanced towards Merlin, nodding towards the crystal orb still cupped in his palm. "Relay the message then. Tell them we're here and to set about with step two."

Nodding, Merlin raised the crystal to his mouth, a touch of gold visibly flaring in his eyes as he set to murmuring Arthur's instructions into the orb. Arthur turned back towards the chute.

"Up there, then?" Morgana called quietly from her own boat. She too had risen to standing, he noticed, the hungry determination in her expression giving her a faintly manic appearance with the messiness of her hair, of her garbs. That at least was very different to the Morgana Arthur remembered from his childhood – that Morgana wouldn't have been caught dead looking so messy.

He nodded. "Up there. Disable the alarms as soon as possible, dismantle the locking mechanisms and head on route to the patients' rooms."

"Patients," Morgana spat, and the sorcerers around them murmured their similar discontent at the euphemism. Then Morgana shook her head and flashed Arthur a smirk. "I sincerely doubt that we'll manage to get very far without triggering the alarms, Arthur."

"Have a little faith that everything won't end in disaster, won't you?"

"Oh, I don't think it will be disastrous," Morgana emphasised, her smirk widening. "Personally I quite like the idea of having my own battle theme music."

"Your idea of battle theme music is a security alarm system?" A sorcerer behind her asked, eyebrow rising in bemusement.

Morgana grinned over her shoulder. "Of course. What else would you use?" And with that, quite
against protocol, orders and their hashed-out plan, Morgana took a series of steps towards the prow and leapt from her boat in a flash of golden eyes. Only to land on thin air, spring higher into that air, and catch onto the edge of the chute. She didn't say another word as, with a grunt and a scramble, she clambered into the darkness.

Arthur could only shake his head in fond exasperation. *Still the same Morgana, the stubborn mule.* Then, with the aid of Merlin rising to his feet beside him with the glowing eyes of his own magic, he followed right behind.

The jarring *WHA-A-AR!* of a siren threw Freya from her sleep. It wasn't much of a sleep, for Freya never truly slept. Not when, at the stroke of midnight, she would be bodily ripped apart by the beast within her time and time again. It never hurt any less, never *would* hurt any less, and she would never be rid of it. Despite what the doctors told her of 'modern medicines' and their attempt to 'fix her'.

Midnight. It couldn't be far off now. But even if it was, she would find no further sleep. Not with that – that *wailing*.

The blaring siren resounded in undulating waves through her ears. She was groggy, her mind stuffed with cotton. Her eyes felt gummy, glued together, her skull far too heavy to lift from the ground even if she'd wanted to.

She didn't want to. For a long time Freya had not felt the motivation to do anything. Not for years, really, but even less in recent months since she had been so alone. She hadn't realised how much she had come to rely upon the simple presence of Merlin in the cell alongside hers, even when they hadn't spoken, until it was taken from her. She'd cried – actually cried – for the first time in years when she'd realised he was gone.

Gone. Merlin was gone. Dead? She didn't know.

But he was gone. And she was alone.

The siren wailed.

*Can't it just stop. Stop, shut up, quiet, stop disrupting my… my peace…*

The thought arose tongue in cheek. Peace? Freya hadn't felt peace for years. Perhaps not in her entire life, or even any of her lives. What even was peace? How would she know when every night she was rendered into a rabid beast? She hurt lying in simple stillness. She hurt to roll over slightly to alleviate the pressure sores that developed on her shoulder, on the side of her head. She hurt, and ached, and pained, her skin tight and straining, her nerves sharply protesting and every muscle screaming just for existing, and it was constant. Never ending. All over. Her nightly transformations only made it worse.

Peace. Peace would be nice. Any kind of peace. And that would be *impossible* if that siren kept wailing.

Freya recalled the sound from once before. Once, just before she'd realised Merlin was gone. That he was gone forever. Was that what this was? Was someone else leaving? She'd only heard the sirens that one time – Freya didn't even know how long ago it had been; days? Years? – but that could be it. Maybe that was it. Someone else was dying, was leaving for good.

Except then she heard it. The voice. Calm, warm, quiet. Reassuring. And though it was exhausting, though it was agony to do so, her head wobbled from the ground as if her ears strained to capture
more of that voice.

"We've come to get you. We'll break you out. We've come, and you won't be left behind. You won't be abandoned. Not anymore."

Tears prickled in Freya's eyes, tears that she wasn't sure what they arose from. Joy? Sadness? Disbelief?

Relief?

She'd heard the messages before. The messages of rebellion, for there could be no other word for it. She'd heard them and hadn't fully believed them, had considered them unreal. How could they be real? Rescue? Rebellion? An end to the pain and suffering that she had experienced for so long she could hardly remember a time she hadn't? No, Freya didn't believe it.

But then that voice, the voice that had spoken but moments before. That sounded different. It was closer somehow, if an unspoken voice could be considered closer. It was warmer, surer, more here. And for some reason, some unconscious reasoning on her minds part, she felt lifted by it. Encouraged. Rejuvenated.

Hopeful.

It was impossible, she knew. And yet somehow she still hoped. She still hoped that there was some truth to those words, that the wailing sirens could mean something other than misery, despair, the loss of another sorcerer. Maybe this was what death was like? She could remember dying in the Past, dying many times, but nothing quite like this. There had been no voice, not to her recollection, no words of encouragement, of rescue, of release.

When the sirens cut short, Freya barely even heard their absence. She was swimming in hope, her eyes drifted closed. She didn't even notice when the door to her cell slid open.

---

Edwin stared at the ceiling.

He stared at the ceiling because he couldn't lie on his side. Not at the moment. Perhaps never again, if the past however long was anything to go by. If he lay in any other manner than on his back then it would hurt too much. It would hurt. Everywhere.

Not that it didn't hurt to lie on his back though. There was a bone-deep bruise to the back of his skull, the vertebrae of his spine dug into the floor that should have been soft enough to alleviate such pains but wasn't, and the pressure of his skin pushed against the restricting white suit that wrapped him like a cocoon stung even when he didn't move.

But for once, Edwin barely considered it. He had never been able to switch off the pain, despite what the Doctors had assured him would come 'eventually'. For once, though, Edwin was distracted. In years – he didn't know how long and had never bothered to keep count – he hadn't been drawn from his hatred and the resentment that had sustained him, from his agony. Not once. But now, he was distracted.

By the siren that had stopped wailing.

By the voice, that familiar voice, that had sounded in his head moments before the blaring had ceased.

We'll break you out.
For once, for the first time in so many years, Edwin felt something. Something fierce that drove what little vengeful will to live he still possessed. That ferocity bared its fangs, urging him to struggle against his weakness, his pains, his exhaustion, when the door slid open.

The doorway opened onto bright fluorescent light, so bright and contrasting to the darkness of his cell that Edwin was blinded. He squeezed his eyes shut, starbursts and fireworks dancing on the inside of his eyelids and stinging the fragile photoreceptors that moaned their discontent. He heard them, though. He heard the intruders as they stepped into the room, their footsteps soft and barely audible upon the spongy floor. More than one, he was sure. Orderlies? Perhaps a Doctor even? Or… them.

_We have come…_

He snapped his eyes open, however, when a touch so gentle that it barely even hurt brushed his shoulder. Ignoring the abuse to his sight, he squinted in the direction of the touch, of the person who crouched down by his side. His eyes widened, even as it hurt to do so.

Merlin. It was Merlin. He was different that Edwin remembered – a little older perhaps, his hair a little shorter than the overgrown mess it had been that he remembered – but it was still Merlin. Very definitely Merlin. There was a determination on his face, an expression of absolute commitment, resolution, steadfast and unwavering.

Edwin knew it couldn't have been Merlin who had sent the message before, who had sent any of the messages. Telepathy was a rare gift and, powerful as Merlin was, it was one he didn't possess. But in the face of the small smile upon his face, the aura of visible magic that seemed to wreath him in a way that Edwin had _never_ seen in this life – no one would dare to wear their magic so openly – he could almost believe it was.

"Hi, Edwin," he murmured quietly, as though he was respecting Edwin's eardrums that had been so repeatedly abused. "It's been a while."

Edwin didn't care if he was a hallucination. He didn't care if he was dreaming, or if for whatever reason the Grim Reaper had chosen Merlin's form when it had come to walk him to the other side.

He didn't care. For the first time in years, he smiled in less than a snarl of hatred. He smiled and he meant it.

The world was a haze of confusion. He could hardly see for the abusive light that rained upon his eyes, could hardly hear properly for the cries, the shouts, the curses and the blasts of magic that met the cracking buzz of electrical bullets. All Iseldir was aware of, all he was sure of, was the ground beneath his feet that he could no longer walk with but instead simply dragged behind him, of the agonisingly painful yet blessed discomfort of the young man beneath his arm, holding him upright.

Mordred. Mordred had come to get him.

The last time he'd seen Mordred, the young boy hiding in the shadows from the eyes of the Hunters, had been years ago. Years and years and years and… Iseldir didn't even know how long it had been. It hardly mattered. He didn't know why it mattered anymore. Existing was all he did and he would be damned if he failed at existing any longer because the Doctors wished him to die. It had been the only thing that enabled him to hold on for so long.

That and the memory of Mordred, the boy terrified and wide-eyed as he stared at Iseldir in the
moments before the Hunters dragged him away, limp and electrocuted and throbbing with the pain of that electricity twitching through his limbs. The memory and the words that Mordred had flung after him in a desperate, telepathic call.

"I'll save you! I swear, I will! Stay alive, Iseldir, 'cause I'm going to come and get you out!"

Mordred, the boy who had just lost his home, his family, who had just seen his father murdered and who was abandoned to a world who would shun him. Mordred had made that call. And Iseldir hadn't believed he would stick by it, hadn't even considered it possible and doubted Mordred would truly remember his words in future, let alone be able to. The world was vast and dangerous and the Pits impregnable.

He'd fully believed that until he'd heard Mordred's messages. He didn't even know how long ago they had been relayed, but he knew they were Mordred's words. Somehow, Mordred was making good his claim.

He had being led – no, carried through the halls. The halls of the Pits, the familiar white walls and fluorescent lights of radiating alternating red and blue despite the night hour that would otherwise suggest darkness. The ring of Mordred's feet on the ground, the clicking of claws of the giant of a dog at his side – where he'd gotten himself a dog, Iseldir didn't even contemplate – and moving at nearly a run.

It was just the two of them at first, but then there were others. Other sorcerers, Iseldir could tell, and other creatures of magic. Iseldir saw a young woman carrying two men at least a head taller than her but half as thin who had to be a Sidhe join Mordred without a word. A pair of burly men who must have grown up outside of the slums of London for their impressive size carried another three skeletally thin 'patients' each, and Iseldir would wager that the shorter one was at least part goblin. More and more joined their party, until they were a veritable troop of rescuers and the rescued, most of the latter barely conscious enough to keep their eyes open and only one – a girl who looked younger than Mordred – actually able to walk on her own two feet. They charged through the hallways, stopping at doors and drawing more 'patients' from their cells until not enough arms existed to carry them and magic had to be used instead.

Magic. It was the first time Iseldir had seen magic used in… in… he didn't know how long. It was like seeing a miracle performed. It was.

The sirens had stopped, but they were replaced soon enough. Replaced when their party drew away from what Iseldir knew as being the patients' wards and into previously unseen territory. A long corridor that Iseldir registered only hazily. A wide desk of sorts, barely glimpsed, before they were passing down another hallway. Red and blue lights flashed, the sound of thumping footsteps accompanied the murmurs of magic as their rescuers enhanced the spells holding their rescued companions aloft, and they ran.

They ran. They were escaping. They were saved. Iseldir hadn't let himself hope, but…

Maybe it was too much to hope for? Maybe he had thought too soon, had hoped too sorely and the God who cared not for the sorcerers of the world had flipped his switch back to oppressive hatred. For swinging around another corner, Iseldir's feet swiping the floor like a mop as Mordred dragged him alongside him, he saw them.

The orderlies. The security guards. Even some of the Doctors. They were in the corridor, electrical guns, batons, Prods, even a pair of Zappers held aloft. The only thing that stood between them and Iseldir's party were two men. Two men who, though admittedly standing tall and evidently refusing to budge, would hardly be able to stem the opposing forces for long.
Mordred, in a bout of commanding practicality that Iseldir hadn't fathomed possible of him, muttered a brief "Fuck!" before snapping his head towards his fellows. "Alright, get everyone out. Now, we have to go now."

He didn't speak, didn't open his mouth but to curl his lip in thinly veiled fury, but each and every one of the other rescuers evidently heard him. They hesitated only briefly, the Sidhe girl grumbled a low "We can't just leave them," before flinching slightly under Mordred's glare. It was fierce, in a way that Iseldir hardly registered both for his detachedness, his bodily confusion and its foreignness upon Mordred's matured face.

Mordred uttered an audible hiss that was echoed by a growl from the dog at his side. "Yes you bloody well can. What do you think we're here for?"

"But we can't just let them face them all alone," the Sidhe girl reattempted, to the nods of several around her. Even the girl who had obviously been a patient, wavering on her feet as she was, appeared in agreement.

But then Mordred hissed again and, with a swinging arm, gestured to a plain door marked only with the word 'Laundry'. "If we delay, then we'll just be making things harder for them. The faster we get out of here the faster they can follow us. And besides," Mordred cast a brief glance towards the two men who hadn't retreated a step in the face of their enemies demands to "move!" "This is Emrys and Pendragon we're talking about here. If anyone could hold them off and make it out alive it would be them."

That seemed to do it. At Mordred's soundless words, objection died from the faces of the rescuers and settled into begrudging acceptance. Then, flowing into action with gestures to drag the drifting, magically-held 'patients' after them, they sprung towards the Laundry.

Iseldir didn't get a chance to do more than glance over at the two men in the hallway. Emrys? And Pendragon? Surely not. Surely it was impossible – he must be less lucid than he'd hoped. He wanted to look, he wanted to see, to verify Mordred's words, but he didn't get the chance. For Mordred, as soon as his fellows had disappeared through the door, spared only a glance himself towards the two men – one had raised something of a heavy claymore while the other's hands visibly brightened with coiled gloves of spitting fire – before charging after them.

That was the last Iseldir saw of the Pits. He wasn't sorry to see the back of them.

"That was Mordred's group," Merlin murmured at Arthur's side.

Arthur didn't glance over his shoulder to check, to be sure of Merlin's words. He didn't need to for it didn't matter. Instead he trained his eyes upon the armed men and women before him, the soldiers as he perceived them who appeared on the verge of leaping to the attack. "Is that the last of them?"

"One more," Merlin replied, ignoring as Arthur did the order to "Stand down! Last warning!" "They're not far off if their last message is any indication."

Arthur nodded. "Right. So we just hold these guys off for a little longer."

"Shouldn't be too hard. There's only, what, fifteen of them or so?"

"Not hard at all."

"A breeze, really."
Arthur smirked despite himself and raised the heavy sword in his hands. It was above and beyond the sturdiness of the rapiers he'd practiced with, had been commissioned expressly by their resident arms-master, Pole, after he'd mentioned the narrower, shorter swords being 'not quite right'. This one, though – if nothing else it reminded him of Excalibur. It was almost exactly the same, in weight, length, balance, the grip of the hilt and the ease at which it settled into his palm as though made for it. He raised the sword with one hand while his other tightened around the leather-like gauntlet slipped across his fingers. A shield, it was, magically imbued into the garment that would spring in defence like an actual, physical shield with a specific squeeze of his fingers.

Magic did indeed have its uses.

Arthur heard the last party arrive. He heard them but he didn’t turn towards them. Neither did Merlin. For in that moment, finally reaching the end of their tether of patience, their enemies reared their heads. They raised their weapons. They attacked.

Bullets fired.

Bodies flung themselves forwards.

Cries of outrage and accusation chorused in the air.

Arthur raised his sword, ready to swing and meet the battle as he hadn't been for years with Merlin, drawing his knives and flickering with fire, at his side.

The Facilities gradually began to fall.

The largest, that situated in London, fell first. That was, in many ways, the easiest victory, despite the embedded nature of its location. It fell within hours, with the Sorcerers, as they unanimously called themselves even if not wholly applicable, making short work of the security, of the retrieval of the supposed patients of the Facilities. They disappeared without a trace.

London was in uproar. Terror ran rampant, and it only refrained from launching into immediate, all-out warfare for the fact that there truly was no knowledge of who had attacked the Facility, or where they had withdrawn to following. For the Sorcerers – as the government too had ironically taken to calling them – simply disappeared. They didn't strike at the heart of London in an aggressive assault. They didn't attack the public, the working class citizen. They didn't even launch an attack upon the Inner City who, even the upperclassmen would admit, would be their more likely targets than the slum-dwellers.

They didn't attack. They simply disappeared.

Until they struck again.

It was at a different place this time. Vastly different, as far flung from the city of London as could be in the United Kingdoms. The Kingdoms itself possessed only seven Facilities, with that embedded in London the largest, but that in Aberdeen was nearly as large. More isolated, but the Facility itself held nearly as many cells, and most of them full. Perched as it was on a cliff-face, on the outskirts of a once large town that had shrunken with most residents relocating further south, it was in prime position to conduct any number of medicinal studies to discern what exactly was wrong with those who possessed magic.

The Facility of Aberdeen fell just as fast as that in London.

That in south Cymry was more prepared for the attack. The government had taken little time to deduce that, when the Sorcerers had announced they would strike in one month, they had been lying.
In response, the security of each Facility was heightened further. Guards redoubled in their number, hiring from pools as low and populous as the London Slums to fill their ranks, though the guards already hired couldn't help but wrinkle their noses at their new colleagues as though the scent of mud and poverty still clung to them. The slum-dwellers hardly seemed to notice. Why would they? They were given a job in a clean environment, and though the prospect of facing a sorcerer was great it wouldn't deter them. Very little could distract them from the offer of even a temporary relief from their worldly struggles.

They didn't manage to beat the Sorcerers. If anything, it was as though the Sorcerers pulled out their stops, intensifying their strength and enhancing their efforts. They fought back against the guards, the authorities, the government and the Facility itself tooth and nail. Of perhaps more correctly magic and DiamondGrit, for many of the Sorcerers weren't just sorcerers. Amongst their ranks were those who didn't wield magic, who swung archaic swords, who shot with crossbows as if they were living in the middle ages, or even used the old-fashioned steel-bullet guns that would kill with a single shot to the head. None used the electrically charged weapons, which was telling of their magical status if nothing else, but they fought nonetheless. And the guards, the slum-dwellers called to duty, they were almost as terrified of the weapons wielded by the intruders as they were of the magic.

The fall of the South-Cymry Facility took longer, though. The Sorcerers still prevailed, leaving not a patient in their wake, and behind them they left a string of injured, of unconscious, even dead opponents. It bolstered the government and their employees little to know that they had succeeded in felling at least a few of the invaders in turn.

The fight had become real and the government reared its ugly, furious head in response. With OGA-laden Clips flung far and wide, with threats thinly hidden by warning and precaution, they set their Hunters upon the scent. The Sorcerers were a menace, destroying government property and the establishments installed to fix them.

They would have to be taken out. There was no other choice.
Chapter 22

Merlin burst from the Pits, a blast of magic caving the door open. He didn't have any other choice, really, though he didn't regret the necessity of doing so. Their entry points had been stemmed, guards and Hunters – Hunters, they now had **Hunters** at the **Pits** – barring their way. So Merlin had made the snap decision: they would go out the front door instead.

The message was thrown far and wide through their communication crystals, resonating with each party throughout the wide-reaching halls. They had become more refined over the past two weeks, though at their fourth infiltration they were hardly even needed. Each and every sorcerer and magical being knew what to do, knew what was required of them.

Retrieve their imprisoned comrades. And get out.

If only it was that easy.

Merlin had expected it. He and Arthur had even spoken of it, had known that the government wouldn't remain quiet for long, that they wouldn't allow their attacks upon the Pits and their retrieval missions to go on without equal resistance on their part. And though Merlin might have hoped for longer than two weeks of relative freedom – South-Cymry had been bad and he still ached for the loss of the dozen men and women they'd had to leave behind to save the living in exchange for the dead – but if he was to be realistic he knew they were lucky to have achieved so much so far with so little loss. The two largest Pits in the United Kingdom had been sucked dry. That was a triumph, if only one step on the way to victory.

Victory itself was daunting. How many Pits were there in the entire world? Merlin didn't know, but daunting as it was he knew that they would have to seek them all. That they would have to destroy them all. It was a Herculean task if ever he had seen one. One that they would hardly even get the opportunity to attempt if they didn't make it out of the Liverspool Pits.

Merlin led the charge through the broken doors, striding with more confidence than he truly felt out into the grounds beyond. They were vast, stretching for nearly half a kilometre before even reaching the outer walls. In that vastness pooled the guards.

Sparing a glance over his shoulder for his party – his party, as Arthur had finally agreed that perhaps, perhaps, it might be a good idea for him to take his own – Merlin raised his arm. He had a people to protect, comrades in arms to stand alongside, and more than two-dozen barely conscious 'patients' under his protection. There was no way that he would let the guards through, the white-clad, weapon wielding guards sprinting towards them alongside the bug-like, rippling muscle of the Hunters that interspersed them.

"Make for the wall, the closest point," Merlin said curtly. "Anyone wants to help, they're more than welcome to try. But getting out it our first priority."

"And staying out of your line of fire," Mellie murmured from behind him with a touch of approval in her voice.

Merlin allowed himself a grim smile. "That too." Then, pausing only long enough to draw a knife with his free hand, Merlin leapt forwards.

Electrical bullets fired. In a burst of fire, Merlin smouldered them in the air, the heat of his conjured flame singing the sparks of energy into non-existence. A score of whirring projectiles of some sort
that looked more like glowing arrows than anything, something Merlin had never seen before, followed in their wake. Merlin called forth a sweeping gale of magic, ribbons of power seeping through him in a rush of hot-cold flooding his gaze golden, and he swept them aside. Then they were upon him.

Merlin was on the defensive. It was his duty to ensure that his party got out safely with as many patients as they could realistically carry. So that was what he did. He conjured a shield that crackled and wavered with every strike of the rebounding electrical bullets in the same moment that he threw himself upon the Hunters and guards. His knives danced and sliced, he leapt on limbs powered stronger by magic of their own, sprung and twisted overhead, ploughed through their forces. A Zapper lashed towards him and he flung the wielder afar with a swipe of his hand. A trio of Hunters wielding Prods seemed to combine forces, targeting him solely, and he fell as much to knife-fighting as to magical defence. A throwing knife punctured the helmet in the third eye of one, the DiamondGrit of the blade slicing easily through the reinforced armour. In a spinning dance with his abruptly-drawn karambits in hand coupled with a blast of reinforcing magic to the blades he sliced through the Prod of another before disabling them with a blow to the head. And in a final upheaval of the very earth, he threw the third to the ground to leap upon her felled form and he drive his knife downwards in a well-aimed thrust to the throat.

He would have to thank Pole for the knives, he thought distractedly. They were perfect. Then he fell back on the attack.

There were countless guards, half as many Hunters, and Merlin fought them all. Not alone, however. Never alone. Mellie appeared to have loaded her rescued onto a staggering fellow's shoulders and had taken to openly defending him instead with darting, magic-driven speed and a Prod-like quarterstaff of her own. Another, Tomas Merlin thought it was, had somehow managing to throw invisible, physical walls of defence at every charging attacker, rebounding them to the ground as he made his way at a lumbering pace towards the wall with half a dozen limp and lolling patients drifting in tow. Ophelia appeared to have twice as many patients as anyone else but was racing with more speed than anyone else towards the walls, and Rik loped after her in leaping strides, his long legs chewing up the distance even as his spider-like arms swept around them both and scattered attackers far and wide.

Then the second party of Sorcerers arrived. And a third. The single-minded focus of the guards and Hunters alike was momentarily distracted.

Merlin still fought. He nodded an acknowledgement to Morgana as she leapt past him with a patient flung over her shoulder in a fireman hold and blasting a pair of opponents with one upraised hand. He saw Mordred briefly, Cerdan hounding with teeth bared at his side before, in a warping twist of shadows that he appeared to have perfected, he seemed to bodily disappear. And across the grounds, as Merlin twisted to avoid a string of fired bullets sent his way and to send a throwing knife spinning in retaliation, he saw Arthur arrive. Arthur, with sword swinging, leaping and thrusting and swiping with greater dexterity and more fluidity than he had ever demonstrated with a sword before. Merlin liked to think that his variability, his adaptability, had something to do with their practice sessions.

He barely had a moment to consider it, however, barely a second to glance towards Arthur to be sure he was alright, before he heard a call from Mellie over at the wall. "Emrys! Fucking – I can't break through it! The wall's too laced with – fucking – electricity!"

Merlin was galloping towards her in a second. He bounded bodily over the head of a Hunter, slowing only the smash the hilt of his knife into his temple and crumple the man from standing even through his helmet. He dove and twisted, swept a blasting tendril of fire towards a guard that appeared to have honed in on his target area, and drew up to a skidding halt at Mellie's side. She
turned her gaze upon him, dark eyes wide and fierce, before reaching out towards the wall to smack her palm against it. Only to draw it away in an instant with a hiss as a visible spark of electricity rippled across the surface of the wall.

"It's not even made of stone," she growled, shaking her wrist and sparing a glance over her shoulder for possible assailants. "I don't know what they made it out of but it's not stone. Some sort of conductor, and I can't touch it for long enough to break it down. My magic just bounces right off it."

Merlin too cast a glance over his shoulder, turning slightly just long enough to send a targeted earth tremor through the ground towards a squad of guards charging straight for them. Then he drew his gaze back from the felled attackers — attackers that the wind mage Ivy appeared to have set her sights upon — and back towards the wall. "Well, that might be a bit problematic."

"You don't say," Mellie drawled, and it said something of her rising panic that she abandoned the almost permanent touch of respect that Merlin had found that — uncomfortably — most sorcerers addressed him with. It would have been welcome to hear if it didn't carry such loaded connotations. "What do we do?"

"Obviously we won't break through the wall, then. We'll just go by another route. Over it, maybe. Or —"

"Under it."

Merlin glanced to his side, towards Lee who had just drawn up at his side. Lee who, for all he was panting and sported a graze upon his brow that had apparently only just stopped bleeding, was smiling. A wolfish smile that bared his crooked teeth and crinkled his eyes. "I got this."

"I'll help," Merlin immediately offered, to which Lee shrugged. "You pick a point — you're the earth mage of the two of us."

"Sure thing," Lee said with a widening of his smile. Then he turned his attention towards the wall. "That mangled stone, right there. Chipped a bit."

"How deep do we go?" Mellie asked from Merlin's other side. She had quickly steadied herself, hardened herself, when a target and plan of attack was in mind.

"They'll have built it down into the pretty far, I'd wager," Lee replied and then, with a brief haziness in his eyes that Merlin took to be sending his magical senses into the ground, he nodded. "Yeah, it's about ten feet down. Not too bad, but —"

"Duck!"

The exclamation came from Rik and, as one, Merlin, Mellie and Lee all dropped to the ground. Merlin heard Mellie cry out but couldn't spare a moment to see if she was alright. He spun, rolling, came to his feet beneath a hail of bullets that clattered and buzzed as they struck the wall behind him. Then he loosed his knives. He flung fire. He swept aside the charging figures with thrusts of his phantom hands of magic and compressed the helmet of a Hunter with a strained grunt and a crush of his hand. They fell to the ground an instant later.

Merlin spun to Mellie the second he was sure they were felled. Mellie, who had fallen to the ground alongside the crouches of the rest of the Sorcerers around her and was clutching at her torso with face contorted into a scowl of pain. As soon as Merlin reached for her, however, she snarled and bated his hands away. "It was just a graze. Just a fucking graze. I won't —" she winced as she raised her hand off her side, revealing the split tunic and faintly charred skin beneath, "- I won't be able to
use my magic for a bit, don't reckon, but I'm alright."

A moment of hesitation was all Merlin could afford. Only a moment before he nodded curtly, turned to Lee and gestured at him to begin again. Lee nodded his understanding, smile fallen from his face, and immediately set to tearing the ground apart. Merlin followed his lead, pouring his magic into the earth to fling stone and earth, rock and minerals high.

Within minutes a tunnel yawned beneath the wall.

"Right, that's it. Go, go, go, get out." Merlin drew aside from the entrance to the tunnel, sweeping his arm in a beckoning gesture to the increasingly large group of Sorcerers that circled the escape, each laden with their helpless comrades. "Get your arses moving, people, we don't have a second to lose."

They did. The Sorcerers were nothing if not efficient, and with the camaraderie and coordination of those that had been working alongside one another far longer than two weeks, they flooded into the tunnel.

Merlin watched them leave, his attention snapping every other moment around him, sweeping over the Hunters and guards that, though their numbers had thinned, still plagued their forces. He blasted countless opponents from their feet with his throwing knives as they made a break for the fleeing Sorcerers. Just as many were knocked down with fire, with a shock of lightning, with physical force like a giant's hand tossing them from their feet.

And then he saw Arthur.

Arthur was like a whirlwind of steel, ducking and dodging, rising to thrust a stab through the chest of an opponent and spinning a moment later to completely lop the head off another. But he was surrounded. The idiot had gotten himself surrounded, drawing his opponents in a veritable moat of the dead and wounded around him and still drawing more to distract from the fleeing Sorcerers. And, fools that they were, the guards and the Hunters appeared to have fallen for his attempt. He was drawing still more in and, even as Merlin watched, it was only chance that saw him missing the fire of an electrical bullet.

Merlin was sprinting towards him before he even had a moment to consider his actions. Slum-dwellers were innately gifted with a sense of self-preservation. Merlin had always possessed that sense, for as long as he could remember. It was a part of him, like another organ, and saddened as he may be by the hunts, the chasing of fellow sorcerers and those with magic, he had never been able to push himself to stand directly in the line of fire and take the bullet for them. Not even for Edwin – that had been different, hesitant, desperate and cautious.

But that was before. Before the Pits. Before Merlin had been forced to confront on the basest of levels the depravity that was being forced upon his people. They weren't treated like slaves, or dogs, or the lowest scum of the human population. They were the enemy. There was no sympathy for those who were deemed 'dangerous'. They had to be destroyed, like a virus, a plague to be exterminated since no matter what, the Doctors of the Pits couldn't discern how to rid them of the disease they called magic.

They didn't know. They didn't understand. It wasn't a disease. There was no getting rid of it. Magic was life. Every attempt to bereft those who possessed it of their magic inevitably ended in death.

Merlin knew that. It was why he avoided the Hunters. It was why he so feared the Pits, had done for his entire life and with just reason. It was why, on the nights that he heard the baying of a Hunt, the distinctive "Hut-Hut-HUT" of a chase, he didn't rise from his poor excuse for a bed and race to the
assistance of his fellow. It had been a desperate enough flight to push himself to go to Edwin's aid. Desperate, and inevitably foolish, for it had achieved nothing.

But this was different. This was Arthur. Arthur, who Merlin knew he had loved for generations. Who he had loved across the centuries and that he knew he would die for without a moment of hesitation. Maybe that was how his father had felt. Maybe, in some small way, it was also what Kip had felt, all those years ago when he'd sacrificed himself. Merlin didn't know. He didn't have the headspace to think of it. All he knew was that he couldn't loose Arthur again. Never.

He fell upon the forces attacking Arthur. He swept through them with knives drawn, sprung upon guards and Hunters alike and slashed until blood physically spurted. He exploded the head of a Hunter in his helmet with the combustion of heat, flung aside an attacking stream of guards with a smack of his phantom hand. He barely felt the force of a blunt end of as Prod as it struck his midsection, didn't pause to regain his breath before he broke the attacker in two with a well-aimed downward cut of his arm. He wasn't even sure if his foe fell to knife of magic.

And at his back, Arthur fought. Arthur, with his swinging sword, with his hard, focused determination, his jaw tightened with the acceptance of possible defeat yet fighting through such acceptance nonetheless. It was the expression he always wore when he fought, Merlin knew. He didn't need to turn towards him to know his wore it.

Merlin didn't feel fear. He didn't even feel anger. He just knew purpose. Protect Arthur at all costs. And, on the fringes of that overwhelming necessity, to stem the forces of their opponents until the rest of the Sorcerers could get out. That was his goal. That was his aim. A glance towards the hastily erected tunnel proved that, for the most part, his comrades had made it out. Some, it appeared, had even returned. Merlin thought he saw Mordred and Morgana both make a break towards them.

It didn't matter. Merlin would just keep fighting for as long as he had to. As long as he could. Which, he knew, weren't exactly the same things. For when he caught sight of the Hunter from the corner of his eyes, the Hunter who hadn't charged towards them but stood at a distance with a pair of electrical guns raised and pointed at Arthur, there was no stopping him. There would never be any stopping him. He would take the blow, the bullet, the attack, for Arthur as he hadn't been able to so long ago.

When the gun fired, Merlin didn't cast a shield. He couldn't, not with his knife embedded in the chest of one foe and his magic focused keenly upon wrenching a quartet of others from their feet to throw them to the ground. It was all he could do to launch himself at Arthur, to bowl him bodily to the ground in a crashing heat.

The bullet struck hard. It struck hard and dead centre. Merlin didn't even have a moment to cry out before his body seized, his magic shorted, and a blast of searing pain threw him from consciousness. Everything went black.

Arthur was leaping from the Skimmer before it had even slowed to a stop. In an instant he was swinging himself to the ground, dragging Merlin along with him. He didn't pause to wait for the rest of the Sorcerers, not even for Morgana, even though he knew that, in the absence of Merlin to act as his mutual commander, he was solely responsible for them.

Not in that moment. He didn't care about his responsibilities. There was nothing more important in that moment that Merlin.

Arthur sprinted as fast as his legs could carry him towards Nimueh's estate, Merlin slung onto his shoulder. The doors embedded in the wall were wide open, anticipating of their return, and Arthur barely even had the notion to be grateful for the fact. Even knowing as he did that he would have
cursed Nimueh to hell and back had she not ensured as much.

It had been a long trip back to the estate. Not really all that much longer than it had been to Liverspool Pits, even accounting for their necessary shaking of any tails, setting false leads even as they masked their own passage with thick layers of magic. But it had felt like it. It had felt so long. Even longer for the fact that, in the entire time, Merlin hadn't awoken once.

Electrical bullets were deadly to a sorcerer. To anyone with magic, though Arthur knew that it effected him less so than others. That nothing could even touch the magic that supposedly settled within him, least of all himself. That it couldn't even be detected. He'd seen grazes that, from any other missile, would have been dismissed as barely a scratch fell the ablest of the Sorcerers. He had seen a shot to the shoulder knock another out like a blow to the head, stunning them senseless and shorting their abilities to use magic any further for a week hence. Perhaps that was the worst, Arthur fathomed. He'd seen the effects of some attacks, injuries acquired from breaking into the Pits, and the worst were those that short-circuited their magic. Even worse were those that few he'd seen that shorted it permanently, that installed a transparent wall where the sorcerer could smell the magic, could taste it, could see it just on the horizon but couldn't touch it. Couldn't use it.

Those were the worst. And they were always when a bullet struck somewhere that, even without the electrical charge, would sorely injure the wounded party.

Merlin had been struck in the back. Right to the spine. The spreading scar of the burn looked like a ruddy, blossoming flower in the very centre of his back; ugly, painful, pulsing. And Merlin hadn't woken up since he'd been hit. Since he'd taken the bullet for Arthur, as he'd seen it at the last minute fired towards him.

Arthur was furious at Merlin. *Furious*, just as much as he was terrified for him. He took the bullet for him? Was he an idiot? Not only was he taking the bullet, would he be inflicted with an injury that was aimed at Arthur, but it was an electrical bullet. Arthur hated to think what that could mean. What it could have done to Merlin.

It felt horribly familiar. Horribly similar to what Arthur remembered of before, of the first time he'd infiltrated the Pits when he had first drawn Merlin from the clutches of the Doctors. They were different circumstances entirely and yet it still so similar. Still fleeing from the Pits. Still escaping the same enemies. Merlin still knocked on deaths door as Arthur raced to whatever help he could find. *Anything. Anyone.*

Mordred ran at his side this time, however. Mordred who he still couldn't quite come to accept the presence of yet barely even noticed as he loped alongside him, his monster of a hound at his heel. Morgana, too. Morgana ran on Arthur's other side, with a long stride faster than Arthur had ever seen her move, in this life or the Past. Her face was tight with worry, not so much for a friend – for companionable as they had become over the past weeks it was not quite friendship – but concerned nonetheless. For Merlin. No, for Emrys. For the figurehead that so many people put their confidence in. He had become something of a idol for the Sorcerers, a being of confidence, of surety, of power that they could depend upon. Arthur knew that it wouldn't be only Morgana who was concerned for his wellbeing. Far from it.

Arthur didn't care about that. He didn't care about any of them. He cared only for Merlin and for the possibility of his injury, the loss of his magic that would be worse to him than the prospect of losing his life, Arthur knew. He barely managed to spare a glance at him, slung as he was over Arthur's shoulders, but he knew he hadn't awoken. Knew it with certainty for the pain that grew within his chest.

*Please, please be alright. I can't lose you, please, I can't lose you. Not after all we've been through.*
Not after what we've only just begun together. In his mind, Arthur knew it was as much the relationship that they shared, a relationship that was still so new, as their rebellion. As their resistance and the rescue missions. It was more than that. Arthur hardly even cared for the resistance at all, wouldn’t care half as much if it weren’t for Merlin.

Merlin, who had come to mean more to him than he could ever have anticipated. More than the world to him. Because in that moment, as he bounded across the pavers of the courtyard, making for the opening doors of the Fortress, Arthur abruptly knew – before, he had needed Merlin just as he had needed Morgana. They were what he held onto, what kept him sane. But now it was so much more than that. Arthur needed Merlin for him. Him entirely.

They'd nearly reached the doors when Aithusa arrived. For once, Arthur barely even flinched as she crashed to the ground from on high with an almighty BOOM, talons raking across the pavers and scoring the stone like countless other marks already adorning it. Arthur wouldn't have spared her a second thought because Gaius, he had to get to Gaius, Gaius could fix Merlin, could make him well except that Aithusa didn't let herself be ignored. In a snake like extension of her long, rippling neck, she barred their access to the estate.

"What is this?"

Her tone rumbled through the ground, rich and deep, and immediately commanded attention. It would have stopped Arthur in his tracks had he not already skidded to a halt. Halted only because if he hadn't he would have crashed bodily into the scaled snout of imposing dragon.

Arthur was panting. Panting and frantic and he couldn't even spare the energy, the attention, to compose an articulate answer. Thankfully, in that moment, Morgana stepped up in his place. He should have anticipated it, really. Morgana was a child of the dragon in all but blood, had assumed the very name of dragon as her own to be known as the Drakon herself. Arthur had heard their sorcerers whisper of it, knew it to be true. She was almost as much a force to be reckoned with in her own right as was Merlin in his persona as Emrys.

Morgana started forwards, raising a hand to Aithusa's snout with a confident casualness that would have left anyone else flinching to contemplate attempting. "It's Merlin, he was hit –"

"Is he killed?"

The cold, almost heartless question struck Arthur like a physical blow. "He's not dead," he snapped with more confidence than he ever would have thought himself capable of when facing a dragon before. "He's not."

Aithusa didn't look the least put out by his response, which was almost a surprise in itself. "And his magic?"

"We don't know," Morgana hastened to reply, as though she felt it necessary to do so before Arthur could get a word in. "He's been unconscious since he was hit."

"The weapon?"

"An electrical bullet."

Aithusa hissed low and long, enough that a few startled cries sounded from behind Arthur. He didn't glance over his shoulder; he hadn't even realised that the rest of the Sorcerers were approaching from behind but he didn't care. His focus had shifted towards Merlin, towards his head that rested upon Arthurs shoulder, hanging limply, and he couldn't seem to shake his gaze away. Please be alright,
"Where?" Like the slithering, giant snake she half resembled, Aithusa wove her neck forwards until Arthur could feel the gust of her acrid breath blowing upon him. It said something for his rising panic, his fear for Merlin, that he barely even considered her proximity. He couldn't take his eyes from Merlin, felt himself physically twitching with the urge to race around Aithusa and up to Gaius' infirmary.

"On his back," Morgana supplied, slipping around Arthur so that she stood behind him and gestured as though Aithusa needed the direction of where exactly his back was. "Right on the spinal column. I was worried – I thought, there might be – I don't know if –"

Aithusa's hiss cut Morgana's words short. "His magic will have been sliced in half by such a strike."

That was all she said. Those handful of words, accompanied by a hateful gleam to her eyes that Arthur, shaken momentarily from his sidelong peering at Merlin, was wholly relieved was not directed towards him. If stares could kill…

The dragon queen's words had an effect upon not just Arthur, not just Morgana and Mordred who actually uttered something of an audible whimper that perfectly fit the absolute horror of Aithusa's words. Gasps and cries from behind Arthur, from behind Aithusa through the doors of the Fortress, rung through the courtyard.

"No!"

"You mean Emrys is -"

"- not possible, not his magic -"

"He can't have -"

"What will this mean? What will it -?"

"Please no, oh, please no -"

Heartfelt misery rung through their voices. Pained, horrified, terrified even. Arthur couldn't help but instantly resent the sources of those voices. What would happen to them? What would Merlin be without his magic? He nearly turned and spat at them, wishing for the first time that he could actually drawn upon his magic to truly intimidate them. How dare they! Even knowing as Arthur did that Merlin would be broken, would be torn apart, by the loss of his magic – how dare they! This was Merlin's life at stake, Arthur's Merlin, and they were worried about what would happen to them!

His loathed their words, sincere as they were, even as Arthur knew that his own thoughts were hardly nobler. He couldn't lose Merlin either. For a different reason, but still. He couldn't lose him.

Arthur's voice audibly wavered when he spoke, something that he'd never heard from himself before. "You – Aithusa, dragon queen, what can you – what can you do? Can you help him?"

"A dragon isn't gifted with the art of healing," Morgana instantly replied, her face crumpling slightly as Arthur turned towards her with a glare. She didn't retract her words however, only continuing in a low voice. "That is not the magic of a dragon. They can't even intentionally use their magic."

"But Merlin's magic is at stake and -"

"And a wizard without his magic won't last long," Mordred murmured, pain thick in his voice.
"Without his magic…"

Arthur swallowed thickly. Mordred was right. He hated to admit it, but he was right. He'd seen it in those Sorcerers who had been struck, who'd had their magic forcibly taken from them by a blast of electricity. His hands tightened upon Merlin's as they hung over his shoulders, tugging him closer to him where he was slung across his back as though sheer force of will could save him. He turned desperate eyes up to Aithusa. "Please. Surely you can do something."

"Arthur, there is nothing she can do —"

"Morgana."

Instantly, the second Aithusa's voice sounded, turning her broad snout towards Morgana, Arthur's sister was silenced. She pressed her lips together, face wrinkled with worry, before turning back to glance at Merlin as Aithusa did the same to Arthur. "Morgana is right. I am not a healer."

"Please. Surely you can do something."

Again, far from a perhaps anticipated indignation, Aithusa only nodded her head at Arthur's interruption. "I am not a healer," she repeated. "I cannot deliberately use my magic. But perhaps for my kin it would be different. Perhaps only."

Arthur stared at Aithusa for a moment. Stared in momentary incomprehension. Then hope sparked, despite her emphasis upon 'maybe'.

Merlin was a Dragonlord. A Dragonlord which, apparently, meant he was kin to dragons. Arthur was still stunned by the realisation, by the revelation, and could barely conceive it. It was one thing to accept that Merlin had magic – one very big thing that had taken a full three years to acclimatise to – but entirely another to think that he was dragon kin. Truly kin, unlike even Morgana for all of her bonds to Aithusa.

Which meant… "What does that mean?"

Aithusa only hummed in the back of her throat for a moment, a low rumble that sent thrumming vibrations through the ground. "It means, child of Avalon, that there is a chance. A possibility that perhaps, just maybe, I the flow of my magic can erase the damage afflicted." She seemed to frown intensely. "A chance only."

For once Arthur barely even registered the name that Aithusa afforded him. The name that had him gnawing over contemplatively at every spare moment, even when he thought he had concluded what it truly meant. With as much gentleness as he could manage, Arthur swung Merlin around from his back and immediately lowered him to the ground. He crouched at his side, hands unable in that moment to withdraw from touching him, his shoulder, his back, touching the side of his face and God he felt cold. Not distinctly cold but cold for a sorcerer. Arthur knew what that meant. He knew it could only bode well for disaster.

He turned pleading eyes upon Aithusa. "Please," was all he could manage.

Aithusa hummed once more, another deep rumble. Then with a shuffle of her monstrous feet a lashing of her tail and a rustle of her wings, she trained her attention solely upon Merlin. Her glowing golden eyes seemed to swirl brighter, like those of a sorcerer using magic, and as she lowered her snout down until it actually touched Merlin's prone form. Arthur could swear they sparked golden fire.

The courtyard was silent. Silent and watchful. Arthur knew they had an audience, possibly even the
majority of sorcerers under Gaius and Alice who worked the infirmary bearing witness to what was happening. Arthur wasn't sure. He didn't glance away from Merlin for a second, however, staring at the pale skin of his cheeks, at the laxness of his features, the limp slump of limbs across the ground. He looked remarkably feeble, hardly seeming to breathe and utterly defenceless. It was gut-wrenching. Arthur couldn't withdraw his touch, a protective grasp, regardless of how closely it positioned him to Aithusa – which should have been terrifying but it wasn't. He had only enough thought-space for terror for one thing at that moment and it wasn't dragons.

A long pause extended. Long and static, with absolutely no movement or change. Aithusa didn't even seem to breathe, the only movement in her giant form that loomed like a tower over Arthur and Merlin both being in the swirling gold of her gaze. Nothing. Nothing. No motion. No sound. No flicker of magic that Arthur could perceive. Until –

A brief flash of golden light. Nothing huge, barely noticeable, really, except that it arose from the point of contact between dragon and Dragonlord. Arthur was close enough to hear the heaving exhalation Aithusa emitted, warm and rich and smelling of something other than the acrid tang of flame. Something sweet. Something full of life.

Then she drew away. She withdrew her contact, arching her neck and shaking her head slightly as her eyes faded of their vivid gold. "There. I believe that is the best I will be able to do." Her voice, even to Arthur's ears, sounded faintly wearied, and a part of him was incredulous at that. A dragon? Wearied? "I believe his magic is healed enough from my own to be able to complete the rest of its recovery in due course."

She hummed again, almost contemplatively. Then, in a shuffle of wings, a slow sweep of her neck, she turned from then and lumbered across the courtyard to where Arthur could only guess where. Perhaps the nest of rubble and sunlight she'd made for herself, he didn't know. He didn't really care. Not all that much.

Only enough to be grateful. "Thank you," Arthur uttered after her with heartfelt gratitude. He couldn't spare a moment more than that, a moment to look at Aithusa, to watch as Morgana hastened to her side with her expression fading into relief or to witness the audience they had acquired flow into action with their usual post-infiltration efficiency. His focus was all for Merlin. Merlin, as he breathed – he actually breathed deeply, almost comfortably – and as Arthur bowed over him long enough to gather his still unconsciously limp form in his arms, holding him to his chest. Just to feel his weight. Just to know his presence, to know that he was alive. That he would be alive.

Arthur had nearly lost Merlin. Truly nearly lost him, not once but twice. He'd be damned if he was going to let it happen again. He would make sure of it. He would do absolutely anything.
Chapter 23

Gaius' infirmary was the largest room in Nimueh's estate with the exception of the great hall. This was due largely to the fact that it wasn't really one room at all but more a succession of rooms connected by door-less archways wide enough for four people to walk abreast.

They were comfortable rooms. Or at least, comfortable relative to most rooms in New World living abodes. Arthur had never really taken to them, not like he preferred those from times gone by – in the past, rooms too were open and spacious, but they at least were cathedral-like in their openness, or of the stony wideness and tall windows of the castle at Camelot, the resident church, some of the richer manors held by the wealthy.

The New World was different. The high ceilings looked too artificial, without even the heavy stone behind the elaborately carved cornices. The walls were largely bare, without adornment but for the occasional frameless picture that looked embedded into the walls, the curtained 'windows' that, when those curtains were drawn open, revealed no such windows behind at all. A keepsake of the past, Arthur had been told they were. A remnant from a better time where windows were actually possible, where the sun wasn't so abusive as to make the possibility of its radiance seeping indoors a danger.

The infirmary was vaguely better, and Arthur fathomed that was because it was more cluttered, with less of an abandoned feel. Workbenches lined the walls, draws loaded with supplies from blankets and plump foam pillows to pharmaceuticals and bandage pads and gauze, syringes so wrapped and sealed against contamination they were a trial to break open. The lights overhead were of a softer fluorescence, more yellow than white, and curtains of false windows lined an entire wall in each room. The beds were spaced widely enough for the positioning of quietly humming machines that were linked to each patient or the small trolleys delivering meals or medication. That, and a chair or two on either side of the bed. Comfortable chairs, plush, like the one that Arthur found himself in.

He had been sitting at Merlin's bedside for the past twenty-four hours. He'd experienced a significant amount of time in the infirmary over the past weeks, as much to meet the people he'd helped to rescue as because Merlin simply wanted to be there. For his friend Edwin who was still bedridden. For the woman Freya who, Arthur was faintly horrified to realise, was afflicted with a curse that turned her into a rabid beast – one that, apparently, held no such concerns for most of the sorcerers, especially after a young Whisperer had appeared at her side that first night and actually calmed her with a word.

This time was different, however. Longer. More personal. Arthur had even slept there when the urge had fallen upon him – a surprising urge, for he hadn't even been sure that he would be able to sleep. But he had. After what Aithusa had done, some sort of miracle that he couldn't quite understand and thought he never would, his rising hysteria had eased.

Hysteria. That's what it was. It was what Gaius had called him becoming nearly a month ago, when he'd been searching for Merlin throughout Nimueh's estate and could find him. Really? Hysterical? Arthur had never been one to panic but… but somehow Merlin induced that in him. Not so much in the Past but now. Was it because he loved him? Was that it? Or was it the sheer terror of losing someone from his Past in Albion, the Past he remembered, and was the only thing that had sustained him for the three years between when he'd awoken from the lake and when he'd found Merlin.

Hysterical. Unbelievable.

But Arthur couldn't deny that he was calmer now. Calmed even further when Gaius had taken a look
at Merlin, had confirmed that there appeared to be no lingering damage from the electrical bullet and that he was likely still sleeping only in recovery of the energy lost to the healing that Aithusa had somehow enacted. Arthur was calmer, but he still couldn't leave his side. Just in case.

Which was how he found himself blinking groggily into wakefulness in the comfortable chair of the infirmary the day after they had infiltrated the Pits at Liverspool. Dragging himself awake, Arthur drew his gaze around the spacious room that wasn't quite as starkly discomforting as those in the rest of the estate. He was surprised to notice that it was already bustling with muted activity, that Gaius and Alice both were up and working alongside at least a dozen other sorcerers and several pale, faintly glowing individuals who were apparently a descendants of unicorns. Arthur didn't quite understand their very existence given that, apart from their ethereal glow they appeared entirely human, but he didn't question it. Not aloud. And he wouldn't dispute their presence even if he'd had a problem with it; they were helping with the healing after all.

From a glance, Arthur could discern that the entirety of the rescued from their most recent endeavour had been outfitted with their own beds. There were now several hundred of those rescued throughout the estate, though only those in a more critical were still in the infirmary. That totalled somewhere around a hundred, those who had spent more than five or six years being put to the torture and had actually survived. Apparently precious few lasted beyond that duration anyway, with Mordred's old mentor Iseldir being perhaps the oldest.

The rest were afforded independent rooms, most sharing with several others as much to minimise the dwindling of space as for the support of their fellows. They, unfortunately, were not provided the liberty of the coma that Merlin had been induced into. They couldn't be, not when at any moment they may have to up and leave. Only those in such a serious state that they would likely fall prey to heart failure should they not be so at induced were kept under. The rest were ordered to bed rest until the proved capable of more.

It was a sorry situation. Arthur had come to terms with the presence of the weak, the feeble, the fragile and the broken as they gradually developed the confidence, the capability and the inclination to rise from their beds. But even so, nothing could quite prepare him for the visible trauma that was pervading the estate. Most of the sorcerers that hadn't been in the Pits were resolved. They were determined and thrust aside the personal woes that would weight them down, that would inhibit their ability to fight, to save, to protect. But those rescued from the torture of the 'Doctors' weren't so capable. Arthur could hardly blame them. How could they be? Most had been through worse than any human could ever imagined.

It did dawn upon Arthur as he witnessed the shattered people just how well Merlin had dealt with his own experience. His own trauma and how he had managed at all. Arthur had seen some of the others, the men and women, some barely more than children, who could only be described as broken. As unhinged. Some would stare listlessly before them, as though they were unaware of what was going on in their surrounds. Others would attempt to climb from their beds, to move in the motions that had been stolen from them for so long only to sink to the floor and dissolve into tears or despair for the feebleness of their bodies. And still others would drift outside simply to stare at the sky, to perceive real light, even if it was considered dangerous to do so.

And then some would scream. Nimueh's estate had grown as used to the sound of cries, of weeping, of hearty sobs as memories of tortures escaped rose to the fore within their splintered minds. They didn't like to be touched – just as Merlin hadn't – and many seemed unable even to look at anyone else, let alone speak.

Merlin, Arthur had decided over the past weeks, was incredible for how well he had handled his own recollections. It made Arthur wonder how much he was actually hiding, how much he was
keeping behind closed doors and out of sight, for it would have been impossible to truly recover in such a short time. He knew in sleep that Merlin suffered, even if he wasn't woken by the nightmares that caused him to tremble, to whimper, to toss in his sheets. Incredible. And he'd been in the Pits for six years.

Arthur found himself staring at Merlin. Staring as he did so often these days, because he couldn't help himself. Marvelling, really, and with such deep thoughtfulness that he didn't even notice when Morgana arrived beside him until she spoke. "He's still asleep, then?"

Arthur glanced up at his sister – for she would always be his sister, even if she didn't yet know it – and offered her a small smile. "Good morning."

"It's afternoon, actually," Morgana sighed, easing herself down into the chair at Arthur's side. She had cleaned herself up from the previous day, had changed her clothes into another outfit that Nimueh had somehow managed to rake together for their growing number, though still maintained her wrapping of the shabby, patchy cloak around her shoulders. She'd drawn her tangled hair back, too, tying it with a cord so that only the odd, curling tendril dangled before her eyes. It was strange, Arthur thought, every time he looked upon her. So much of her features were the same, so much of how she acted was the same. And yet other parts were different. Entirely different, with her openness about her magic being just one of them.

Nodding his head, Arthur turned back to Merlin. "I see. I suppose that's why the infirmary is abuzz with activity."

"It always is."

"I know. I just didn't realise how late in the day it was."

Morgana settled back into her seat, crossing her legs. "I came to check on you a couple of hours ago but you looked comfortable enough sleeping in your chair."

"What can I say, they're comfortable chairs." Arthur patted the arm of his chair with mocking fondness. "A pillow wouldn't have gone astray, however."

"You could have gotten yourself one."

"I could have."

"Don't expect me to get it for you."

"I would never."

"Good. Just so you know your place."

Arthur's smile widened as he turned towards his sister. He had missed this, missed it without even realising it. He and Morgana had always had something of a love-hate relationship, even before they'd known they were siblings. Teasing, bantering, jesting and exchanging insults that were more a practice at verbal warfare than anything else; he'd missed it all sorely, and had only realised when it had been returned to him.

He and Morgana had spent precious little time actually talking. There was so much to talk about, Arthur knew, and yet so little that they could truly discuss, because the Past that Arthur remembered Morgana hadn't yet recalled. Arthur wasn't sure he wanted her to remember it at all – what if she did fall into a fit of insanity once more? The reactions to the Past that most of the reincarnated he'd met suggested that she was more than likely to simply acknowledge her Past actions and accept them as
simply memories. But what if? What if it was more?

Arthur had to forcibly thrust those thoughts aside. He had longed to find his sister, searched for her nearly – yes, nearly, he could admit that now – as ardently as he had for Merlin. And yet now that they were together there was a definite sense of awkwardness. Of distance that Arthur wasn't sure they would ever cross. Morgana herself had been hesitant, close-lipped, as though she didn't know how to approach discussing the Past that Arthur knew but she was not yet aware of. It had largely evolved into a single, short conversation.

"So you died. But you weren't reincarnated."

"No. My case is somewhat exceptional in that regard, I believe."

"You... you really died?"

"To me, it felt like only about three and a half years ago."

"Three and a half years ago?" Morgana's face had twisted into an expression Arthur couldn't quite recognise but was touched with at least a hint of sorrow. She'd dropped her gaze and pressed her lips together firmly as though holding back an upwelling of emotions. "So you died. So young..." Then she'd paused, taken a tentative gasping breath and glanced up at Arthur. "How... did it happen?"

Arthur had stared at her. How did it happen? What could he say to that? How could he tell her that it had been her that had effectively killed him? He couldn't, that's how. No, more correctly, he wouldn't. He wouldn't do that to her, not before she was ready.

He hadn't reply, but Morgana had seemed to understand his hesitancy to a degree. "I knew, didn't I? I knew why you died?"

Slowly, Arthur had nodded. "You did."

"So I was still alive?"

Arthur paused. Well, that was an awkward question if ever he'd heard one. Morgana hadn't still been alive when he'd actually died but... Arthur nodded anyway.

Morgana had drawn a deep breath. "Alright then. I'll know in due course, I suppose. I'll get around to it. You don't have to tell me." Then she'd adopted a small smile, filled with false cheer. "I'm sure you've been cautioned about talking of the Past with other before, yes?"

"I have been told once or twice."

Morgana had actually laughed at that, and it had only been a little strained. They'd hardly spoken of anything, Past or past, since. Arthur wanted to – he wanted to hear of Morgana's life, of what she'd done, of how she'd come to be so bonded with a dragon of all things, but he didn't ask. He wasn't even sure how to ask. Besides, they'd barely had a chance to speak alone anyway, what with the planning of the infiltrations and Arthur's admittedly compulsive desire to keep Merlin within sight at almost every possible instant. It was a bit of a problem, true, but then Arthur had always been the protective sort, had always been overly concerned with those he cared about. The same had been with Gwen – he'd hardly been capable of anything but bowing before her demand to accompany him on campaign, even if it was only to remain in the hospital tent with Gaius.

Sitting alongside Morgana at Merlin's bedside was the first chance they'd really had to simply sit down alongside one another in relative privacy. Arthur should have made more time for it perhaps, but there hadn't been time. Between infiltrations was but a couple of days, and those days were spent
ensuring that the rescued were well cared for, that those who had been injured were similarly seen to, that the plans for the next infiltration were evolving and adapting in accordance with what they'd learnt from their most recent mission. Time was of the essence – the longer they waited between rescue missions the more time the government and the authorities would have to evolve their security systems. It would only get harder from hereon out.

They didn't have the time. And yet, even knowing that, Arthur couldn't bring himself to leave Merlin's bedside just in case. He knew it was foolish, that it wasn't how a war leader, how a king, should behave. But he wasn't a war leader any more, even if her was leading the resistance, and he certainly wasn't a king. Arthur didn't realise how much he'd changed until that moment.

"You were in the infirmary this morning, then?" Arthur asked by way of making conversation. "Sorry I didn't see you."

Morgana only gave a small, chiding smile. "You were asleep, Arthur. You were tired." Then she shrugged, slouching back into her seat in a way that the Morgana from Camelot would never have done. "Besides, I wasn't here to see you. I came to see my sister."

"Your sister." Arthur's gaze drew unconsciously towards a bed only four down from Merlin's. The sleeping figure of Morgause Drakon, still skeletally thin and with the greyness only just beginning to fade from her cheeks, made only a slight hump beneath her blankets. The machine at her side hummed quietly, attached with more cords and cables that Arthur could recall being used for Merlin. Morgause was one of those that was kept under, her risk of falling into an even more critical state only heightened should she awaken. It was another reason that Arthur and Morgana had spent little time together over the past weeks; Morgana had spent every other minute at her sister's bedside. She might reprimand Arthur for sleeping in a chair in the infirmary, but she herself hadn't even bothered to claim a room; every night she spent in the infirmary herself anyway.

"You knew her, didn't you?"

Arthur glanced sidelong at his sister. Her gaze was settled upon him, faintly thoughtful, slightly frowning though more in consideration than accusation. She seemed to be like that, Morgana. Different from what Arthur had seen of most with magic, she seemed tentatively eager to talk to people of the Past, though would withdraw like a turtle tucking their head back into their shell at a moment's notice. Merlin said it was like that sometimes, that sometimes they simply needed to talk about it. He'd told Arthur of how he'd been the same, with Mordred, with Edwin, with Freya and Gaius when they'd met once more. Arthur could only assume Morgana was the same. It was a pity, really, considering so much of what she asked was dangerous territory to explore.


"Did I meet her?"

"You… did."

"Ah. I'm assuming this is one of those sensitive topics?" Morgana nodded her head knowingly. It was a surprisingly wise gesture was one so young; she was only just sixteen, Arthur had discovered, a disconcerting realisation in and of itself. Morgana had been older than him in the Past.

"Not sensitive so much as complicated," Arthur explained. "I wouldn't even really know how to start explaining it."

"Then don't," Morgana suggested. "You don't have to. I'll remember it eventually, provided I don't die before my time."
"Hm," Arthur hummed neutrally. He wasn't sure he wanted Morgana to remember that either. Drawing his gaze back to Morgause – he hadn't even been aware that it had settled once more upon Merlin, as though his subconsciousness had needed to check that he was still there, still breathing, even without his acknowledgment – he frowned slightly. "You're close with your sister, then?"

"In this life, or those before?"

"Both. Either." As Morgana raised her eyebrow at him, he raised a hand, brushing aside his question as inconsequential. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. I just feel like we haven't really had a chance to speak yet. I'd like to know how you've been, what you've been doing. After all, you are my –"

Arthur only just managed to catch himself before he said "sister". He paused clearing his throat as Morgana's eyebrow rose further, a smirk touching her lips. "Your what, Arthur?"

"My friend."

"Friend?"

"Friend. Sometimes. When you're not being a royal pain in my arse."

Morgana chuckled, reaching out to punch him with pointed knuckles. It actually hurt a little, for the angle and the force of her punch, and Arthur reflected that such was another difference between the Morgana of the Past and the Present. She settled herself back down in her seat a moment later, however, tucking one leg up beneath her in a pose that embodied her age more appropriately than had her wisdom. "I don't mind telling you if you want to hear."

"I do," Arthur replied immediately.

Morgana's smile spread once more, softer this time, and she nodded. "Alright. But then you'll have to tell me about you two when I'm done."

"Us two?" Arthur asked, though he knew of who she spoke even before she gestured between he and Merlin.

"You two," she emphasised pointedly. "Don't think you're fooling anyone that there's nothing between the both of you."

"We weren't trying to fool anyone," Arthur muttered.

"Right."

"We weren't."

"Right."

"Shut up, Morgana."

Morgana only grinned once more. Then she propped an elbow onto the arm of her chair, dropped her chin onto her palm and turned once more towards Morgause. "Morgause is my sister, yeah, but she's sort of more my mother, actually."

"You're mother?" Arthur felt his eyebrows rise in surprise.

"Not like that," Morgana corrected. "Not literally, of course. It's just that she's fifteen years older than me and, well… our actual mother died giving birth to me. After that, Morgause sort of took her
place."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"About your mother."

Morgana shrugged as though it didn't bother her. Maybe it didn't. "Doesn't matter. It seems to be a
habit for me, actually. I can't count how many lives I've actually been an orphan, how often it's just been me and Morgause. Or more correctly me, Morgause and Aithusa."

"Always Aithusa?"

"Yeah. She always finds me, in whatever life I'm born in, wherever I am. The oldest I've been is six, I think. That's the longest she's taken to find me again."

Arthur shook his head. "Incredible."

"What is?"

"That you share so much with a dragon." His eyes turned unconsciously towards the curtains, even knowing that behind them showed not the outside and the nest of rubble that Aithusa had built for herself but only stonewalls. "Incredible."

Morgana smiled once more, a little proudly. "I don't know why she has such loyalty to me – I don't remember when we first met and she won't tell me, so I can only assume it's something to do with that – but it's special, what we have. What all three of us have. Morgause, Aithusa and me. It's been the three of us more times than I can count too."

"Never your parents?"

Morgana shrugged, her lips quirking as though thoughtful. "Sometimes, I guess. But the parents I do remember were never all that close, and my father generally even more removed from our family. When my mother's still alive, it tends to just be us three women. Us and Aithusa." Her lips quirked again and she looked momentarily disgruntled. "Well, when my mother doesn't run from Aithusa in terror. You'd think she'd remember that Aithusa wouldn't kill her. Not again, anyway."

"Again?" Arthur glanced at her sidelong, slightly horrified.

"Oh, don't look at me like that, Arthur," Morgana sighed in exasperation. "It was just the one time."

"Just the one time."

"She deserved it."

"Really? Your mother deserved to be killed by a dragon."

"Yes," Morgana nodded curtly, frowning. "She abandoned Morgause and I to the slavers when we were four and five, and then when we'd made something of ourselves she tried to blackmail us into supporting her. Bitch."

"That's your mother you're talking about," Arthur muttered, his faint horror unabated. He could understand the anger that Morgana didn't even seem to feel any longer, an anger that would have driven her to hate the mother who had sold her children into slavery but – no, perhaps Morgana had never felt all that much for her mother. She seemed to care more for Morgause, from what Arthur
"Yeah, well, I do love her. Sometimes. But in that lifetime?" Morgana pulled a face. "She was a bitch."

"I'll believe you on this one."

"You'd better. I'd take personal offence if you didn't."

Arthur gave a small smile, as much in an attempt to rid himself of the mental image of Aithusa brutalising the faceless woman who had been Morgana's mother. He turned his gaze back to Morgause with an effort because, naturally, it had settled back upon Merlin's sleeping face. "And this life?"

"This life." Morgana's expression shadowed for a moment. "This life, Aithusa found me when I was three. We retreated, the three of us, took ourselves out of the world and pretty much any contact with other people at all. Up into the Scottish Highlands, we went. They don't build up there anymore, you know. It's too far away from Glasglow."

"Fair enough," Arthur nodded. He had come to acknowledge that the civilisations of the New World were, if nothing else, focused on several major regions and abandoned in most others. "You withdrew from people entirely?"

Morgana shrugged nonchalantly, though Arthur could discern a touch of tension in her bearing. "Mostly. We – Morgause and I, obviously not Aithusa – went down to Glasglow every couple of weeks, sometimes even to Aberdeen. Just to get more supplies, to filch what we could and buy what we couldn't steal. Clothes and stuff, and sometimes food if what we could fish for ourselves was too scarce."

"You fish?" Arthur raised an eyebrow, couldn't help but offered her a grin.

Morgana didn't even seem to notice and Arthur's smile faded as he realised she was being entirely serious. Serious and practical in the way of so many people in the New World. "Aithusa would take us both down to the water every other day. She'd have to eat as much as she could and we'd fish. It's pretty thin pickings, but actually better in the water than on land, you know. Sometimes we'd even find an oyster bed or something. I never liked oysters in my Past lives, you know, but now they're one of my favourite things, I think."

Arthur smiled. Oysters? He'd never tasted oysters himself, even if he had heard tell of them being eaten. In the New World, the food on offer was almost entirely synthesised – it was strange to hear of Morgana hunting for food herself, for real food. "You sound like you quite enjoyed yourself."

"I did, as a matter of fact." Morgana smiled, though it faded a moment later. "Or at least I did while it lasted. The good times never last, do they?"

"That they don't," Arthur murmured. He couldn't help himself but reached a hand out to Merlin, just to touch his arm. His warm arm, blessedly, as warm as it should be. He felt a moment of frustration that he and Merlin hadn't had a chance to even experience the 'good times' together.

When he glanced towards Morgana, it was to see her eyes upon where he held Merlin's hand. There was a faintly sorrowful cast to her soft smile. "What happened?" He asked after a pause. Not because he wanted to break the relative calm of their quietness but because he knew the words, the explanation, was sitting on the tip of Morgana's tongue.

She drew her gaze towards him, her eyes so similar to those of the Past as to be exactly identical. Her
soft smile faded as she turned to stare unblinkingly at Morgause across the room. "She was taken is what happened. We didn't often go on trips by ourselves, and when we did it was to the smaller townships that were within a couple of hours walking distance so we didn't leave the other alone without Aithusa. Usually Morgause, of course – I was a lot younger than her, back then.

"This little town, it was called Fort Wine for some such reason. Probably a forgotten name, or adapted from what it used to have been like most towns and cities are. But that town was quiet, and never experienced any uproar. There was a commune there, you see. A sorcerer commune, tucked away from most everyone and out of sight, out of mind. I don't know, maybe the authorities did know they were there. Maybe they did know they existed and just chose to let them be because they weren't bothering anyone. Except that just this once, just the day that Morgause went down to see the town, the Hunters decided that they'd been lenient enough and chose that day to spring them."

Morgana's jaw visibly tightened. Arthur thought he could almost hear the grinding of her teeth and felt nothing but sympathy for his sister. His sister who still, after years, felt such pain for the incident. He could hardly blame her, what with the evidence of what had resulted from it lying in the figure of Morgause before her. "I'm sorry."

"You need to stop apologising," Morgana murmured, though there was no heat nor even reprimand in her tone. She was very clearly looking inwards, recalling the past, embedded in the pain that had long since embraced her. "It wasn't your fault."

"I can still be sorry that it happened."

"Even if it wasn't your fault?"

"Even then." Not for the first time, Arthur felt an upwelling of self-disgust rise within him. For his own Past and how he had perceived sorcerers. In many ways, he had been little better that the New World government. He hadn't actively persecuted sorcerers, not as his father had, but he hadn't been forgiving of them either. Hell, he'd even shunned Merlin for his magic, for hiding the nature of that magic, when he'd found out about it.

Arthur's fingers tightened just slightly around Merlin's wrist at the thought. It could have been his imagination but he thought Merlin might have shifted just slightly beneath his hand. He didn't have a moment to consider it further, however, for Morgana was speaking once more. Arthur's attention immediately shifted back towards her.

"After that Aithusa and I lived alone. I wanted to do something, I did, but I didn't know what." Morgana spoke in a monotone, as though she were reciting rather than recalling the past. Perhaps that was better. Perhaps that was the only way she could speak of it. "I know Aithusa was protecting me in urging me from hunting down the Hunters who took Morgause. She's always protected me, and has become even more protective in recent lives because of the rising awareness of magic. She's... cautious of the government. I'd even go so far as to say fearful."

"She's a dragon," Arthur felt he had to point out the obvious. "What could she be afraid of?"

Morgana turned her pale eyes upon Arthur. "What could she be afraid of? Other than the fact that she's the last of her kind, and with her death dies dragons entirely?" Morgana reached out a hand to poke Arthur's shoulder as he dropped his chin a little guiltily. "Don't take it too hard, Arthur. Most people consider dragons to be all-powerful and dangerous – which I suppose in some ways they are. But they're as susceptible to attack as anyone else. And this world, it's equipped to respond to any sort of threat that a dragon could pose."

"That's a little terrifying in itself, really, isn't it?"
"Yeah, I'd say."

There was a pause between them, then Arthur took a deep breath and shrugged off the sombre, contemplative mood. "Then why did you come to our assistance? If it's dangerous for you, both you and Aithusa, why did you come?"

Morgana quirked her lips once more, twisting them thoughtfully. "Honestly? It was as much my choice as Aithusa's. Aithusa, she felt the pooling of free magic, just like she said when we first arrived. I think she felt like we had to make a last ditch effort, to support the sorcerers and magical people who were choosing to fight back if it was the last thing we both did. And me," Morgana paused, face tightening slightly as she stared at Morgause once more. "I wanted to find my sister. I know I've been useless, that I'd done nothing so far – I practiced my magic up in the highlands, you know, preparing myself for the day I would come and find her, that I would have to break into the Pits and get her out. I even looked for intel, trying to work out where she was kept." She shook her head. "Didn't do any good. I couldn't do anything. I didn't even know if I ever would be able to until... I heard the message, the call to arms of sorts. Sent by that Mordred guy. I heard it just as everyone did."

"That Mordred guy." Arthur snorted, a little ruefully. How different to the Past, when Mordred and Morgana had actually worked together.

"What?" Morgana asked, immediately glancing suspiciously towards him.

"Nothing."

"No, tell me."

"It's nothing."

"It's about that Mordred guy, isn't it?" Morgana scrunched her nose slightly, her sombre mood abruptly lifting. "He's a little weird."

"A little weird?" Arthur smirked at his sister. "What makes you say that?"

"He always looks at me strangely. Different to anyone I've ever seen look at me. I thought it was something to do with the Past, you know, but now I'm not so sure, 'cause it seems to be even a bit different to that. Though I guess as a sorcerer you tend to get looks like that from strangers more than I'd care to admit." Morgana raised both eyebrows meaningfully at Arthur, as though prevailing upon him a hidden truth. He felt his smirk only widen further – as if he hadn't been told so many times – which caused her to frown. "What?"

"Nothing."

"You know something, don't you? About the Past, with me and this Mordred?"

"Would you really want me to tell you if I did?"

"Yes," Morgana said immediately.

Arthur stared at her flatly. "Really?"

Morgana stared right back at him for a moment, unblinking and unwavering. Then she sighed, frowning begrudgingly. "No, I suppose not. I'd rather wait and learn in my own time."

"I would tell you if you'd really like me to," Arthur teased with a small smile. "But how could you
know that I'm telling you the truth."

"Because I can read you like an open book?" Morgana suggested.


"I still can, actually."

"No you can't."

"I can. I can tell that you're absolutely smitten with Emrys – Merlin, whatever – without you telling me anything."

Arthur turned his smile upon Merlin and – yes, he was sure he'd shifted beneath his hand that time. Maybe he was waking up? "It's not like I'm exactly trying to hide anything."

"Oh, God."

"What?" Arthur glanced towards her.

Morgana's eyes were wide, eyebrows climbing high, and a teasing smile spreading across her face. "You're actually in love."

"Yes. I am."

The promptness and lack of embarrassment in Arthur's reply seemed to stunt Morgana for a moment. She opened her mouth, only to close it again with a frown and a "hmmph."

"What?"

"That's not nearly as fun as I expected it to be."

"What isn't?"

Morgan grumbled something under her breath, sinking back slightly into her seat and folding her arms across her chest. She looked remarkably childish in such a pose. "You always said you'd never fall in love when we were kids."

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did."

"Well, there you go. Things change."

"You said," Morgana continued. "That to take a queen didn't need you to love them anyway. That a co-ruler wasn't supposed to just be a stupid, simpering wife like the brainless princesses your father introduced you to but a comrade in arms."

Arthur blinked at Morgana in surprise. "I said that."

"Those exact words."

"Did I really?"

"Would I lie to you, Arthur?"

"Most definitely."
"Well, in this instance I'm not." Morgana grinned widely and though it vexed Arthur to see her so making fun of him – she was more than half his age – he couldn't stay irate for long. It was better than the melancholy that had settled upon her before.

"I confess I'm a little embarrassed to have said that, then."

"Oh, don't be," Morgana said, unfolding her arms briefly to flap a hand at him. "If anything, I think that the feminist movement in the twentieth century would have been more than approving of you for your perspective."

"The feminist movement? What –? What are you -?"

"Mm, yes." Morgana nodded her head as though considering. "Not the whole 'you shouldn't love your wife' thing, but that you wanted your queen to be your 'comrade' as a ruler. I'm proud of you for your progressiveness, Arthur."

"Thank you for being so non-patronising."

"I try," Morgana grinned. Then she glanced back to Merlin. "To be honest, though, I never saw you as ending up with a guy. It's not uncommon to come into your sexuality at a later age but… when you were younger you sort of had a bit of a thing for the girls. Did I miss that much over the years?"

Arthur shrugged, his hands unconsciously taking up a stroke of Merlin's arm. "I might have, yes. I did love Guinevere, but that's –"

"Wait, Guinevere?" Morgana started, sitting up straight. "You mean – do you mean Gwen? The servant, Gwen?"

Arthur glanced towards her. "Yes, 'the servant, Gwen'." He paused, frowning. "Surely you would have known that. From what I can gather, the history books and old stories all tell that I was married to her."

"Yes, but…" Morgana trailed off for a moment, shaking her head. "I never considered it to be that Gwen. I never thought until now…"

"Is there a problem with that?"

Morgana was grinning a moment later, however, urging Arthur into a different kind of disgruntlement entirely. "Not at all, Arthur. In fact, your promotion of equality just upped its stakes. Marrying a servant, eh?"

"You sound like a peasant when you speak like that," Arthur muttered.

"Hey, now, don't think you can fool me with such references to peasantry. I know better, now."

"I shouldn't have told you anything," Arthur sighed.

"No, you shouldn't," Morgana replied with a satisfied nod of her head. Arthur sighed once more. Guinevere. Gwen. He had loved her, he knew. Loved her fiercely, too, if in a slightly different way to how he had Merlin. At times, he felt guilty for thinking of her so little. It was almost as though, much as the sorcerers considered the people from their Past – those not reincarnated – long gone, so too had he considered Gwen. It was saddening, and yes, Arthur still missed her at times, but there was no going back. Arthur wouldn't return to that world, or to Gwen. Strange, how in so many ways he could move on and yet with others, with his own death, he was
still held him so strongly.

"So who was Emrys to you, then?"

Morgana's question drew Arthur from his musings. He glanced towards her, frowning slightly. "You know, he doesn't particularly like being called that."

Morgana shrugged. "Good thing he's asleep then so he can't hear me then." She paused expectantly, then prodded him again. "So?"

"So…" Arthur turned towards Merlin. "He was my friend."

"Your friend?"

"A very dear friend."

"How did you meet him?"

Arthur glanced towards Morgana. "This is touching upon the Past that you don't yet remember, you know. Are you sure you want to -?"

"Oh, shut up, Arthur, just tell me."

Arthur smirked. Morgana, ever the bossy and demanding. "He was my manservant at first actually, before we became friends. I don't think I really realised how important he was to me until after I… until after I came to the New World."

Morgana stared at him for a moment, face utterly blank. Then, in a bark so loud that Arthur wasn't the only one to startle – he caught sight of Gaius and several patients up the other end of the room jump slightly and glance in their direction – she burst out with laughter. "Oh, Arthur! Do you have a thing for servants, then?"

Arthur blinked. "What?"

"First Gwen – a servant – and then Emrys – Merlin, sorry, whatever – who was also your servant." She grinned delightedly. "Hilarious."

"I'm so glad you're enjoying yourself, Morgana," Arthur drawled, rolling his eyes. "Oh, I am. I very much am." Still grinning, Morgana slumped back into her seat once more, shaking her head. Her gaze settled upon Merlin, however, and she became faintly more composed. "Still, it's nice to see you so caring for someone. You really do love him, don't you?"

Arthur too stared at Merlin, but for a different reason. He'd felt him stir once more beneath his hand, saw the slight tightening of his forehead that suggested he was awakening. He felt a surge of relief that poured through him. "Yes," he replied to his sister. "Yes, I do. But even so, I swear, if he ever considers taking a bullet for me again, I will personally smack him into next week."

At his words, Merlin seemed to swim fully into consciousness. With a deeper breath, a slightly squeezing of his eyes, he blinked his eyelids open. His blurry gaze turned upon Arthur, followed a moment later by his small smile. The small smile that Arthur had come to so love. "Well, I guess we'll have to be a little bit more careful next time, won't we?"

Arthur shook his head. "You're an idiot, Merlin."

"Just as much as you, you clotpole."
Arthur snorted, but more in relief that ridicule. Then, uncaring that Morgana sat right beside him and watched their every move, he leant forwards and pressed his lips to Merlin's.

For once, Morgana found the restraint to hold her tongue.
The great hall was the site for meetings. For discussing and planning, for prevailing upon all of the Sorcerers who would accompany Merlin and Arthur upon their missions the specifics of those plans. They had long since overrun the number of available chairs and now, when all capable of making the trip from their rooms descended into the hall for discussion, as many were left standing as seated.

Not that anyone complained. If anything, it seemed to boost motivation that there were so many Sorcerers to fuel their forces, to help with their rescue missions. So many and still growing, for in the week since Merlin had woken up from his injury, in the week that they’d conducted another two infiltration missions, their number had nearly doubled. A fair proportion of that number were, admittedly, incapable of partaking in future rescue operations but still. It was an added incentive to those who could.

In that moment, though, as Merlin seated himself beside Arthur and drew his gaze across the group of Sorcerers – of his people – the great hall was not overflowing. Instead of rows of seats there were tables, multitudinous round tables arranged to fit as many within the four walls in a comfortable arrangement as possible. A fair proportion of those seats were filled, being midday and the time for lunch, but not all of them. Not overflowing.

The smell of food – of actual food, even if it was of the synthetic kind – tickled Merlin's nose. He had long since grown accustomed to the relatively richer diet of those who could afford it. At first, when he had first awoken in Nimueh's residence, he remembered his stomach had rebelled; not only was his body unaccustomed to digesting anything other than a liquid diet, but even had he come straight from the slums his gut would have protested.

It wasn't good food. There wasn't anything even approaching delicious in the New World, even with chemical flavour enhancers. Merlin, like every other sorcerer, knew this because of his memories of the past, of a time where flavours were complex rather than monochromatic, where the purpose of eating was as much the taste as it was to provide energy in the form of dense biscuits or eco-meat that hardly warranted the term 'meat'.

It wasn't bad, though. Merlin would never complain, could only thank Nimueh, could only be grateful to her, that she had not only supplied the estate for them but was further supplying resources. It was likely going to get only more difficult to provide for so many people hidden in the one spot soon enough, and Merlin had to admire the skill of the sorcerer communes scattered hidden across the country in covert caches. He and Arthur had already discussed casting their nets further afield, sending those who offered to go on resource missions to factory towns at even further flung destinations so as not to elicit suspicion. They were doing well enough now, but Merlin had to wonder how long it would last. How long the ration tickets that Nimueh provided without a bat of her eyelid as the resource-mission Skimmers left the estate would endure. She was certainly generous enough, Merlin considered, and even had to admit that his aversion towards her had faded in the face of that generosity. It hardly mattered that she was getting exactly what she wanted out of the situation, seeming to spend most of her time practically interrogating each of the bemused Sorcerers.

Poking at the contents of his bowl – Merlin didn't even know the breakfast was was but it wasn't necessarily unappealing, despite the strange combination of purple, orange and green colours – he glanced towards Nimueh across the room. Nimueh, who, as always, was drifting through the Sorcerers with her back straight, gaze sweeping and eyes alight with that hunger that would have been more disconcerting if Merlin hadn't known from whence it came. It was still a little, but he had long since cast aside his worries. Nimueh was, by and large, fairly harmless. She seemed to actually
care about the welfare of the Sorcerers, even if it was for fairly mercenary reasons. Even as Merlin watched she turned a smile upon a pair of young women, strolled towards them and lowered herself into the seat beside them. Her smile had lessened to only a touch of greediness, and Merlin fathomed that the girls likely couldn't even detect it had they recognised it.

"She's doing it again, isn't she?"

Merlin glanced towards Arthur at his side. Arthur, who had stuck to his side like glue in the week since he'dawoken, even when the stiffness and Merlin's fear for his magic – blessedly unfounded thanks to Aithusa – had dwindled. He raised an eyebrow. "Hm?"

Arthur gestured towards Nimueh and the girls with his spoon. The girls, who had, with identically wide smiles of enthusiasm, had set about conjuring what looked like miniature fireworks in the shape of creatures and urged them into life to flutter about their heads like butterflies. "That. She's hunting again."

"Must you use that word?" Merlin sighed, shaking his head. "Really, it's connotations –"

"Sorry," Arthur immediately offered, and he actually did look a touch guilty for his slip. "It's just what it looks like."

Turning back towards Nimueh, Merlin had to acknowledge that Arthur was right in that regard at least. Nimueh did look a little like a hunting hawk, her eyes sharp and unblinking as she drank in the sight of the magical display. It wasn't anything particularly complex, but even Merlin had to admit that he hadn't seen anything quite like it. The conjured lights themselves looked different somehow, almost as though they were solid rather than a scattering of transparent colours. More like liquid than vapour.

"True," he murmured. "But at least she's not doing anything particularly dangerous."

"Yet."

"She won't. Not if I have a say in the matter."

Merlin felt Arthur turn his attention towards him, regarding him silently for a moment. When he spoke it was contemplatively. "Not if you have a say? Meaning –"

"I'm still holding it over her head?" Merlin nodded. "Yes. She knows if she pushes it too far then I'll withdraw my own offer."

"She still falls for that?"

Merlin pursed his lips. He had to agree with Arthur's unspoken words on that count. He would admit, at least to himself, at least to Arthur, that he wouldn't feel right in depriving Nimueh of his promise to her. She had kept up her side of the bargain since they'd altered their plans, and had gone beyond that with her support. Even if he considered that the pool of sorcerers, of magical beings, and the knowledge that they themselves possessed was surely vaster than any that Merlin himself could offer.

"I think she's probably more concerned that if I kick up a fuss, or if I – for some utterly stupid reason – decide to leave, then I might take a significant chunk of the Sorcerers with me."

Arthur hummed thoughtfully, ladling another spoonful of the multi-coloured dish into his mouth. "Well, she wouldn't be wrong."
"So you think," Merlin muttered.

"So I know," Arthur retorted. "So I've seen. You don't really realise how much everyone looks up to you, do you?"

Merlin shook his head, more in ridicule than denial. "Looks up to me? They look up to the name 'Emrys' which, if memory serves me correctly, I haven't actually used for at least four lifetimes. At least not in my younger years."

Arthur shrugged, chewing through another mouthful. "Doesn't matter. Something I've noticed is that people with magic tend to have a long memory."

Merlin rolled his eyes, glancing at him sidelong. "Tell me you didn't just make a joke."

"Because if you did, it was a pathetic attempt."

"But a joke no less," Arthur said, waving his spoon at Merlin. Then he quelled his amusement, his expression becoming serious once more. "But it's more than that, Merlin. They look up to you because of who you are to them now."

"If you're going to reference the rescue missions, we've been through this. We both acknowledged that you were the one who more significantly contributed, who directed –"

"Yes, I know that," Arthur interrupted him, without a hint of arrogance in his tone. "I know that I'm the strategist of the two of us. We have acknowledged that."

"And the Sorcerers look to you to lead them because of it," Merlin nodded.

"Maybe, Maybe they do. But," once more Arthur gestured towards him with his spoon. "It is you who is their magical idol."

"Magical idol? What, is that the name of a pop star or something?"

"What?"

"Nothing," Merlin brushed aside his words. "That sounds ridiculous, though. Idolisation is –"

"Exactly what it is," Arthur finished for him. He stared at Merlin pointedly as he made to object, effectively quelling him. "What I'm saying, Merlin, is that they see you with your magic and you give them hope that they can succeed. That they can beat the government."

"See me with my magic?" Merlin raised his eyebrow once more. "What do you -?"

"You don't see yourself on the missions, Merlin," Arthur explained. He pushed his finished bowl away from himself and rested his elbows upon the table as though he were seated in a war meeting. His gaze fastened intently upon Merlin once more. "You don't see it and so you don't understand. It's incredible watching you, you know. And I'm not the only one saying it. If there was anything to strike fear into the hearts of the enemy and invoke believe in the possibility of triumph from our own, it would be watching you."

Merlin stared at Arthur. Stared and had to bite back the rising embarrassment that threatened to make him blush. Arthur was being so intense, so genuine and heartfelt, as though he truly believed his words. That made Merlin only the more uncomfortable. It was still a strange feeling, to be the subject
of Arthur's entire attention.

Even after months, even before he had admitted that he loved him, Merlin had been aware that Arthur viewed him differently to how he had. As though he were actually important, as more than just a friend. And afterwards, after they had shared their mutual feelings in a manner that still made Merlin wistful to recall, encouraged him to repeat at every possible instance, he had changed again. His gaze seemed to be settled on Merlin even when he wasn't looking towards Arthur himself. He would sometimes simply turn towards him to find him watching him. Not speaking, not with any distinct urge to act. Just watching. It filled Merlin with a mixture of delight, confusion and adoration that he wouldn't dare show for fear of it inflating Arthur's head in the way that he had, in the Past, been so prone to falling prey to.

That stare, the intense stare that seemed to speak more words than Merlin could hear, was trained upon him once more. It bereft him of any words he had felt the urge to speak, drawing his gaze downwards to his half-eaten bowl.

"If you don't believe me," Arthur finally said, breaking into their mutual silence to the backdrop of the conversations around them, "then you'd just have to look around you. They might turn away the second that you look at them but you probably don't even realise how many people watch you when your back is turned."

Instantly, Merlin lifted his head and glanced around himself. He swept his gaze around the hall with watchful eyes and for the first time he actually begun to realise what Arthur was talking about. It was strange, surreal even, that when he turned towards the Sorcerers around him, so many met his eyes in return. As though they were waiting for his attention, to offer a nod of their heads in recognition, a small smile, to simply blink and stare. Merlin had just considered it to be the mutual admiration of comrades to one another or perhaps to a superior even though he hardly considered himself such, but now… maybe Arthur was right? Maybe it was different?

"You see now?" Arthur asked, a touch of satisfaction in his voice.

Slowly, disbelievingly, Merlin continued drew his gaze around him – there were so many gazes, even those engaged in conversation with their fellows, or with their lunches before them, or departing the hall. Turned briefly towards Merlin and just looking. In any other situation, Merlin would have been disconcerted by the attention; a life in the slums deterred anyone from being inclined to such focus. But now…

"How odd."

"Welcome to the life of a king," Arthur said, straightening slightly as though his own words resounded in his mind. "Although, I wouldn't go so far as to call you a king. You're hardly noble enough material for that."

"Shove off, you prat," Merlin smirked, unable to resist turning towards him and butting into him with his shoulder. Arthur took the rebuff in stride, smiling in turn, and accepted the brief kiss Merlin offered a moment later.

"I'm serious, though," he said after a time, when Merlin was scraping the last of his lunch from his bowl. "People need an idol to follow. It gives them purpose. A drive."

"I know," Merlin agreed, glancing up to him once more with a small smile. "I did go on campaign with you just a couple of times, you know. I saw what you did."

Arthur smiled obligingly, accepting the unspoken compliment in Merlin's words. His smile faded,
however, as his gaze drew over Merlin's shoulder and hardened slightly. Merlin knew before he'd
even turned himself who approached them.

"Mordred, how are you? How's Iseldir?"

Mordred had been by-and-large scarce over the past weeks, with the exception of the few days when
Merlin had awoken from his bout of hospitalisation and he'd clung to him like glue. It was as Merlin
had observed with Morgana – he appeared to have taken up residence in the infirmary. Waiting, he'd
told Merlin, for the time when Iseldir would be woken up.

Merlin had seen Iseldir for the first time in this life but weeks before. After their first infiltration
mission, when he'd first regrouped with Mordred on the Skimmers back to the estate as they made
their winding, circuitous route back to base, he'd been introduced to the man who had, but moments
later, fallen into unconsciousness. Merlin thought he would have recognised him even had Mordred
not supplied his name. He was older than Merlin had known him by at least a few decades, his
features slightly more angular and thinner from his treatment, forehead a little wider and nose a little
sharper, but even so Merlin thought he would have known.

Since Iseldir had been brought to Nimueh's outer city estate, he had been one of those who had been
induced into a coma. Mordred had been beside himself until Alice had assured him that, despite the
tortures he'd undergone longer than almost anyone else they'd rescued, he would be alright. Merlin
had visibly deflated at that. He was still in the infirmary – the damage afflicted upon him in nearly ten
years at the Pits had still taken its toll, a duration that floored Merlin and had him wonder what kind
of resilience enabled him to survive – but he'd seemed less on the verge of panic.

Mordred had been a different person since his old mentor, his old commune Spokesperson, had been
declared off the brink of mortal danger. He was always a loud kind of person, as loud as a telepath
could be. Jovial even, in spite of everything, but he had taken a turn after his reunion with Iseldir. He
seemed almost to have regressed to a more childish state, and wore a permanent smile these days.

Not when Merlin turned towards him, however, creases settling deeply on his brow, and for a
moment he feared the worst. Merlin was on his feet alongside Arthur in an instant. "What is it?
What's wrong?"

Mordred raised a hand, shaking his head as he brushed aside their concern. "Nothing's wrong. Just…
something."

"Something what?" Arthur asked. Merlin could hear the frown, the concern in his tone without
turning towards him.

"Someone's arrived," Mordred continued, frowning slightly. His hand settled upon Cerdan's head,
the loyal dog as always at his side and staring up at him attentively, ears pricked. "Someone from a
commune. A Spokesperson. He says his name is Taliesin."

Merlin gasped. He actually gasped in surprise, and without another word, not even waiting to hear
more than Arthur's surprised "Taliesin? Merlin, wasn't he -?"

Striding from the hall, grabbing Arthur's arm to drag him after him purely by reflex, Merlin was
distantly aware Mordred wasn't the only one who followed behind them. A rise in the murmur of
voices, of the surrounding sorcerers, suggested that they too followed his lead. Merlin barely noticed
them. Taliesin. He hadn't known, truly understood at the time of their first and only meeting, who the
man had been. In his lives since then, however, that had changed. He'd come to know that name,
much as he fathomed that people knew of his own as Emrys, or some knew of Mordred, or Nimueh,
or Morgana. Likely the stories were as blown out of proportion as his own was, but then he had to
know anyway.

Taliesin was a wiseman. A seer and a healer. It would be wise of Merlin himself to hearken to his words. To seek whatever guidance he could offer. And Taliesin had come here? There must be a reason for that.

Mordred fell into step at his side, slowing from the jog he had fallen into just as Arthur did at his other side. "Merlin, Taliesin, isn't he -?"

"He was the one who healed you. When you got struck by that bandit arrow, you remember?"

Merlin glanced to his side, blinking up at him.

Arthur nodded slowly. "In the Valley of Kings. I remember. You told me."

Merlin nodded himself. He had spoken to Arthur of the Past, of the Past that was skewed by his secretiveness, because he'd felt he had to. Despite the discomfort of it – it would always be just a little discomfiting – he owed Arthur that much. He'd told him as much as he could recall, and Taliesin had been one of those things. "He's a seer as much as he is a healer. Or at least, he was."

"Was?"

"Sometimes the focus of magic shifts throughout lifetimes," Mordred explained, for once without a touch or exasperation directed towards Arthur. "For most powerful enough, not really. But something like the gift of prophecy?" Mordred shook his head. "In chaotic times, when the world is so rapidly changeable, precognition is often hazy."

Merlin nodded his agreement to Mordred's words. He had noticed on several occasions that such a truth was apparent, not only in this life but in past lives. At the age of the industrial revolution, the world itself had been under such stress from the changes that many prophecies were so vague as to be entirely useless. Aithusa herself, in one of many brief discussions Merlin had shared with her, had voiced as much of her own innate gifts.

"I am a dragon," she had said, "and as such it is my right to be wise, understanding and knowledgeable. But I have not the true gift of Seeing, and as changeable as the world is in its entirety I cannot accurately claim to know with definite confidence of the future."

Merlin had accepted her words, even if he had been a little disappointed. It was true – dragon's were wise and they did have a touch of the Sight, but nothing like a sorcerer. They were beings of magic but without the tailored focus of that magic that a sorcerer utilised. Morgana herself was not yet mature enough to reliably use her gift of prophecy, and other than her there were precious few who possessed the shadow of the talent at all.

Taliesin, though – perhaps he would know. Perhaps he was strong enough to know something. To know what they could expect, to know where they would go, what they should do. For though Merlin truly believed that he and Arthur were heading in the right direction, that they were doing what they must, he knew that their endeavours wouldn't last long. They would have to relocate soon – it was a surprise that they hadn't had to already – and Merlin wasn't even sure if the next base they had in mind would be protected enough for them to hide in, let alone big enough.

He strode through the doors, more than aware now of the Sorcerers following in his wake. It was hard to ignore them for their muttering of excited conversation and whispers of "What is it? What happened?" Merlin tried to ignore them, which was easy enough to do when he saw Taliesin.

He was standing beside Aithusa, and unexpectedly looked none the more fearful for being in such
proximity to her. Rather, they seemed to be in conversation, much to the apparent nervousness of what looked to be a troop of at least twenty people behind him, all backed as far away from the hulking, scaly mass of dragon that loomed over Taliesin and made him look no bigger than a kitten in comparison.

He was an elderly man, older even than Merlin recalled him being. His back was slightly hunched, hair little more than a wispy grey cap atop his head, and face so wizened and sagging with wrinkles that it almost made it impossible to see his features. As thin as a stalk he was, and as comparatively tall, and Merlin got the impression that he would see Gaius resembling him in years to come. If, of course, they both survived that long to see it.

At Merlin's exit through the front doors of the estate, Taliesin turned towards him. There was a moment of pause in which Merlin stared down upon him across the distance of the steps before, as though he were greeting a superior, Taliesin bowed his head. He actually bowed.

Merlin was striding down the stairs before he could stop himself. It was one thing to hear Arthur speak of the respect of his fellow Sorcerers; it was quite another thing entirely to see such respect exhibited through a physical bow. It was disconcerting, discomforting, embarrassing even to see such an aged man, with wisdom positively radiating from his gaze, incline his head in a show of respect.

He stepped towards him, pausing by his side and sparing a glance and nod for Aithusa. Lenient though the dragon queen might be, she would still demand due respect from those who approached her. At Aithusa's slight nod in reply, Merlin turned back to her conversation companion. "You really are Taliesin, aren't you?"

It wasn't so much a question as an acknowledgement. Merlin recognised the man – he looked enough the same to how he had in the Past, even aged and of a paler complexion than he had been, that he didn't need to ask. Taliesin bowed his head in agreement anyway, however. "I am indeed, Emrys. It has been a long time."

"Centuries," Merlin murmured. "From what I can remember, anyway."

Taliesin gave a slight smile. "Not quite as long for me, perhaps, as it is for you."

"So then we…?"

"You will remember. In due course." Taliesin afforded Merlin a small smile. "Worry not, it was hardly of consequence. I do believe we barely exchanged a word at the time."

Merlin shifted uncomfortably for a moment – it really was disconcerting to have someone else know more about him than he did himself – before turning his attention momentarily over Taliesin's shoulder. "You have companions with you."

Taliesin nodded in a bow once more, though didn't spare a glance for those nervously shifting companions. "I have."

"You seek shelter and sanctuary?"

"And offer our support," Taliesin added. He gestured behind him, still without turning, in an encompassing sweep of his hand. "I must apologise on behalf of myself and my fellows that we have not come sooner. It was my own foolishness and hesitancy that delayed our offer of support for as long as it has been withheld."

Merlin frowned, momentarily confused, but was distracted a moment later as a woman sidled up towards them. She was short, dark-haired and with the beginnings of her own cast of wrinkles
sketching lines across her face, but her gaze was steady and deliberately removed of the nervousness of her fellows. She cleared her throat before speaking. "We were unsure as to the validity of the messages you have sent, Emrys," she said, loud and clear so that her voice rung about the courtyard. "Unsure and yet no longer. My name is Maelys and as the deputy Spokesperson of our commune I bring word of the success of your messages and the rising belief in your cause. Tales has spread far and wide of your rescues of our people. We would seek to offer our support to further your endeavours."

"Then we will gratefully accept your aid." Arthur's voice drew Merlin's attention sidelong, to where he'd stationed himself at Merlin's side with arms folded across his chest, chin raised high and gaze calculating rather than wary. "Any support would be greatly appreciated, and all who seek to escape from the oppression of the government will find solace within these walls."

Merlin suppressed a smile of gratitude. It wasn't that Merlin himself wasn't capable of thanking or welcoming others, but he was far less fluent than Arthur was. Not to mention that, whenever he felt the urge to speak, he became suddenly aware that it was not solely for himself that he spoke. At least for the moment, he was simply one element of the voice of the Sorcerers.

Taliesin and Maelys turned towards Arthur, and once more Taliesin bowed, even if the woman at his side did not. "King Arthur Pendragon," Taliesin murmured, a smile touching his lips once more. "The once and future king."

"Indeed. Or so it would seem," Aithusa rumbled from overhead, momentarily drawing their communal attention. Taliesin nodded as though she had made a proclamation of great insightfulness. "Returned once more."

"So it would seem," Taliesin echoed. He turned back towards Arthur, towards Merlin, and nodded his head slowly. "So told is the prophecy and so shall it be realised."

Merlin's breath caught, sudden keen focus sharpening his attention. He had no difficulties speaking now; the urge to make sense of Taliesin's brief words welled within him. "Prophecy? What prophecy is that?"

Taliesin turned upon him directly, gaze sharpening despite the haziness of age that clouded his vision. "You know of what I speak already, Emrys."

Merlin caught his lip between his teeth. Did he know? He could guess perhaps, but… there was simply so much that he wanted to ask of the old seer, for seer he evidently still was. He wanted to know what he'd seen of the future, of what glimpses he'd caught of their potential victory or disaster, regardless of how distant and wistfully sought the former was. He wanted to know if Taliesin had any wisdom to bestow upon them, whether he could direct the focus of their attention, whether he could point them towards which regions to strike first that would lead to their greatest success. If he had any suggestions of how they should proceed when the government finally combined their forces and got their act together enough to be able to find them. Where should they go? What should they do? How would they end what they had begun without absolute death and destruction?

As he stared at Taliesin, tongue momentarily stilled, Merlin was left with the impression that he knew. That he could almost hear Merlin's thoughts, that he suspected the flood of questions that raced through his mind. "You seek answers, of course."

"Yes," Merlin nodded. "Do you have them?"

"Perhaps," Arthur said, his tone dropping just low enough that it wouldn't resound outside of their little circle, "it would be best to take this into an area of privacy. Potentially confronting revelations
Maelys gave an unintelligible murmur – it sounded almost like another language, and even could have been – but the nod she afforded Arthur was telling enough. She, at least, approved of his suggestion. "It would not do to strike terror into the heats of our people."

"They'll find out anyway," Merlin muttered. "They shouldn't have anything kept from them." And to his surprise Taliesin nodded his agreement to his words.

"That they will. That they should." He glanced up at Aithusa, as though asking her permission before turning back towards Merlin and Arthur. "If it is all the same to you, I will speak. I know of little, given that the changeable state of the world so inhibits my Sight." Merlin nodded his understanding at his words, Arthur doing the same at his side even if he likely didn't fully understand. "But what I do know, what I have seen and what I have come to understand, can be heard by all." Taliesin's expression became slightly shadowed, as if sorrowful. "Truly, even the negative is most likely known by every magical being already."

Merlin took a moment to cast a glance over his shoulder. To spare a moment for his comrades, for the new friends he had made. At the top of the steps before the front door, halted as though a wall that prevented them from continuing down the steps, they watched, they listened, with not a voice speaking even in wonder. He could see Mordred, hand tangling in the fur of Cerdan's head. He saw Alice, too, though Gaius was likely still in the infirmary. And he saw Morgana just a little further away, her arms folded and an attentive frown upon her face. He saw the rest of them, people he had met only so recently but had begun to depend upon: Mellie, who had taken a full week herself to recover from the electrical bullet wound that had grazed her side, Lee with his eyes narrowed and staring at the members of the commune with thoughtfulness rather than distrust. Rik and Tomas, Mae and Penny, the siblings Vi and Bask who stood out for their height in towering above their fellows. Countless heads, some of them that Merlin couldn't only name. They were his people, now his friends, his companions and his supporters. His fighters and his rescuers, those who strived for a better world, for their own freedom.

They deserved to know the truth, to know what they were getting themselves into without the euphemisms that skewed the reality of the situation.

Merlin took a moment to glance towards Arthur. To meet his gaze and hold a silent conversation. He saw a brief upwelling of concern in his eyes, a hesitancy to so openly allow for such a translation of knowledge for fear of what it would do to the listeners. But that concern gradually faded into acceptance at whatever he perceived from Merlin's attention. He gave a small nod of agreement. "Alright then. What do you have to tell us?"

Taliesin bowed his head once more in what appeared to be something of a habit for him before raising his chin once more and affixing them both with a steady gaze. It was different, solemn, and for a moment Merlin beheld a brief flash of orange swirling in his eyes. Then he spoke.

"We have travelled from the border of France and Neo-Belgium," he began, his voice solemn, "as we have been driven by an understanding. A cause. An eventuality. That the end of the magic as we know it is upon us and that should we fail to act then it shall indeed be driven from the world entirely."

There was a gasp that rippled throughout the courtyard, and for a moment Merlin regretted that he hadn't considered Arthur's suggestion more fully. But then Taliesin continued, vanquishing his thoughts. "But not yet. Not if action is initiated, and a response conducted in due course. I have seen it occurring, as a minor possibility that has sprung like a seed from a grain sack. A seed sown by the combined forces of Emrys and his king." Taliesin paused, and the flash of orange in his eyes
flickered between Merlin and Arthur. "Such a small possibility, in the space of but years, has sprouted and flourished into a sapling that has the potential to grow into a tree of life.

"It is but young. This seed, the speck of improbability that has sprung into possibility, is shadowed by the clouds that wreathe the world. There is a chance that it will survive, that it will blossom and grow into triumph, into success, into life, but such a chance is still tenuous at best. It is that which has driven us here, to your aid, Emrys, King Pendragon. You fight for a dying people in a dying world – the support of all with the ability to offer it is a necessity."

Taliesin paused, and his gaze turned towards the Sorcerers on the steps. He seemed to consider them for a moment before speaking, and when he did it was in a direction Merlin had not anticipated. "Albion fades. The great magic that welled within its time flounders, shredding into dust to vanish in a puff of wind. For years, for centuries, it has been declining, even without the active threat of those not in possession of magic as our foe.

"There is a chance. A small chance, that you two," Taliesin turned his gaze back to Merlin and Arthur, eyes steady and unblinking, "will save us. With the furls of your commitment, your motivation, unfolding like the petals of a spring flower, there is a possibility. I see light in the direction that you face, light and possibility and a future. Yet there is… a confusion there too." For the first time, Taliesin frowned, appearing slightly less confident in his words. Then he shook his head and continued. "Confusion that I cannot perceive. There is an element of which I do not understand, a feature of your goal that has not yet been realised or understood and so remains but a hazy possibility. A key of understanding, that will prove the saviour of our people. Of what remains of Albion. But I…"

He trailed off the flash of orange in his eyes faded completely. Merlin was left staring, frowning, incomprehension welling within him. Silence reined and slowly, slowly, it faded into rising frustration on his part. That was it? Encouragement and a suggestion that they were ‘missing something’?

He suppressed the urge to grumble aloud his vexation. It wouldn't have been fair. Taliesin had told him what he knew, no more and no less. Likely there wasn't anymore to know, what with the haziness of prophecy itself. But then… Merlin had held hope that Taliesin, with his Sight, would be able to guide them. Would provide them with a suggestion. Evidently he could not. Perhaps there was none? Perhaps that was simply… it?

Merlin didn't need to glance to his side to know that Arthur held similar frustration. He could feel the tension rippling off him, in the set of his stance, the tightness of his folded arms. Unconsciously, Merlin reached out to touch his arm. Just lightly, but he felt Arthur respond to it nonetheless, as though he were forcibly urging himself to ease from that tension.

There was silence across the courtyard. Silence that rung loudly with incomprehension. At least Merlin had the satisfaction that he wasn't the only one left confused. Before anyone could speak, however, Aithusa gave a rumbling hum and dropped her head down towards Taliesin. Maelys, still at his side, visibly jumped and made a sidling retreat, concern and thinly veiled fear rising in her eyes. Merlin couldn't blame her, really. There was the awe, the respect for the dragon queen evident in her gaze, but unfamiliarity and the reflexive distrust of anyone with magic seemed to immediately put her on guard.

Aithusa ignored her, just as she ignored that Arthur, despite similarly growing more familiar with her over the past weeks, too tensed once more. Instead, she fixed her golden gaze upon Taliesin for a moment, before swinging her giant head towards Merlin. "I have considered. There may be some merit to the words of the Seer."
Merlin raised an eyebrow. Even coming from a dragon, her words were something of a dismissal, as much as the deliberate turning of her attention towards Merlin. Taliesin didn't appear fazed by them in the slightest, however, so Merlin chose not to take commiserating offence. "Is that so?"

Aithusa nodded her head sagely, arching it slightly to loom tall over his head so that Merlin had to crane his neck in order to keep sight of her. "You were given a prophecy, Dragonlord, a long time ago. By my predecessor, I know, upon the shores of the Lake of Avalon. You recall?"

Merlin nodded. Of course he remembered it. How could he forget? Even now Kilgharrah's words resounded loud and clear in his mind. "I do. It spoke about the return of the once and future king – about Arthur." He spared a glance for Arthur at his side, who similarly glanced towards him, before they both turned towards Aithusa once more in unison. "What of it?"

"When Albion's need is greatest, Arthur will rise again," Aithusa intoned, with such resonating depth that her voice sounded almost identical to Kilgharrah's. "You recall, of course."

"You told me," Arthur said at his side. "It hardly sounds like a prophecy so much as a hope." He frowned slightly up at Aithusa. "What of it?"

"Do not so belittle the words of a dragon, child of Avalon," Aithusa rumbled, for once showing her dragon pride in the face of the perceived disrespect. Even Merlin felt himself shift a little uneasily. "Kilgharrah spoke with his own Sight. You would do well to abide by his words."

"What of it?" Merlin asked, as much to divert the glare that Aithusa had turned upon Arthur that caused him to tense even further until he felt like a statue beneath Merlin's hand as for his own curiosity. "Arthur has returned. Is he supposed to save the world?"

Aithusa, thankfully, trained her gaze back upon Merlin as he drew her attention. A puff of acrid breath blew into his face, almost stinging his skin, as she released something of a 'harrumph'. "I believe that the words of the prophecy were misleading in their metaphor."

"Metaphor?"

"Indeed," Aithusa murmured, the ground rumbling slightly as she shifted her weight back onto her haunches. Had she been less intimidating for sheer size, Merlin might have considered the seating reminiscent of a dog's. "The land of Albion is long lost. It will not return."

A moment of silence that settled once more upon the courtyard. Then, with an audible gasp, someone Merlin couldn't identify cried out a strangled "What?" And was as though that single word unleashed the floodgates.

"Albion's gone?"

"How is that possible? It is truly lost?"

"But what of -?"

"How could that -?"

"- not possible –"

"What will we do -?"

Aithusa didn't shift her gaze from Merlin. Merlin who himself felt every one of the words that was ringing around him. Albion was gone? Lost? It couldn't be saved? But then, Arthur had returned,
hadn't he? In 'Albion's time of greatest need'. He was supposed to save it, wasn't he?

For the first time, Merlin truly realised just how much he had been holding onto his memories of that Past. How much just the knowledge that such a world had once existed had sustained him, that if he fought hard enough, if he survived long enough, he would see it return. It was what had enabled him to endure his life in the Pits alongside Freya, their exchange of words in reminiscence adding light and vibrancy to a colourless world. It was almost as much the land itself as the Sorcerers that Merlin had been hoping to save with their rescues.

Now that was gone. The possibility, it was gone.

Merlin didn't realise until that moment that it wasn't just he who depended upon it so fiercely. It wasn't only he who clung to those memories, who fought to preserve them with the recollections of a life long lost hanging like a dangled carrot overhead. It was everyone else, too. They fought, they strived, they sought to rescue, as much for the name of Albion as for those who had existed in that time. For the descendants of those sorcerers.

Now… that was gone.

_Maybe that little revelation should have been announced in privacy first_, he thought numbly as he turned his wide-eyed gaze upon Arthur. Arthur, who was frowning as though uncomprehending, as though he couldn't understand Aithusa's words. How could he not? Did he not understand that, effectively, what they had been fighting for, what they had been striving to achieve, the sanctuary that they'd all been silently longing to revive, was gone? Gone for good?

"We… have we…" _Lost?_ Merlin couldn't say the final words, only turning towards Aithusa in what he knew to be desperation. "Is it…" _All for nothing?_

Aithusa tilted her head slightly, considering. She seemed to almost be listening to the voices of the distressed Sorcerers, of their newest members from Taliesin's commune as they seemed to sag with defeat. And then she spoke, and every single voice silences as though magicked into muteness. "The land of Albion is indeed gone. It disappeared the moment that magic was once more realised. This world cannot accommodate the dual forces of magic and modern science, of the electricity that so stunts magic itself. One or other must overwhelm, as all natural competitors must. But."

Then she paused, and if a dragon could appear pensive she was assuming such a state. Her listeners stared, spellbound, Merlin amongst them. _But_. It was such a loaded word, carrying hope, and Merlin couldn't help but feel it swirl within him. Albion was lost. But.

"But the people of Albion still endure."

The words did not come from Aithusa. Merlin found himself turning to glance over his shoulder, turning towards the steps and towards Nimueh where she had drawn herself to the front of the waiting audience. With a sweep of her skirt-trousers, her back straight and tall and chin raised, she stepped down from the shadow of her estate. Her gaze was fastened upon Aithusa's and there was an understanding there, a confidence, a determination within her eyes that Merlin hadn't seen before.

Aithusa in turn drew her gaze towards the approaching sorcerer. She gave a deep, rumbling hum of approval. "Indeed. The land of Albion is lost but it endures in the minds of the people who still recall it." Then she turned her attention back towards Merlin and Arthur. No, towards Arthur more specifically. "Do you understand, child of Avalon? You have returned, have been brought to return, to save Albion. But it is no longer the land that needs saving, a land that no longer exists, but –"

"The people," Arthur finished for her, and for once Aithusa didn't appear angered that he had
overridden her. Instead, she simply inclined her head in acknowledgement, an acknowledgement that Arthur returned with his own nod. "Of course. Albion's time of greatest need."

"It's not… the kingdom, then?" Merlin asked, glancing between dragon and king. They both turned towards him. "The kingdom of Albion really is lost but –"

"It still exists. In its people. In its sorcerers," Aithusa nodded. She swung her gaze to Taliesin, who tilted his head towards her. "You, seer. You have seen that there is a possibility for success?"

Taliesin nodded slowly. "I have. Such as I have seen, but –"

"There is an element of incomprehension," Aithusa interrupted him. Which, considering she was a dragon, in all of her resounding voice and presence, was a little difficult to continue through. "The how. Or more correctly, the where. I believe that is your point of 'confusion', seer."

"The where?" Arthur asked, shifting his gaze between Aithusa and Taliesin. "Meaning –"

"A sanctuary." Nimueh had drawn up at Merlin's other side quite without his notice. For once, he considered they might have even share their sentiment, their goal, their desire. Merlin wanted to save the Sorcerers, wanted to preserve what was left of Albion even though the kingdom itself was apparently lost, and Nimueh… Nimueh wanted to preserve the knowledge of a time gone by.

It was ironic, Merlin considered, that after so long of disbelieving in the mutual goals of one another, they had really been aiming for the same end. "But where?"

"I have a suspicion," Aithusa murmured, though it was more like an exclamation for the volume of her rumbling voice. "A suspicion that I must dwell upon, contemplate to deduce the validity of." And with that, without another word and with the arrogance of a dragon who assumed those to wait upon her every whim, the queen turned and made her was back to her self-assigned nest. The thumping footsteps of her passage slowly faded as she drew away from their still, silent masses.

That stillness persisted for a moment. For a long moment. No one seemed able to move, Merlin because he was recovering from the loss of what he hadn't even known he reached for, and likely his fellow Sorcerers of a similar mindset. At his side, Arthur took a step towards him. Arthur, as steady as a rock and, at a glance, already considering and calculating what Aithusa's – and to a lesser degree Taliesin's – words would mean for them.

"Arthur," he began, but Arthur silenced him with a hand to his shoulder.

"This doesn't change anything, Merlin. Not really. Not for us. The only difference lies in our understanding of a possibility, not in the end result itself." His hand squeezed Merlin's shoulder briefly before, flowing in his casual, assuming yet entirely acceptable motion, he slipped his arm around Merlin's neck and turned him as though to make back for the estate. His voice rose, not speaking directly to any of their sorcerers but as though he was merely conversing with Merlin and it happened to be loud enough to be heard. "Aithusa has proclaimed it: she is thinking upon the point of 'confusion' in our plan. We have a role to fulfil, responsibilities, a duty to stand by. Which means that we will only persist with the plans we have been acting upon until either they are no longer possible to achieve or entirely achieve them we have."

His words were full of a confidence that Merlin didn't feel, resounding with the strength of the king he had once been. Walking alongside him, his arm unconsciously sliding around his waist and feeling the solid strength of him, Merlin marvelled once more at the person that Arthur was. He was under no allusions that he too held misgivings, that he was uncertain and nowhere near as confident as he appeared to be. But he couldn't see it. He couldn't hear it in his voice. And evidently, their
audience of Sorcerers didn't either, for as though sparked like a flame starting a bonfire, a chorus of voices, of enthusiasm, of renewed determination, erupted once more.

Arthur was right. They would still fight. They would still strive to rescue their companions that were buried in the Pits. And when the time came to retreat, to evacuate and escape from the Hunters and the authorities that would descend upon them…

Well, Merlin didn't have all that much of a plan for that. He had the makings of a plan that would most likely fall through but not a plan itself. He could only hope that Aithusa, in all of her wisdom, would unravel the mystery of Taliesin's 'confusion' and pave the way for their success. For their survival.

Without a backwards glance or a backwards thought, Merlin and Arthur led their newest acquisitions into their temporary sanctuary. If only they knew how long it would remain as such.
Chapter 25

"Get down!"

In a flying leap, Arthur threw himself towards the party of Sorcerers, knocking them all to the ground even as a pulse of visible electricity rippled overhead. There were cries from those he toppled over, but more of outrage, of anger at the blasting attack then at Arthur's actions from the sound of the words they cursed.

Glancing over his shoulder, Arthur caught a glimpse of the culprit of the attack charging down the hallway towards them. The Hunter, dark green outfit cast black in the flashing red-blue of the alarm light, siren still wailed unceasingly overhead, held a weapon big and clunky that certainly wasn't a gun. Arthur didn't know what it was, but he'd seen its effects before. A new weapon, this one, wielded by the Hunters and guards at both this Pit and the last they'd infiltrated. It fired a horizontal blast of electricity, wall to wall and scorching those walls with its passage. Everything caught in its path was immediately thrown into convulsions if they weren't electrocuted into insanity in an instant.

Their opponents were evolving. Rapidly. Dangerously.

Arthur didn't think. He just acted. With a grab at his waist, he snatched a throwing knife from his belt and launched one, two at the Hunter. They were batted away easily – one, two quick swipes – but not fast enough for smaller, thinner projectiles that followed Arthur's lead. Not two but five, almost too fast to be possible, sprung towards their foe and within seconds the Hunter was down.

Arthur spared only a glance for Merlin at his side, paused in the act of reaching for another of his throwing knives. He met his gaze, nodded briefly, then sprung to his feet. There was no time to converse, no time to think.

"We need to get out of here," Arthur ground out, falling into a jog that became a run as the rest of their squad flowed to their feet around him. They were a large party, nearly thirty in total that had gathered after splitting up nearly three hours before, but unlike the rest of those that spread throughout the Pits of Northireland, they carried none of the rescued with them. That wasn't their role. They were the aggressive defenders. A quick change of strategy after their last infiltration had proved the need for such a squad. They swept throughout the corridors and took everyone down who stood in their way.

"Are we even able to leave now?" Mellie – Arthur thought that was her name – gasped from behind him. "Is everybody -?"

"Delilah just sent me a call," Merlin interrupted, speaking in between his own panted. They were all winded, as much from running as from the heat of fighting. "She's out."

"Delilah just sent me a call," Merlin interrupted, speaking in between his own panted. They were all winded, as much from running as from the heat of fighting. "She's out."

"Then that's everyone," Arthur said with a nod. Finally they could leave. It had been a bad one – he didn't want to contemplate just yet how many were injured, let alone killed – but Arthur could accept that they had won. Of a fashion. This time. And only if... "That's it. We're getting out of here. Out. Now." Curving around the corner of the corridor, he was silenced for a moment as they came upon a sea of guards. Not Hunters – thankfully – but a threat nonetheless. No one spoke as, within seconds, they fell upon their foes and drove them to the ground. Moments later, in a series of leaps and bounds, they vaulted over their felled assailants and sped past.

Arthur spared a glance over his shoulder. "Lee? Where are we at?"
"Um…” Lee's eyes flashed a ruddy gold for a moment as his magic flared. "Four corridors over, I can feel we're close to the boundary."

"Outside?"

"Yeah."

"Good," Arthur nodded curtly. Then, picking up his step, he urged his squad onwards further at a faster pace.

They raced down one corridor, then another. Arthur was nearly tripped to the ground when Merlin – he knew it was Merlin, even without looking – snatched at the back of his collar, dragged him to a stop, and blasted a torrent of fire towards some unseen trap before them. Arthur caught a glimpse of the white-blue flash of electricity – a barrier? A wall? – before it was consumed by Merlin's flame and they were charging on through.

Yes, their opponents were evolving. That one in particular was a dangerous one, an ambush and unseen until it was too late.

Arthur drew his party to a skidding stop that they coordinated seamlessly as they bounded into the fourth corridor. He glanced towards Merlin, then towards Lee just to his side. "I say we take the direct route out."

"Sounds good to me," Merlin agreed instantly. "Lee?"

"I could probably –"

"Sit back, boy, I've got this."

Heads turned towards Maelys as she pushed her way to the front of their party. Sword in hand, she positioned herself beside Arthur and raised her other palm. She didn't even glance towards Arthur or Merlin to confirm her request. Or her demand, more correctly. "Brute force is faster than shaping the stone out of the way."

Then, with an earth-shaking BOOM! the wall exploded.

Arthur ducked instinctively to the ground, as did everyone else. Maelys was like that, Arthur had come to realise. Direct, just as Arthur had suggested. Not only that, however, for she was a skilled swordswoman, a master of the blade. Just like many sorcerers, Arthur had come to realise, just like Merlin, Maelys had deduced the practicality of becoming skilled in a physical weapon to compliment her magic. Because magic… use of magic was dangerous, no matter how powerful it was.

Maelys was indeed powerful. The yellowish swirl of magic in her eyes was only just fading when the dust of her explosion dissipated enough for them to see the destruction she had wrought. A hole. A five-foot-wide hole in the wall, the darkness of night seeping into the flashing red-blue interior of the Pit's hallways.

That was all Arthur had time to register. That, and the resonating, collective call of multiple Hunters as the approached down an adjacent hallway with an echoing "hut-hut-HUT!"

"Out! Now!"

As one, they fled.

There was nothing cowardly about their flight, Arthur knew. They didn't turn on their heels and run,
fleeing a foe from cowardice. There was no 'running from a fight' when no fight was truly sought, was avoided at all costs. Arthur and Merlin, their comrades, they weren't fighting a battle; the conducted a rescue mission. In and out, that was the way. Right now, with their mission complete, their fellow party members reportedly out of harms way, they would leave.


The crunch of gravelled ground was the only sound any of their squad made as they dove into the darkness. All were mute, focusing upon speed, putting distance between themselves and their pursuers. At least they were until Arthur deemed it necessary to speak.

Between breaths, he relayed his orders. "Right, El, Manson, we need those phantoms sent out. Pi, help Carys with masking our trail."

"Don't know how up for that I am just yet, Arthur," Carys panted from some distance behind him.

Arthur only half glanced over his shoulder at her words. He caught a glimpse of the phantoms, of the trio of illusionary squads identical to their own conjured by El and Manson's magic, loping into the darkness in different directions, the brief, glimmering gold of their outlines fading into neutrality in seconds as they fully formed. He pursed his lips for a moment, mentally scanning over each of his party to choose an alternate as his feet pounded into the gravelled earth.

"Kenzie, then," Merlin supplied between the pants of his own heavy breathing. "Kenzie, follow my lead, I'll direct you through it. Gareth, we could use you too – mask the heat signature of our passage if you would."

Arthur nodded curtly in agreement, acknowledging the legitimacy of Merlin's words. Merlin knew their Sorcerers and their strengths better anyway. He understood them. Arthur instead squinted ahead, scanning for the wall he knew them to be approaching as his ears strained for the echoes of the Hunters' calls behind him. "Right. Lee, I'll need some direction here, and Maelys?"

"I'm taking the wall down?"

Arthur gave a grim smile without bothering to turn towards her. "You're taking the wall down."

"With pleasure," Maelys growled, and the enthusiasm of her tone seemed to invigorate them all into faster flight. Within moment's they'd hit the wall. Seconds later, and they were through. The calls of the Hunters disappeared into their wake as they sped into the night.

The Skimmers were mostly packed with Sorcerers and rescued like apples in a barrel by the time Arthur and his party arrived. They slowed to a stop, pants gushing forth and hands dropping to knees. It had been a long run back, not only for the distance but for the alternate route they had taken because they had to. Because there was no way they could risk the Hunters with the senses of hounds catching their trail. As always, Arthur only hoped it was enough of a misdirection.

It was dark around the Skimmers. Of course it was dark, as dark as it ever got in the New World with the seemingly constant glow of light that radiated from Spotters, from the factory regions, that seemed to simply hang suspended in the air even with the absence of buildings. The Pit of Northireland was located on the outskirts of the Belfast, overlooking the coast like a fortress perched upon a cliff-side. As such, there was little actual 'darkness' to be found. Not as much as Arthur would have hoped for.

Still breathing heavily, he strode through the lines of Skimmers, scanning around himself with sharp eyes to discern the speed with which they could leave. Minutes, he predicted. Minutes, which was
Captains of each squad hastened towards him, to Merlin at his side just as much, and quickly relayed their numbers.

"Thirty-one rescued, four casualties and two with electrical damage."

Then another. "Twenty-eight rescued, though one looks in critical condition, might not last the trip home."

And a third. "We lost Emmaline. Down in a second. Couldn't bring her back with us – we didn't have a chance. Van's in a bad way too, but he should be able to last until we get back to base."

"Thirty rescued, seven casualties and four of them with electrical damage…” The fourth captain trailed off.

Arthur felt himself grow grimmer and grimmer at each relay of information. He felt Merlin at him side grow similarly tenser with each relay of information. Arthur knew that sacrifices had to be made, but Merlin had never been able to accept that. Even less these days, since Aithusa's proclamation; he seemed to have placed all of his faith, all of his unspoken commitment, upon fuelling the resurgence of Albion, into protecting and defending the people who were all that was left of the land and kingdom. That so many were injured, some even killed… Arthur didn't need to look at his face to know it was cast in shadow. He did anyway, however, enough to see the golden swirl of his magic rising in anger within him.

Though anger? No, maybe not anger. But certainly distress.

Arthur relayed the instructions to every captain that approached him. "Very well. Get everyone aboard the Skimmers post-haste. We make for the Sea-Barge as soon as everyone is aboard." Each captain replied with a sharp nod disappeared back towards their own Skimmers.

Arthur turned to Merlin as they approached one of the remaining half-filled Skimmers. The last of their Sorcerers were just boarding but Arthur waited. He would always wait until everyone else was aboard before boarding himself, just in case. Besides, in the aftermath of their infiltration, it was a relief to have a brief moment just with Merlin. Just to make sure everything was… alright. Not always but sometimes he would fall inward, reliving what Arthur could only fathom at for his silence and withdrawal.

"Merlin," he began, but Merlin was speaking before he could say anymore.

"It's getting worse," he said, his voice low and barely audible. He met Arthur's gaze through the darkness and Arthur could make out the reflexive rise of magic flaring his eyes brightly, a signal if nothing else of how sorely he felt his distress. Arthur was not unfeeling, was not unaffected by what he had seen, what he had been told, but he was hardened to it. He'd had to be. It had taken time, an effort, for him to fall back into the mindset that he had assumed as a war leader in the past.

Merlin had never had that hardness. He'd never been able to distance himself, no matter how necessary it was.

Slowly, he nodded. "It is. They're getting –"

"Worse. They're getting worse." Merlin stepped towards Arthur and, in an uncharacteristic display of exhaustion and defencelessness – for him at least – he dropped his forehead onto Arthur's shoulder. "What the hell do we do, Arthur? We lost more of our people today. More than last time."
"We don't have a choice," Arthur murmured, quietly enough that any potentially listening Sorcerers wouldn't overhear. "We keep ploughing through. We keep trying."

"They'll get stronger. They'll get better. We'll lose more people." Merlin's voice was muffled by Arthur's shoulder, even more so when Arthur wrapped a commiserating arm around his shoulder. He loved to touch Merlin, to hold him, for the simple act of intimacy, but now was different. There was desperation in Merlin's slump. "We need to save them, Arthur. We need to save them all. But how can we when the world is against us?"

"Merlin –"

"More than that, how will we escape? With enough skill, enough preparation, we might be able to continue with our rescue missions. But what happens when they eventually find out where we're based? It won't be long. You know it won't be long, just as much as I do."

Arthur bit back the empty reassurance that rose on his tongue. He could tell Merlin that it would all be alright, that they would work it all out. That they had nothing to fear, not yet, not when there hadn't been any evidence of the authorities knowing where they were located. That they had a dragon defending Nimueh's estate when the bulk of their forces were absent, so there was nothing to worry about.

But he didn't he didn't say any of that. He couldn't bring himself speak when Merlin seemed so despondent, not when he wasn't in a state to take it. Merlin believed his own words, knew them to be the truth because they were. Arthur knew it too, and couldn't speak to dispute his understanding. It wouldn't be fair, not to Merlin. Merlin, who tried so hard to be strong, to wear a brave face before their Sorcerers, who didn't once let his guard down but to save someone else. To save Arthur, in all of his stupidity, when he'd take the bullet for him. Merlin needed answers to believe in, not falsehoods that would only reassure his bout of realistic pessimism.

Merlin wasn't a pessimistic person. Not naturally. But even in the Past he had been unexpectedly burdened by potential and actual disaster. Arthur remembered that only too well.

Arthur wrapped his arms wound his waist, holding him closely for a moment. He cared for Merlin so deeply, more than he had ever considered would have been possible and in such a way that he almost felt guilty for it. Guilty to Gwen who he knew he'd felt differently for. He knew it. Merlin was different. He would always be different. Strong, powerful, and resilient yet fractured, and Arthur loved him for it. Even if right then he struggled with that resilience.

"Yes," Arthur finally said, accepting the truth of Merlin's words. "Yes, they will find us. And we will have to flee. I don't know to where, but Aithusa –"

"She doesn't know. Not yet. Maybe she never will. Maybe there isn't any real sanctuary for us to hide. Maybe there isn't anywhere for us to live. We could be rescuing our people and for nothing, to be dragged back to the Pits when they finally hunt us down 'cause we've nowhere to go. We're losing more and more people and…"

He trailed off and Arthur couldn't think of anything more to say. It was difficult to consider that everything would be alright when there was so much to suggest that it wouldn't be. They were going well enough with their infiltrations – really, they were. They were successful, and Merlin's sorrow and grief arose because he focused his horrified gaze upon what they lost rather than what they'd gained. Only in privacy though it was apparent to Arthur that he felt it outside of such times nonetheless. There was the looming future, the gradual response of their foes that would rise in retaliation to oppress and defeat the Sorcerers once more. Arthur knew they would, that they would try. And the longer they took to find their sanctuary, to rescue as many as they could, the more
prepared their foes could become.

Arthur wanted to reassure Merlin. He wanted to reassure him as much as he wanted the assurance that they would, somehow, surpass and achieve success for himself. He didn't though, couldn't, and before he got the chance a voice called his attention over his shoulder.

"Arthur, Emrys, we're good to go."

It was Jade, Arthur thought it was, the young girl with eyes to match her name. Arthur glanced over his shoulder, drawing away from Merlin to turn towards the blonde head sticking out from the Skimmer, just faintly illuminated by the interior of the vehicles. He nodded at her in recognition of her words. "Thank you, Jade. We'll be –"

"Emrys. Emrys, can you hear me?"

At the sound of Nimueh's voice, Arthur snapped his attention back to Merlin. Merlin who, jerking abruptly away from Arthur to stand straight, instantly thrust his hand into the pouch at his belt and withdrew the palm-sized communication device each captain carried. The crystal was glowing a pale white, faintly radiant, and just visible upon its glossy surface –

"Thank the Gods, I wasn't sure if I could scry you across open water." Nimueh's voice was faintly frantic, a sound was so vastly different to her usual tone that for a moment Arthur thought he might have mistaken her for someone else. But no, it was definitely Nimueh.

Merlin frowned, eyes widening in sudden worry than vanquished his brooding, weary slump in an instant. "Nimueh? What is it, what's -?"

"They're here. They've found us." Nimueh cut him off with a sharp snap of words. Even in the hazy image of the crystal orb that Arthur only just make out, he saw her glance over her shoulder, pause and murmur something hurriedly as though relaying an order to a passer-by. She turned back to Merlin a moment later. "We're surrounded. The entire estate's surrounded. They approached out of nowhere and we hadn't the time to evacuate."

Merlin sucked in a breath that sounded almost like a hiss. Once more Arthur saw the swirl of gold rise in his eyes, but more in fear than anger this time. "What -?"

"We'll escape as soon as we can if we can't defeat them," Nimueh interrupted him once more. "Aithusa is holding them off. Those with the capacity for offensive magic will support her but… but we can't –"

"Nimueh, how long? How long have they been there? How many are they?" Arthur stepped to Merlin's side, staring at Nimueh's blurring image with a hard gaze.

Nimueh barely spared him a moment of her attention, didn't even bother with a derogatory snort at his interruption which said something of the urgency of the situation. "How many? Unknown. They're in Speed-Skimmers that can hold nearly a dozen passengers and there's at least twenty of them."

"Not an entire army then." Arthur glanced up at Merlin, meeting the growing horror in his wide-eyes with a like-minded stare. "They're likely scouting around, have probably sent similar scouting parties to other locations, but suspect that Nimueh is –"

"Pendragon! Emrys!" Nimueh's snap was suddenly harsh, demanding. Not really scolding but sharp with obvious worry. "We haven't the time to discuss this further. I can barely maintain our connection as it is, you need to –"
"We'll get there," Merlin cut in. "We'll get there as fast as we can, Nimueh. Just hold out until we arrive."

"You'd better," was all she said in nearly a growl. An instant later, as Nimueh turned to glance over her shoulder once more, her image faded from the orb leaving only milky crystal in its wake.

There was a pause. A pause in which Arthur stared at Merlin, met his gaze unblinkingly, unwaveringly, and Merlin stared back. Horror was exchanged between them, horror and despair and desperation. Why now? Why so soon? They had barely been conducting their rescue missions for two months and already –

Why now?

It was almost as if the fates had latched onto Merlin's words of moments before and realised them. Arthur felt his hands clenching tightly at his sides with the need to do something. They needed to be back, back to base, to the Fortress. And dammit, they had an entire sea to cross! It could hardly be worse timing!

"Merlin –"

"We need to go," Merlin snapped abruptly.

Not another word was shared. They ran for the Skimmer.

The smoke was the first thing they saw. The smoke, rising in wispy, dark clouds from the Fortress walls, illuminated even in the darkness of night by the withy-lights of the Sorcerers erecting a soft, white, magical glow. Arthur wasn't the only one leaning towards the front of the Skimmer, staring wide-eyed through the shaded glass at the bright spot as they sped across the barren plains that surrounded the estate.

"Fires…" Someone murmured. "Did they try to…? Try to burn…?"

"Or Aithusa," Merlin muttered at Arthur's side. His voice was so faint that Arthur didn't think he even knew he spoke. No one said a word further.

Then there was the destruction. It became clearer the closer they drew to the walls, the walls of the estate that were hardly even walls at all anymore. Rubble dribbled from what had been the impressive height of those walls, shattered and torn like the remains of an avalanche. Beyond that, the damage to the estate itself was almost as bad – walls punctured with visible holes, an entire wing seeming to have caved in upon itself, the thick, metallic doorway ripped from its hinges as though by a battering ram.

And around it: carnage.

What looked to be the remains of Skimmers, some broken in two and thrown in opposing directions, others so crumpled and torn apart as to barely resemble the vehicles they once were. Bodies that similarly barely resembled humans any longer – charred remains, limbless torsos, a head in the bug-like helmet of a Hunter without a body attached – were strewn widely across the grounds, both outside of the wall and inside the courtyard. Not many, not as many as would have been on a battlefield in times of old – not by half. But it was enough that Arthur stared.

More than that, however, was the atmosphere of the aftermath. The silent stasis, the absence of movement and activity, as though action had been paused in place in the middle of the wreckage though the fire still chewing at the remains of a Skimmer still crackled. As they approached, a
boulder-sized stone suddenly slipped from its teetering upon the remains of the wall and crushed down. Arthur had always thought that it was the aftermath that was more haunting than the actual battle itself. In battle, there was heat. There was adrenaline. There was the drive to move, to fight, to survive and defend for should he pause, should he delay for even a second, only death would result. A soldier, war leader or otherwise, barely had time to think in battle.

Afterwards was different. Afterwards, the evidence of what had happened, the true foolishness of warfare, was spread like a morbid banquet to the sickened eyes of the survivors. Arthur hadn't even fought in the battle that had raged at the estate, the battle that had evidently ceased, and yet he couldn't help but feel the familiar upwelling of regret, of repulsion, of disgust. Of pain. The Hunters, the soldiers who had attacked the Fortress – they were the ones in the wrong, but it didn't make their deaths feel right. They weren't good. Just… necessary.

Their Skimmers drew to a halt just outside of the walls and there was an overall rush to escape the vehicles and charge towards the potential survivors. They had made the trip back to the Fortress in record time, and it was clear that the battle had only just finished. The need to be assured of the welfare of those who had remained behind, of the recovering rescued, of the healers and the skeleton force of defenders, was paramount.

Arthur was right amongst his comrades, the dozens of Sorcerers sprinting into the shell of the destroyed base. He was aware that Merlin was at his side, but of little else. His eyes scanned the surrounds, catching upon the fallen, the dead, the destruction – detachedly, he recognised some of the bodies of their Sorcerers.

Of course they were. It would have been ignorant to believe they would have escaped without damage to their own ranks. But even so…

The Fortress itself, the inner building, looked to have had the entirety of its roof torn away. That was how Arthur perceived it. As though a giant's hand had reached down, grasping fingers towards the stone roofing and prying loose the seamless ceiling clamped atop the walls like the lid of a barrel to toss it aside. He saw their people before they were even within calling distance.

It was to the remains of the great hall that they had made their retreat. The great hall that was no longer a hall but a sorry mimic of the now-destroyed courtyard they had just passed through. Figures were hunched half-seated, others bowed over the bodies of the rescued, of those still too feeble to even support themselves in sitting, let alone use magic to defend their sanctuary. Arthur saw Gaius, sweeping through his ranks of patients with his eyes glowing with magic, saw Alice hastening between her patients just as quickly and even Nimueh bowing over a collection of younger Sorcerers, children for the most part, with her hand raised and shimmering faintly in the familiar glow of healing. And above them all loomed the dragon queen.

Morgana's cry of "Aithusa!" turned the dragon's great head towards their arrival. Her golden eyes, usually so vibrantly glowing, were dimmed, as though she were struggling beneath the weight of her own exhaustion. Which she quite possibly was, Arthur suspected, or at least from the ache of injuries. Dark blood painted her scales, shadowing as much of the whiteness as was revealed. Whether entirely her own or that of her foes Arthur wasn't sure, but at least some of it must have been from the injury that gashed across her chest, the visible tears in the delicate leather of her wings, from the hashing of scars that raked across her hind legs crusted grime. It was clear that she had been a primary fighter.

Arthur hadn't realised he'd drawn to a stop until his periphery noticed the swarming of their returning forces seeping around him. There were no exclamations of grief, no cries of woe or demands of "Why? Why did this happen?" The Sorcerers fell to silent efficiency, just as they did in their
infiltration operations, and within moments the hundreds of returning, those without the burden of the just-rescued, fell upon the wounded and glowing hands of healing sprung into existence like awakening fireflies.

Arthur's gaze swept their ranks. He couldn't tell exactly how many had been lost in the attack, hadn't had the chance to count before they were lost beneath the tidal wave of returning Sorcerers. He could calculate the impact of the destruction however. He could gauge that the blow to morale would be just as great as the physical loss of their forces, that the safety of their Fortress haven torn from beneath them would weigh heavily and painfully, terrifyingly, upon their shoulders. Even as his scanned his people – for they were his people, Arthur realised, truly his people; the people of his Albion and all that remained of the kingdom – even as they worked in silence, he saw faces tightening with the knowledge of what the attack meant for them, could make out the trembles of rising foreboding, the paleness of physical nausea arising from the mental strain at witnessing the first of what could only be many direct attacks.

He felt more than saw Merlin at his side. Arthur and Merlin, just the two of them, observing with cold silence the impact, the damage of what had been afflicted.

Until Merlin spoke. Again it was in the faint murmur, detached, as though he hardly even realised he spoke at all. "Pappy always told me that the more concentrated in one place the more likely it was for them to draw disaster upon those who wielded it."

Arthur turned towards Merlin, towards his profile that was pale in the abusive yet wan light of the glaring sun overhead. The sharp, angular lines of his face were tightened in pained, eyes narrowed slightly, lips pressed together as though to bite back the words that spilled forth. He didn't manage, however, for his murmur continued. "It was always going to happen. Even if we could manage to prevent a magical disaster from occurring, disaster itself was going to happen anyway. It's why communes never really last that long. It's why it's always safer to live in the bigger cities, to be interspersed by the unmagical, to have our density diluted. Disaster will always arise."

Arthur stared at him. He stared at the still, suddenly silent figure at his side, at his Merlin. Merlin who, in the Past, so long ago, had always been so ready with his reassurances. Who had always offered a smile, even in the most ridiculously impossible situations. But that had been the Past, and Arthur realised that such a Past was indeed behind them. That in this life, Merlin couldn't bring himself to such pervasive optimism all the time. That he'd seen horrors, experienced tortures, had been confronted with the real world, and when faced with death and destruction such experiences made it that much harder to push himself towards believing that everything would all be alright.

In so many ways, Arthur wanted his old Merlin back. He wanted the positivity that had supported Arthur as much as it had boosted the morale of everyone around him, in such a way that Arthur hadn't even realised how much of a benefit his joviality had been until it was no longer provided. He wanted it so badly that he was almost tempted to grab Merlin's shoulder, to drag him around to face him and shake him until he saw sense, until he went back to the way he was.

But he wouldn't. He couldn't. Because just as the world had changed so too had Merlin. There was no returning to the Past, just as a wizened adult couldn't return to being a child with the knowledge, the wisdom, the world-weariness that afflicted them. And truly, while Arthur may sometimes long the innocence of Merlin from the Past to return, may long for that positivity to arise once more, he wouldn't request it aloud. He wouldn't ask for it. He couldn't. And not only because it wouldn't be fair to Merlin; it was as much because Arthur loved this Merlin as much as he did that of the Past. Broken, regrown crooked, and yet still able to stand tall despite the shadow that loomed over him. Merlin still fought, he still struggled, even if at times he couldn't hide how much he hurt. He might be struggling beneath the weight of the world, may be unable to suppress feeling that darkness that
welled within him, but he still persisted. He still fought.

Stepping closer to his side, Arthur looped an arm around Merlin's shoulders, drawing him towards him. The tension in his stance, the tightness of his pose, didn't abate as Arthur settled himself against him, but he didn't draw away. After a moment, he even settled his own arm around Arthur's waist.

They stood in silence for a moment, simply watching. There was nothing that either of them could truly do, not in a situation so grounded in healing. Arthur knew barely the rudiments of first aid, and that paled in comparison to the skills of the Sorcerers, and Merlin… Merlin couldn't heal. Something in his past, he explained, in the past of his current life, inhibited him from it. Arthur didn't know what it was but didn't pursue the subject. Not when such a block so obviously distressed him.

So they waited. They watched. And though Merlin's words still rung between them, though Arthur's mind raced with considerations of possibilities, of where do we go? What do we do? Where should we hide now that the Fortress has fallen? he didn't speak. And when the eyes of the Sorcerers drew towards them, seeking support, reassurance, pleading silently and welling with the hope that Emrys, that Arthur Pendragon, would have a solution to their problems, Arthur met their gazes. Met them and attempted to convey a confidence he didn't feel. Just as a war leader should.

It was Aithusa who drew them from their silence. Aithusa, the giant dragon queen herself, who turned towards them and made a slow beckoning gesture with her head that Arthur didn't interpret immediately until Merlin, arm still around his waist, drew him towards her. They picked their way through the Sorcerers, through the wounded and the recovering that sprawled upon the ground in the inadequate bedding of pillows and blankets that did little to soften the hard floor. Arthur took a moment to glance at every one of them as they passed, to meet the eyes of the injured and the healers, to attempt to convey steadfast confidence when he didn't feel it.

Morale. Morale was important. And even if the commander lacked it, the soldiers should still be boosted by the confidence he presented.

When they drew before Aithusa, it was to stop at Morgana's side at the same moment that Nimueh also stopped before her. Evidently she too had noticed and understood Aithusa's request for attention.

With a slow dropping of her head, Aithusa swept her gaze across all of them in turn. Morgana had done her best to heal her wounds with her own magic and the gash along her chest, larger up close, looked to be days rather than hours old. When she spoke it was with a sombre tone as though offering an ultimatum. "We cannot remain here."

"Evidently," Nimueh said immediately. "That much is apparent. We have no 'here' in which to remain." Aithusa's slowly turning head silenced her but only for a moment. She took a subtle yet deep breath and raised her chin as if in defiance. "I have a secondary residence, further north into Scotland. If we withdraw there –"

"No."

Aithusa's single word wasn't demanding. It wasn't harsh or angry, or even mildly irritated at Nimueh's presumption, that she would so speak her opinion before Aithusa got the chance to voice her own. It silenced Nimueh instantly nonetheless.

Arthur was staring at Nimueh, at the further paling of her face as though she were a child that had just been scolded by her parent. As such, he almost missed the moment that Merlin slipped from beneath his arm to step towards Aithusa. His expression was guarded, yet beneath that guardedness Arthur thought he could make out a faint glimmer of hope. "What do you know, Aithusa?"
"Know?" Arthur asked before he could stop himself.

"You obviously know something. Or suspect something," Merlin didn't glance towards Arthur. A frown settled slightly upon his brow as he stared up at Aithusa. "About what you've been considering?"

Arthur had a moment of confusion before he made sense of Merlin's words. What Aithusa had been considering. Of Taliesin's words. Of her own suspicions but days before. She had said she had a 'consideration', a consideration pertaining to the supposed 'confusion' of Taliesin's precognition. What Arthur could discern of Merlin's words, of the response that Aithusa afforded him in her attentiveness and lack of denial, was that she had finally validated her suspicions.

With an inclination of her enormous head, nearly the size of a Skimmer, Aithusa nodded. "I have contemplated. And I believe that I have a solution. We will not reside at your residences, Priestess." She didn't even turn towards Nimueh as she addressed her. Instead, her gaze drew unexpectedly towards Arthur instead. They settled upon him unwaveringly. "It is too dangerous to remain in the world of the unmagical. To be so afflicted by threat upon threat. I believe that the only solution would be to withdraw from this world entirely."

There was a moment of silence. Of stunned silence and confusion. Arthur found himself staring at the unwavering gold of Aithusa's gaze as it still settled eerily upon him.

"Withdraw from this world… what does that mean?"

"What do you mean, Aithusa?" Morgana asked, her voice thin and suddenly embodying her age as it hadn't so much in the weeks since Arthur had been reunited with her. "What do you… leave the world? How does that…?"

"Where would we go?" Merlin's voice held not so much the confusion of Morgana's but genuine query. As though he knew that Aithusa would have an answer and sought to urge her towards revealing it. "To escape the world of the 'unmagical' – where would that be?"

Arthur glanced towards Merlin, at his wide-eyed attentiveness turned toward Aithusa. He saw faint desperation in the schooled set of his features. Merlin, as much and perhaps more than everyone else, needed to know. He needed direction. As a leader, as the icon that Arthur believed him to be, he needed to have a goal to strive for.

His attention was drawn from Merlin by the physical weight of Aithusa's gaze narrowing in upon him more heavily still. Arthur had but a moment to experience confusion before she spoke. "We will go to Avalon."

Silence.

Once more silence settled upon them. It took Arthur a long moment of that silence, of surprise that was touched by more than a little incredulity, to realise that not a voice spoke throughout the courtyard of what had once been the great hall. Not a one chanted in the healing language of magic. No one moved nor shifted. It was as though they were bound by silence.

Then someone not far behind Arthur sighed. It was a loud sigh, but wouldn't have been quite so audible if the silence hadn't been so pervasive. Taliesin's murmur followed. "Ah. There it is. That's what I was looking for and couldn't see…"

His words seemed to shake life back into Aithusa's audience. Morgana was the first to speak. "How? How is that possible? Avalon is –"
"The world of magic," Merlin continued for her. His frown impressed more firmly upon his face, confusion but not the melancholy of despair that Arthur knew would have arisen had he discounted Aithusa's words entirely. "If it even exists – which many people think it doesn't – it's not even connected to our world. It would inaccessible to the living. Not even a creature of magic can access it while still alive."

"No, they cannot," Aithusa rumbled with a nod of her head. "Unless they have already been there before. Unless they have been born again as a child of Avalon. Such a child could once more open the untouchable doors."

Once more there was silence. A stunned silence. And yet suddenly it all made sense to Arthur. As he felt the weight of gazes turn towards him, as his own met Merlin's sudden comprehension as his eyes turned to him, he understood. He remembered.

There was precious little of Avalon that still remained to Arthur. Little if anything. He recalled hardly anything of the time after his death, between awakening and hauling himself from the lake to fall into the begrudgingly welcoming arms of old man Mite who had lived in the lakeside town of Glaston. When he turned his mind back to the past, to his past in the New World, it was to recall meeting Nimueh after attempting to break into her secure files. It was to remember the slow, hesitant trip he'd taken from Glaston to London, the New World and all of its changes impressing upon him with every step. It was memory of his meeting with Sophia, the Sidhe girl he had once encountered in the Past so long ago, who had been the first to explain to him the reality of sorcerers, of their reincarnation, of the loss of everyone he had ever known and yet the rebirth of those few. It was to recall his first days under the care of old Mite, resentful and all but willing to help him for what Arthur had later come to understand as being in the hopes of Arthur 'putting in a good word for him with whomever his parents happened to be'. It had taken Arthur a long time to even understand why the old man had considered him wealthy at all, though he could only be thankful of that misunderstanding.

Before that was hazy. Hazy like a dream, like being wreathed and cradled by thick, downy pillows and even thicker, softer pillows. He remembered a light, a warmth, a brightness. He remembered the epitome of joy as only a distant echo, one that barely even reverberated in a shadow since he had left the golden shores of that magical land.

Arthur hardly remembered any of it. He had wanted to, but he couldn't. And in the years since, he had forced himself not to try; it would only end in a wasted effort anyway.

"I don't remember Avalon," Arthur found himself saying. He found himself staring unblinkingly into Merlin's eyes, his gaze filled with just a touch of rising hope, a potential for embracing the proffered hand that Aithusa's words had given him. He stared at Arthur as though he held the key to the world, which, if Aithusa was correct in her suspicions, perhaps he did. "I don't remember any of it really. It's more of an impression." Arthur shook his head. "I never believed that I would even return there. The idea never crossed my mind."

Aithusa nodded her head sagely in the semblance of a wise man yet infinitely more profound because she truly was wise. A dragon queen, one who had lived for millennia; there could truly be none the wiser. "I would anticipate that you wouldn't. Avalon is a sacred land, protected and protective of itself and its children. I would hazard a guess that such protection would extend to ignorance of its reality upon leaving it."

Arthur nodded slowly. That would make sense. A sad reality it was, but it would make sense. "You believe that I could return there? More than that," he made a gesture towards Merlin, towards Morgana, a sweeping motion towards the Sorcerers behind him. "You think that I would be able to
lead everyone there?"

Aithusa wasn't the one to reply to his words, though her head cocked in consideration and she appeared on the verge of doing so. Instead, Taliesin, who had stepped up to Arthur's side and peered at him with eyes swirling a vivid orange, quoted in sombre tones. "That's it. That's the meaning of it, of what I had seen but not understood." He nodded his head slowly, and a small smile that grew rapidly wider spread across his face. His gaze still settled upon Arthur, but he was given the impression that the old seer was looking through him rather than at him. "Avalon. The once and future king, he will return the dregs of Albion back to the birthplace of magic itself. That's…"

"I believe so," Aithusa nodded, and a hum of something approaching satisfaction rippled through the ground in tangible vibrations. She lowered her head until it was but an arms length from Arthur. Even so, he couldn't step away, no more than he could look away. "Lead us to a new home, child of Avalon."

Home. A home. In Avalon. Arthur had never considered it, had never even contemplated the possibility – Avalon was a time, a place, a barely-recalled memory of something glorious. It was like the sun that was almost absent from the world. It was like the brightness, the vibrancy of a luscious spring, flowers erupting from the soil in a mosaic of colours and trees sprouting leafy laurels in a way that Arthur knew no longer grew in the New World. It was warmth, it was comfort, it was scent of the new, the rich headiness of clean rain after a drought, the dive into an icy pool on a scorching day.

Perfection. That was how Arthur perceived it. He couldn't remember it – he hadn't let himself try to remember it – but that was what he knew it as being. He hadn't thought it possible to return, hadn't even contemplated it because he couldn't – because he'd had a kingdom to return to and then discover was lost. He'd had Merlin to find, and Morgana, and then a people to protect and rescue. He couldn't spare the thought, the notion, for even considering Avalon. It was in the past. The Past.

But Aithusa was wise. She was knowledgeable, possibly knew more of the world and the magic it held than anyone or anything in existence – Aithusa had told him it was possible to return. And Arthur wanted it. He wanted it almost as much as he wanted to return to Camelot, to a kingdom that had long since fallen to ashes.

Arthur hadn't realised he was smiling until he saw the mirroring smile spreading across Merlin's face, turned towards him. It was a smile of relief, of desperate relief, of understanding and hope.

Slowly, Arthur inclined his head in a nod. Then he glanced towards Aithusa, spared a glanced for Taliesin, and turned fully towards the people around him. "Then I will. I will lead us to a new home. To Avalon."

No one cheered. No one cried out in joy. But the sigh of relief, the almost-sobs – they were as good as.
"We've shaken loose of them, Emrys. At least for the moment."

Merlin released a breath he hadn't known he held and briefly closed his eyes. Then he turned towards Penny, the changeling still possessing the amber shine of magic to her pupil-less eyes. Even with the reassurance that they had managed to shake loose the tail that had been upon them since they'd fled the remains Fortress but hours before she maintained her lookout. She was his watcher, just as every one of the dozens of Skimmers had a watcher. They were spaced at a moderate distance from one another but close enough to provide support should they encounter opposition on their route to Somersept.

Hours they had been travelling. Almost minutes after Aithusa's revelation, after Arthur had announced that the impossible – that going to Avalon – was maybe just possible, they had flooded into the Skimmers, piling their rescued and their more mobile Sorcerers aboard. It was a tight squeeze – they hadn't truly anticipated having to move everyone at once, despite Merlin realising in that moment that they should have probably expected such a possibility. Hope for the best and prepare for the worst he had always been told. He hadn't been prepared, not completely. He'd hoped instead.

But even that knowledge of his own failings, the slowness that resulted from it as the Skimmers were loaded at maximum weight, couldn't shake him from his focused eagerness. Avalon. They were going to Avalon. More than that, almost more importantly than going to the fabled land that was as much a myth as it was an untouchable reality, was the knowledge that they were going to a sanctuary. A sanctuary that would be out of reach to those who sought to do them harm.

Only a child of Avalon could open the doors. That was what Aithusa said. Only a child of Avalon and Arthur was one such child. Merlin hadn't even conceived the true meaning of such a title, afforded by Aithusa in a way that seemed to be more an instinctive address than a true knowledge of the meaning of it. But now…

A child of Avalon. One who could open the doors, the gateway between. One who could lead them to safety, to a haven, where they could live without fear. Kilgharrah had once said that Arthur would return in Albion's time of greatest need. And Aithusa had said that the kingdom itself, that the land of Albion, was reduced to merely the people who retained a memory of it. The dregs of Albion, evidenced only in those people, in those sorcerers and magical beings that still recalled its glory days – that was who Arthur would protect. It was they he was protecting.

It was they he would save.

Merlin clung to that knowledge. There was no certainty, of course. Aithusa's speculations were only speculations. Even if she didn't admit as much, Merlin knew. He knew that there was no assurances, that it was just as likely they would arrive at what had once been the Lake of Avalon – of Ave à Lone as it was now called – and be barred entry from their intended passage. And then they would be left with nothing. They would have failed.

Merlin didn't let himself think that. He couldn't. He wouldn't. Not until proven true. Instead, he focused his attention solely upon making as much speed towards Glaston as was possible.

When they had left the Fortress, their watchers, those with spatial rather than temporal Sight, had already caught glimpses of the distantly approaching back-ups to those who had assaulted their base. There hadn't been a moment to spare. Unanimously, linked by the crystal orbs that acted as their communication devices, they agreed that every Sorcerer would pool their efforts. Even some of the
patients, those barely able to hold their heads up, had fought to throw their magic forward in an attempt to stave off their foes.

They skewed their tracks, physical and chemical.

They cast illusions that both tripled their apparent number of Skimmers and fled in every which direction in an attempt to confuse.

They conjured winds, smoothed the earth, powered the engines of the Skimmers until they strained in an effort to drive them forwards faster.

And when the divided forces of those back-ups caught up with them, the Speed-Skimmers that sped faster than even their magically reinforced vehicles, they fought back.

Merlin added his own magic to the mix, throwing his everything into their defence. He erected invisible shields in their wake that crumpled their pursuers on impact. He opened the roof of the Skimmer he and the dozen other Sorcerers were squashed into and fired magical projectiles behind them, exploding their targets into ashes. He conjured up a wind in a mimic of that he could feel Edwin struggling to erect and forced them on to greater speed.

It worked. For a while. They lost their tails. But then they gained others, more. It was a three-hour trip from their Fortress to Glaston with the speed they were travelling, and they wouldn't escape the notice of their pursuers for long. Besides that, they had to skirt around London. They'd gained a whole platoon of assailants with their passing.

That platoon had only just been shaken. Just in time, too, for they drew into Glaston barely minutes later. It wouldn't last for long. Merlin knew, but he held hope that they could make it to the lake in time. That they would escape without another confrontation. He hoped.

"T minus three minutes to Glaston," Jiles called over his shoulder, barely raising his gaze from where it was trained upon the holographic map that sat at the front of the Skimmer. Merlin, who had stationed himself at the back of the Skimmer and still half leaned out from the roof so the wind wailed in his ears almost deafeningly, only nodded his agreement.

Three minutes to Glaston. They would disembark just on the outskirts of town, just out of sight. Dawn was only just approaching, only just settling upon them, but hopefully the residue of night would conceal them enough. Hopefully they would be adequately hidden from view, enough to make it to the lake. Merlin held onto his mental chanting of hope, hope, hope, please as he turned his gaze into their wake once more. He'd urged Jiles to keep their Skimmer towards the back of their party just in case, and a glance forwards caught a glimpse of the shadows of Aithusa soaring on enormous wings overhead like a solid cloud, of the countless Skimmers speeding below her. Some were at a distance, others close enough to make out the figures of their fellows inside. Merlin knew without being able to make him out that Arthur's was at the very head of their forces.

They pulled to stop as one of the last within sight of the glowing sprawl of Glaston. It wasn't a large town, barely a candle to the bonfire of London's size, but it was large enough. It likely held at least several thousand residents, likely all of whom would shriek in terror and turn whatever weapons in their possession upon the Sorcerers should they realise who they were. Merlin didn't intend for them to find out. He didn't intend for them to drift close enough to the silent residences, bathing beneath the ever-present glow of light pollution that was a constant even in such a small town, for them to realise they were there at all.

He jumped from the Skimmer, clambering out through the roof rather than waiting for the rest of his fellows to exit through the doors. With long strides he led them towards the head of their party,
pausing only briefly to call to Jiles. "Just key in the security lock anyway, Jiles. Just in case."

Jiles paused in the act of following them, dark eyebrow rising slightly. "Why? I thought we weren't coming back?"

Merlin nodded his agreement to the younger man's words. He was right. Mostly. "Probably not. Not for most of us. But some – we will come back."

"For everyone else, right?" Penny asked, her youthful voice high yet hardened with determination. "We won't leave them all behind."

Merlin nodded his agreement. He wanted to go to Avalon, wanted so badly the freedom and the safety, the easing of the fears that had sat with him for the entirety of this life, that had practically become a part of him. He didn't even know what it would feel like not to be scared all the time. It was a foreign concept.

And yet he knew he would return. He had to. There was no way he would allow the rest of the sorcerers, everyone else with even the slightest hint of magic, to remain at the hands of a government who thought it a disease, who sought to 'cure' then of what wasn't an ailment, and killing them in the process. Merlin could never leave someone to that. Anyone. And there was a whole world of government-funded Pits who sought to imprison, to torture, to destroy and vanquish that which was so integral to a Sorcerer's life.

It was an impossible task, but one Merlin would strive to accomplish. He would. He couldn't leave anyone behind, not to that. Besides, even with the message Mordred had sent to the world at large through his amplification artefact, urging any potential travellers from the remains of the Fortress, there would be more that would seek to come. More that would strive to assist, would long for the lifeline that was offered to them.

Merlin couldn't leave them behind either, no more than he could those in the Pits.

Nodding to Penny, he offered a nod to the smiles of approval, of satisfaction, arising on the faces of the ten other passengers of his Skimmer. "We won't leave them behind. And it might be a little idealistic to think that the Skimmers would still be there should I come back, for when I might need them –"

"For when we might need them," Penny interrupted, her pale eyes flashing in correction. "For when we come back."

Merlin paused in the act of turning back towards the gathering of their people to glance towards her once more. He couldn't help but offer a slightly wider smile at the determination that spread across each of the faces of his comrades, at the commitment. "I wouldn't ask you to –"

"You don't have to," Penny overrode him once more. "We wouldn't expect you to. But you're not coming back alone, Emrys."

Merlin could only nod in acceptance, dropping his chin to hide the upwelling of emotion that choked him slightly. Hiding from their gazes too, from the loyalty of his fellow Sorcerers, he turned and led them through the field of stationary Skimmers.

They drew alongside their gathering forces, Merlin weaving amidst those standing and those cradled upon stretchers or with their arms looped around the shoulders of those who offered them support where their own feet could do so. He saw Freya, who had only just returned from her Bastet from of which the Whisperer of Tongues Artemis had kept her under control. He caught a glimpse of Gaius
and Alice urging a clutch of children surrounding them, of Edwin, leaning heavily upon the shoulder of Giddian, He saw Mordred with Cerdan trotting at his heels who similarly held Iseldir aloft as one of the few who hadn't been drawn from his comatose state despite the gravity of their situation. Aithusa crouched as a towering figure alongside Morgana, who Merlin saw was wrapped around a feeble Morgause who had only hours before been awoken for the first time. She swung her head waveringly around her with the limpness of a newborn, eyes wide but visibly blurry even through the darkness, as if unbelieving of what she saw. She likely was. Their populace numbered in the hundreds, breaking over seven hundred in the previous week and would likely still be at such a size even with –

Even after the attack. Merlin didn't want to consider that. Not now. Maybe not ever. Even if it needed to be considered.

He stepped up to Arthur's side. Arthur, who was standing tall and confident, arms folded across his chest and scanning their people like the vision of strength he always had been. He wasn't quite as tall, relatively speaking, as he had been in the Past, but Merlin would still always consider him an impressive sight. For he was: broad shoulders, wide stance, the unblinking hardness of his eyes conveying confidence and surety rather than superiority and disregard. In the pre-dawn waness, just light enough to see by, his crown of blonde hair looked almost like a halo, the faint stubble upon his chin tinged his skin golden. He turned night-darkened upon Merlin as he stopped beside him and Merlin might have been imagining it but he swore he saw him ease slightly of his tension barely-perceivable tension. Merlin couldn't blame him for his concern. He always felt a similar worry arise within him whenever Arthur was out of sight, even briefly.

"Harper said she could see traces of an approaching party in our wake. Distant, but approaching," he murmured as soon as Merlin was close enough to hear.

Merlin nodded. Penny hadn't seen anything, even as one of the watchers furthest behind, but Harper was their specialist when it came to spatial Sight. If she'd seen something that the rest of their watchers hadn't, it was nothing to disregard. "Then we'd better get a move on."

Arthur nodded his own agreement. "Would you like to do the honours or should I?"

Shrugging, Merlin made a gesture with his hand. "You're the orator of the two of us. I'll just make sure you're heard." And with a hot-cold swirl of magic in his eyes, he drew forth a tendril of power and directed it towards Arthur. When Arthur spoke his voice echoed just loud enough to carry to the ears of every listener yet not beyond. His words were brief, but all eyes falling upon him, all lips pressed shut and tongues silenced. "Sorcerers. We have reached our goal. Over that hill," he gestured behind himself, "lies the Lake of Avalon. Our new home."

The silent eagerness visibly grew within the listening crowd, an eagerness that Merlin felt well within himself, too. Home. In only hours, the prospect of Avalon had grown to the vibrant possibility of returning to a 'home'. Merlin had never had a home, not in this life. It felt like a foreign concept, an impossibility, a dream from the Past. Just as Avalon was. Had been. Except that now both dreams were becoming a reality.

"There is nothing more for me to say, but to make all haste. To support those who are in need. And to follow me." There was a brief touch of uncertainty that passed over Arthur's face, but it was so brief, so slight, that Merlin considered it likely that no one else would have seen it. "I will lead you through the doors."

That was when the silence erupted. Not loud enough to echo over to the sidelong town but enough to overwhelm any words Arthur may have continued with. Not that he did. With a nod of his head, reaching towards Merlin in a manner entirely improper for a commander but accepted from their
people nonetheless, he linked their hands together and started into the semi-darkness in the direction
of the lake.

It was an easy trip. The region around Glaston was flat, absented even of the moderate undulations
that had surrounded the Fortress, and they made quick time. Or as quick as was possible for their
forces who were at least half incapacitated in one way or another. Magic couldn't fully erase the
weight of the feeble, the drag of heavy, exhausted feet. Even Aithusa with her long strides seemed
slowed with the weight of weariness, energy depleted from the fight that she had fought and the long
flight following. Merlin kept an eye upon their people, watching them with worried attentiveness.
They didn't have long. Someone would find them. They didn't have much time to reach the lake, to
access Avalon, to be away from a world that sought nothing but their disappearance.

Maybe they would even be happy that they'd left.

Of course, it would never be as easy as that. Harper's Sight proved accurate, much to Merlin's and
Arthur's frustration.

It was the sound of their pursuers that arose first. A distant roaring, the buzz of approaching
machinery rippled across the steadily lightening expanse of empty plains. Merlin turned at the sound.
Turned and walked backwards, his hand still in Arthur's warm grasp. Arthur similarly turned,
glancing over his shoulder. His feet picked up their pace, dragging Merlin along with him.

Except that when the Fighter Barge drew into sight, Merlin stopped. He stopped and drew his hand
from Arthur's. The manor-sized vehicle rumbled towards them, the dust of its hovering passage
erupting around its base like sweeping skirts. Vast and metallic, fluorescent lights beaming from its
head like unblinking eyes, it sped towards them at a pace that bellied the distance between them.
Fighter Barges put the speed of their regular transport cousins to shame.

Rising murmurs and gasps of fear rippled throughout the Sorcerers as they swept past Merlin in his
immobility. Fear that hastened their steps as protective concern had sped Arthur's. Within minutes it
would be upon them, Merlin knew. And from the size of the Barge it likely held half an army in its
hull.

"Merlin, come on." Arthur's voice sounded from directly behind him, just as his hand reached out to
lock on Merlin's once more. It was a demand, an order as much as a request. "If we hurry, we might
be able to –"

"We won't. We won't make it in time," Merlin murmured. He didn't care that the gazes of the
surrounding Sorcerers snapped towards him – or at least he didn't care enough to draw his attention
towards them. "We won't make it unless…"

Snatching his hand from Arthur's once more, Merlin threw himself back in the direction they'd come.
The shout of "Merlin!", more terrified than angry, was accompanied by cries of "Emrys!" and
"Don't!" Merlin ignored them all. He threw himself away from his Sorcerers, sprinting along the path
they had just trodden even if he had no real intention of crossing the entire the distance to the Barge
entirely. And when he drew far enough from the Sorcerers that he hoped any backlash from his
building magic wouldn't whip them savagely in a rebounding effect, he skidded to a stop.

It might have been wholly too ambitious. It might have been too much to assume that he could
destroy a monster of a Barge just himself. Maybe he should have relied upon the support of the
Sorcerers, should have asked for support. But he didn't want to drag anyone else along with him.
They had to flee. They should still have been fleeing. Merlin didn't glance over his shoulder to
check.
Raising his arms, he drew upon that rising well of magic swirling within him. It flowed through his veins in an invigorating rush, brightening his vision with the sparks of magic. And with a sweeping swipe of his hands, he unleashed a raging tidal wave of force towards the Barge. It burst from him in an explosive rush.

Merlin could almost see the magic, which shouldn't have been possible because it wasn't visible. He could almost see the stampede of energy that galloped towards the oncoming vehicle, that raced like a charging bull with head bowed and horns pointed. With a mental thrust of all that was in him, he urged it to smash the metallic hulk to the ground.

The sound of a true explosion erupted across the plains. Like thunder without the lightning, in a snapping clap, the blow stuck into the metal of the vehicle and rumbled forth like a volleying ball rebounding to Merlin. In the wake of the expected shockwave that blasted Merlin, that made him squint, that caused him to physically rock upon his heels and raked at his hair and dragged at his skin, the Barge fell. Like a tower struck from its foundations, it leaned. It groaned at the force of Merlin's magic and, slowly but surely, it fell. Nose tipping, arcing in a rapid decline, it fell.

The following crash into the ground shook the plains like an earthquake.

The instant it collided with the ground, Merlin reeled in his magic. Dragging at the charging bull of power, he withdrew, straining to pull the force and energy back from its crushing attack upon the felled Barge. The head of the vehicle had caved, was still caving, and only eased when, in a ping like a rubber band, Merlin's magic snapped back into him.

He sagged an instant later.

Merlin hadn't even noticed that Arthur had followed him until he felt arms grab around his waist, catching him as he fell. Strong arms, always dependable, and a scowl that turned upon Merlin as he tilted his dizzily swaying head. The concern in Arthur's wide eyes smothered any real anger, however, as he shook his head, releasing a sigh. "You're an idiot, Merlin. Would it have killed you to ask for help?"

Even through the sudden bout of weariness, the haziness that momentarily clouded his vision and the tremble that had only just set its hold on him, Merlin smiled. "Sorry 'bout that."

Arthur only shook his head. Then, with surprising ease – it should not have been so easy – he propped Merlin on his feet, looping his arm around his shoulders and hefting him so that he was barely even touched the ground. Then, turning to reveal the waiting mass of Sorcerers that had stood behind him, that had hastened after Merlin without his knowledge with eyes aglow with magic and arms raised, they fell to their retreat once more.

The Lake of Avalon was hardly a lake. To say that that it had entirely dried up Merlin would have felt to be an exaggeration, but not by much. It was barely larger than a pond, the tranquility of its surface undisturbed in mirror-like flatness that reflected the wispy blanket of mist shrouding it. That mist reflected the feeble illumination of the rising sunlight that beamed upon it, forbidding the polluted light from touching its pristine surface.

For all the smallness of its size, however, Merlin couldn't see the other side of the lake. He knew it was there, knew that if he'd skirted the lake that he would eventually come full circle, but he couldn't see it. It as almost as though it wasn't there at all. Almost as if an entire world existed between the shores.

Which, Merlin considered, there sort of was. There had to be.
The Sorcerers lined the lakeside, spreading and staring, peering into the mists with visible hope in their eyes. It was almost longing in its intensity, radiating from their masses like a physical pain. Merlin couldn't blame them for it, not when he felt a similar longing welling within him.

"I climbed out from almost this exact spot, you know," Arthur murmured. He still wrapped his arm around Merlin's waist, holding him steady despite the fact that Merlin himself had regained his senses enough in the brief trip to the shore to be able to hold himself upright. Arthur gestured towards one point in particular, indiscernible from the rest. "Right there."

"The fact that you even know that..." Merlin murmured, shaking his head.

"What?" Arthur asked, glancing towards him with a raised eyebrow.

"Nothing."

"What do we do?" The young girl – Flint, she called herself – glanced up at Merlin from his side, wedged as she was between he and Mordred who still carried Iseldir. Flint and Mordred weren't the only ones who turned with faithful query towards Merlin, towards Arthur, as though they would know what to do.

They didn't. Merlin didn't need to confer with Arthur to know that he had no further clue than Merlin did. Not that he revealed as much. Instead, with the confidence of a king who knew he was right even if he didn't know, he gestured towards the misted depths of the lake in reply to Flint's words. "We head inwards."

"We could build a bridge," the voice of Morgana sounded from somewhere behind them. "Across the water, we could –"

"I could solidify the surface, freeze it easy enough," another voice interrupted.

"I could help. I'm alright with water working."

"I grew up on the sea."

"I was a miller three hundred years ago; I know the basics."

A series of murmurs erupted around them, offering suggestions, offering support. Merlin felt a rush of affection for the ready offer of aid, the enthusiasm of his fellows. He should have expected it – they had all relied upon one another, always offered their mutual support since the beginning of their rescue missions. Even when it could have cost them their lives.

Arthur's expression barely changed, but Merlin could swear he saw a touch of satisfaction upon his lips. A touch of approval, of affection. "Then that's what we'll do."

That was all the permission that the Sorcerers needed to respond.

Merlin didn't partake. He didn't need to, which was a relief because it would have been a struggle with the magical strain of his felling of the Barge in one fierce blow still settled upon him. Before his eyes, in a ripple of magic, the surface of the lake visibly hardened. Merlin could almost see the magic flow with that way that his sixth sense could detect, and he beheld the stretching, reaching tendrils of power stroking across that surface of the lake and urging it into hardening. Freezing it into a wide road of ice that stretched into the mist. Not smooth but gravelled, as though to forbid the potential for slipping. Merlin wondered whose extra touch that belonged to.

What arose was a veritable highway that stretched across the lake, conjured in seconds in a white-
blue sheen that seemed to mimic the drifting vaporousness of the mist. Wide enough to fit at least twenty abreast. They would be able to retreat quickly, which was a benefit. Merlin didn't have confidence that their reprieve from attack would take long. But that road… was captivating. Enchanting. It held so many prospects, was the pathway that led into the potential light.

Just as Arthur took a single step to continue down the shore to the water's edge, making to lead the way down the frozen bridge, a voice called out from the back of their crowd. "Emrys! Emrys, there is someone –"

Instantly, Merlin snapped his attention over his shoulder. Not with anxiousness so much as confusion. The voice that had called for his attention didn't sound worried but merely startled, as though the arrival of whoever approached was unexpected but not concerning. Sharing a glance with Arthur, meeting him frown for frown, he drew away from him and made for the back of the crowd. Or at least he tried to draw away from him – Arthur didn't let him for more than a second, reaffirming his hold around Merlin's shoulders as though he actually needed the support.

The crowd parted before him, revealing an open passage to the trodden plains of their wake. In that passage stood a girl. A single girl, a slip of a thing who looked barely six years old. She stared up at the Sorcerers from a distance of ten paces away with wide dark eyes, pale, mud-smeared face peering through the matted tressed of her fringe as her fingers tugged at the filthy, torn hem of her tunic. She was barefoot, embodying the stereotype of a street rat to a T.

Merlin stepped towards her, adopting a calm, soothing expression in an attempt to alleviate the evident wariness in her eyes. Not fear, surprisingly, but a definite guardedness, a tension far too pronounced and knowing for someone her age. Or should have been except that most every sorcerer or magical being, most every slum-dweller, was the same. Old beyond their years. Her gaze fell upon Merlin as he drew towards her across the open distance behind the Sorcerers, Arthur right behind him.

The girl shuffled slightly when Merlin dropped to his knee before her, Arthur's arm slipping momentarily from his shoulders. Her eyes never left his face, only appearing confused when he offered her a smile. "Hello. What's your name?"

The girl stared at him, for a moment, then drew her gaze briefly over his shoulder. Then to him, then back over his shoulder once more. She worried at her lip for a long moment before replying. "I'm… I'm Daegal. I heard… I saw your magic from where I was hiding, and I thought…"

Merlin blinked in surprise. Blinked, and then felt a smile spread across his face. "What are the odds?"

"Daegal. I knew you, you know."

Daegal started slightly, eyes fluttering rapidly in momentary confusion before understanding dawned. "Really?"

"Really. We were… friends of a sort, I suppose you could say." He held out a hand. "My name's Merlin. It's a pleasure to meet you again, Daegal."

Daegal stared up at him for a long moment, stared at his hand, then tentatively reached forwards and grasped his fingers. Merlin wrapped her small hand in his own and let his smile widen. It was barely even a struggle to do so. In a moment, as though the expression was foreign upon her face – which it likely was – Daegal smiled in return. "Merlin."

Merlin nodded. He didn't ask her anything further, nothing personal. She was like a young deer, quivering and nervous and on the verge of leaping into flight. Instead, he rose to his feet, keeping his hand wrapped around hers. "We're going home, Daegal. Would you like to come with us?"
Daegal followed his movements as he rose to standing, eyes widening slightly in incredulity. "Home?" She glanced behind her, in the direction of Glaston with a distinct discomfort before glancing back towards Merlin. "What home?"

"Avalon. Have you heard of it, by any chance?"

Daegal didn't reply, but her eyes widened further nonetheless. Widened in wonder and awe. For every possessor of magic, knew of Avalon. Even the children. Even a six year old. Maybe not more than an ideal, an inkling of a legend, but they all knew. In an instant Daegal was nodding her head vigorously.

Merlin nodded in turn. "Then you're more than welcome to come with us," and without another word he turned around and made his way back through the parted Sorcerers, drawing the little girl after him. Arthur raised his eyebrow at him as he drew alongside him, turning in step as they made their way back through the crowd.

"You know her?" He murmured with a sidelong glance, quiet enough for Daegal to remain ignorant of his words.

Merlin nodded. "Knew her. From Albion. Although she was a boy then, and not quite so young."

Arthur nearly stumbled, whipping his head fully towards Merlin with both eyebrows rising in surprise. "A boy?"

Merlin bit back a smile, could see the smile's surfacing on the Sorcerers he passed as the overheard his sudden loud bout of incredulity. "Yes. It happens sometimes. Rarely, but sometimes."

"To you?"

Merlin shrugged, slowing to a stop as they approached the ice-path over the lake. Daegal touched a foot forwards, as though feeling out the pathway with a building of awe in her expression. He glanced towards Arthur and couldn't withhold the smirk that arose at his stunned expression. "Yeah. Twice. It's not as confusing as you'd expect it to be."

Slowly, Arthur shook his head. "Will the wonders never cease?"

"Never."

With a sigh, Arthur seemed to forcibly thrust the thought aside. He leant around Merlin slightly to peer at Daegal, who didn't even appear to notice for the attention she trained upon the ice-path that had been erected, physically parting the matted hair before her face with her other hand as though seeking anything to clear her vision further. "Well, that's one more rescued, I suppose. How many more to go?"

"I have no idea. But I guess we'll find out."

Merlin shook his head, yet even the effects of Arthur's reminder couldn't dampen his light-heartedness entirely. "That we will," Arthur nodded, and linking his hand into Merlin's once more, they took their first steps onto the gravelly, icy surface of the bridge leading to Avalon.

Merlin didn't know what they would find at the end of the bridge. Whether they would even reach the doors of Avalon embedded in the mist. He didn't know if they would open if they did find them. But he forced himself not to think about it. He squeezed the hands of Arthur and Daegal respectively as they strode along the ice, spared a moment to glance over his shoulder to the Sorcerers that followed behind. He saw Mordred right behind him, Cerdan trotting at his side, Gaius and Alice
holding hands as they led a horde of children along with them. He saw Nimueh striding regally just behind, her eyes trained forwards with a mixture of hunger and determination. Freya stumbled at Artemis' side, the Whisperer catching hold of her as she slipped, and Edwin just visible behind them. Penny and Jiles, Taliesin and Maelys, Mellie and Lee and Rik and Ophelia, and looming over the top of them all Aithusa, with Morgana striding at her side as she took her slow, lumbering steps.

So many sorcerers. So many magics. And yet they were only a portion of those that existed. Such a small portion of a greater whole, of a looming challenge set before them. But they would get there. They would return. Merlin and Arthur at least had decided that they would finish what they'd started.

Turning forwards once more, Merlin stepped into the mist, the mist that glowed like a visible light, shrouding and masking, curtaining the steps of their passage. They would return. They would come back and they would save what remained. They would rescue the last dregs of Albion.
The buzz of the market had died down to a gentle lull as the sun began its descent. What had been a hubbub of activity was now thinned to a sparse smattering of merchants packing up their wares, the odd goodwife wandering between stores gradually closing their shutters. Carts were hitched to the backs of motor-mules by their weary drivers, the groaning machinery gushed and heaved as they whirred into life for the trip back home through the large town. Dust plumed from the dirty cracks between ancient pavers as the stomping of metallic hooves clattered homeward.

Market Place was the central plaza for the town of Little, a town that hardly warranted the name when compared to some of the villages that surrounded it not a day's drive away by cart. An hour if one rode astride one of the newer model mecha-birds. With a population of over ten thousand, it was no wonder that come Sunday the market plaza would be a riot of bellows and calls, haggles and banter and laughter. Consistently two-storey residences, the narrow shops interspersed between them, lined the plaza like sentinels peering upon the mayhem before them from beneath the rims of their flat, tiled roofs. Fondly, however, without the stoic glare of guardsmen at work.

Like clockwork, however, as soon as the sun went down it was to urge the passers-by into the warmth of their homes. Solar energy was the primary source used to power machinery, and though there was more than enough stored in the thin, humming slats of battering lining every rooftop to supply the night sufficiently, by habit, retreat was undertaken by most in the sleepy little town. Most.

The youngsters of Little ruled the streets after sundown. Weaving through the goodwives were the children, and by children, they ranged from young to grown, those nearly adults by their own right to others barely old enough to have untangled their fingers from their parent's fingers. It was a commonly accepted ritual that took place every night in Little, as it had for years, for generations, for as long as anyone could remember. It was a chance for autonomy while remaining under the objectionable gaze of the elders that peered through windows and barked accusations of 'too much ruckus' and 'the stupidity of youth'.

They played tag. They shrieked and giggled as they fled from the wolf in 'Find Me, Spot!' They kicked weighted balls in one-on-one or in teams with shouts of "To me" and "Pass it! Pass it!", a broken theme tune to the chiming of the ball as it skidded across the goal lines input into its intelligence system. The teens that had saved their pocket money played Fireflies, the little glowing darts following their creeping owner before chasing after their targeted blue, glowing companions with aggressive intent upon sighting them.

Those older still lounged on the fence palings that surrounded every other front garden, crowing and laughing with one another, breaking into scuffles that descended into raucous betting and inevitably ended with the culprits being chased by scolding residents from the street before their houses. It was all in good humour, however, and even the grumbling residents would shake their heads and roll their eyes before disregarding the incident entirely.

Some other children, some of the less obtrusive members of their cohort, hung back on the sidelines. They looked on from the shadows, observing and silent, many rolling their eyes with the same condescension as their elders at the antics of their fellows. They found their interest in other ways, with the setting of pitfalls for their unsuspecting peers, with taking shots of incriminating activities through miniature Snappers to use as taunting blackmail. With scaring the living daylights out of the gullible with complex antics that required far too much preparation to warrant the brief burst of
bubbling satisfaction from the silent participants.

And some few, some very few, even less than a bare handful, gazed on with eyes briefly flashing yellow-orange-gold to swipe the feet from an unsuspecting idiot, to blow the loose shirt-fronts of pompous swaggerers into their faces or to spit down a brief shower of rain droplets onto a clutch of chatterers that were speaking far too loudly.

Merlin was one of those few. Though on Market Sunday night he felt not the need to toss about the magic that flared his eyes golden. Even if to use as much would be incredibly satisfying, especially given that the bunch of teens his own age who puttered in aimless circles not half a street away, those he affectionately termed Peony's Groupies, were acting like such complete morons. And not only morons but mean morons, ringing the shepherd pup curled on the ground before them and prodding it with their booted toes in what was closer to kicks that nudges. They acted far younger than the sixteen years that most of them proudly held, barely two years older than Merlin's himself. He had always bemoaned the future of his town if people like that, people with such mush for brains, would be the lead of society in but a decade or two. Hopefully three.

It was because the shepherd reminded him of his little dog at home, Will, and Merlin felt instantly protective. It was because the shepherd had golden eyes. And that in itself was a problem because magic was still enough of a cause for wariness these days that such colouration elicited distrust. Not as bad as it had been, Merlin knew from his Memories, but certainly not good. The pup was an outcast, and Merlin had experienced enough of that in his lives too to overlook the actions of his so-called peers.

Swinging his legs as he perched upon the corner of Abel Blue's roof, Merlin regarded the scene with narrowed eyes. The sun had died enough that it required a squint through the darkness to make out any details. Or at least it would have had Merlin not had his magic to enhance his vision. He was waiting for just the right moment, for just enough darkness to launch his reprimanding attack. His knives were something of a fable around the town of Little, what with the whole "fighting the wrong and protecting the weak". He had a reputation to uphold of the nameless, faceless avenger.

Flipping his slender throwing knife end over end, Merlin caught it between his thumb and forefingers before tossing it again. He didn't even need to watch the twirling to ensure he didn't slip up and slice off a finger; Merlin's knives were an extension of himself, as they had been for years. He fathomed they almost held an intelligence of their own, that they wouldn't even consider turning upon their wielder.

Another blink, another minute, and Merlin deemed it dark enough. Just in time, too, for an exceptionally loud yelp punctuated the year, louder even than the game of ball two streets over that bubbled laughter and cries of victory into the air. With one final toss, Merlin cocked his head, narrowed his eyes, and sent his knife flying.

Then he sent another. And another.

Within the space of ten seconds, seven knives were soaring through the air. They flew exactly to their targets. Merlin felt a smile spread broadly across his face as shrieks of terror split the air.

He didn't kill anyone. He didn't even hurt anyone. None of his knives grazed skin, nor even came close. Instead, they pierced through the toes of boots, pinned the hems of trousers and long skirts to the ground, and sliced closely enough to the scalp that a scattering of hairs were snipped loose from the fringe. All enough to startle – or terrify as appeared more the case from the visible flinches, the screams and the speed of which the teens abandoned their sadistic play.

There were few things more satisfying than seeing bullies sent running. And run they did, the
majority leaving their friends still pinned to the ground behind them to dislodge themselves. Most left behind simply tore their clothes to free themselves, or even abandoned their boots entirely. Merlin couldn't suppress a bubble of mirth from spilling through his lips. He watched fondly as the little shepherd pup shook itself to its feet and, in a stagger that quickly smoothed into a stumbling trot, fled into the night.

*Job well done,* he congratulated himself. It was times like these that he felt like –

"Enjoying ourselves are we? Funny, I wouldn't have seen you as one to delight in terrorising pathetic ignorants."

In an instant Merlin threw himself into flight. He didn't even glance over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of the man who had spoken behind him. In a leap that would have sent most tumbling to a broken mess if not their deaths, he flung himself from Abel Blue's roof and plummeted to the street below. A flare of magic caught him before he struck the ground and, rolling, Merlin sprang to his feet and darted off down the street. He slowed only enough to skid on bare feet and grazing knees into a slide and scooped up his collection of scattered knives before taking off at a run once more. The knives slipped unconsciously beneath his clothes and into their sheaths with practiced fingers.

Oops. That was bad. Merlin had never actually been sprung in performing his acts of justice before. Not that anyone could prove anything, not that the man, whoever he'd been, could prove anything – Merlin was the good little boy of Balinor Seelie and Honey Copper who'd likely never held anything sharper than a butter knife in his entire life – but that didn't soothe his worries. How had he not even noticed the man sneak up behind him?

Weaving through the streets of Little, pelting down alleyways and sliding through cracks between houses narrow enough that he scraped his elbows, Merlin fled. Not with fear; there was nothing truly to fear in Little except for bands of stupid kids roaming the streets, and who really cared about them? But foreboding was very strong in his mind nonetheless.

*Pappy is going to kill me if he finds out,* was the thought at the forefront of his mind.

Down another alley, turning left into the wide Main Street, dodging through a game of Fireflies and nearly blinding himself with the little blue, flying gadgets, Merlin hastened homeward. He was an overly cautious person, he knew, one far too wary for his years given the relative safety of his childhood. But Past Memories were a hard thing to shake; the route he took home was at least twice as long as it needed to be.

Merlin slowed as he approached Baker Street, gasping in heavy pant that drew deep breaths of the distinctive smell of baked bread hanging as surely as a signpost above every two-storey house. The darkness of night had fully descended and only the mellow glow from half-open windows illuminated the street beyond, reflecting off white fence posts and unlocked gates, the glossy leaves of picture-perfect shrubs and pale flowers. His breath puffed thin clouds of smoke into the air, alerting Merlin to the descending cold of night that he hadn't even felt. He ran barefoot just about everywhere anyway, much to the exasperation of his mother.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Merlin patted himself down through his knitted sweater and leggings, checking for obvious signs of his weaponry outfitting. Balinor knew about his... hobbies, but Honey remained studiously and very deliberately ignorant.

Good. Nothing.

He'd barely taken a step into Baker Street, however, before the man spoke once more. "Took you long enough to get here. I've been waiting five minutes already."
Whipping around – how was the man always behind him? – Merlin fell into a half-crouch as his fingers grasped the dual knives on his forearm. Without thought he launched them towards the direction of the voice, instinct lining up his throws without a passing thought. Through the darkness he could just make out the figure of the man shadowed further by the overhang of the house on the corner.

The man cursed at the attack but managed to drop to the ground in a duck fast enough for him to avoid being impaled. Not fatally, of course, but enough to injure; Merlin figured if someone was chasing him they at least deserved a scratch or two to warn them off continuing their pursuit.

Clicking his tongue in frustration – how had he managed to miss? – Merlin had just tugged another pair of knives from beneath his jumper when the man rolled to his feet. And three things happened at once.

First, he demanded, "Merlin, wait!"

Second, he tugged a Glimmer from his pocket and the orb of bioluminescent algae was shaken into greenish light, casting the scene into sharp illumination.

And third, he dropped what looked to be a baton of sorts, a weapon, from his hand to clatter to the stone pavers lining the road. His abruptly empty hand rose in the universal signal of "I'm unarmed".

It was the use of Merlin's name, however, that caused him to pause. Both for suspicion, for the man had obviously identified who he was, and curiosity. Still crouching, shoulders hunching and chin ducking into the folds of his scarf, he narrowed his eyes and peered up at the man. "How did -? Do you...? Do I know you?"

He didn't think he did. Could bet he didn't, even with the obsessive fixation upon memories that was, admittedly, a trait of just about every sorcerer. Merlin never forgot a face, even those he'd known in the Past. He made a point of it. The man before him wasn't ringing any bells.

He was a young man, Merlin noticed. He couldn't be more than four, perhaps five years older than Merlin himself. Maybe more but it couldn't be by much. He was tall, about a head taller than Merlin, in the way of most people in the inaccurately named Little were, but unlike most of the Little folk he was broad of shoulder rather than narrow and, as in Merlin's case, lanky. The characteristic was emphasised by the stretch of his thin shirt that clung unnecessarily tightly to his torso. And as the man raised the bio-globe to head height, Merlin caught a glimpse of a mop of dark blonde hair, tousled yet not quite curly, and eyes shining pale in a face of sharp, well-defined features. Well-defined, and set in a very definite sense of entitlement, the hold of his jaw bespeaking of one who made demands and expected them to be followed.

In short, he was definitely not someone Merlin recognised. Definitely.

"I don't know you," Merlin said bluntly.

The young man shook his head. "Maybe not yet. But you will."

Understanding clicked within Merlin immediately, though his wariness remained. "When?"

"What?"

"I don't know you but you obviously know me. When did I meet you? How old was I?"

The man gave an exasperated sigh, slouching slightly with one hip jutting. "Oh, I don't know. I hardly knew you well enough to know how old you were, Merlin. We weren't exactly close."
Merlin twitched slightly at the man's tone. "Wow, you're filling me with so much confidence."

"What do you mean?" The man asked, frowning.

"You don't know how old I am, and you said yourself we weren't close. We obviously weren't friends."

The man's frown shifted into an arched eyebrow. "You know that for a fact, do you? That we weren't friends?" He sounded more objectionable to Merlin's knowing, rather than for the assumption itself.

Merlin nodded, slowly rising from his crouch. "'Course. I'd never have a friend who could be such an ass."

The man startled enough that Merlin flinched himself, almost convinced that he was reaching for a weapon. A moment later, however, he tipped his head back and gave a bark of laughter. "Ha! Exactly the same."

Merlin frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing, nothing," the man said, shaking his head. His shoulders jostled slightly in laughter, though his amusement seemed tinged with something akin to distaste. "Just memories."

Pursing his lips, Merlin narrowed his eyes. "Memories, huh?"

But the man wasn't having any of it, providing no explanation. That vexed Merlin more than he could say. He felt it like a physical itch poking him with a smirk of amusement. "Enough of this. Come on, I've been told to come and get you."

"What?" Merlin's frown deepened.

"I've been told," the man said slowly, as though speaking to a simpleton. Or a child. He widened his eyes in a very deliberate – and very demeaning – fashion. "To come. And get you."

"By… my Pappy?"

"No, you idiot," the man snorted. "By Aithusa."

"What in the hell is an Aithusa?"

The man sighed. It was more of a groan than anything, emphasised by the touch of his fingers to his forehead. He looked like an older brother chiding his younger sibling. As though it was Merlin who had sought him out to pester him and not the other way around. "I really don't have the time or the inclination for this."

That vexed itch niggled Merlin once more. "Good. Then leave me alone."

"You're supposed to come with me."

"Uh-huh," Merlin said slowly, already stepping around the man to scoop up his fallen knives before turning to head back up the Baker Street.

"And I'm not leaving without you."

"How romantic of you," Merlin drawled, casting a glance over his shoulder as he started up the paved street to his house. He didn't bother with hiding the location of his residence anymore; the man
had beaten him home so obviously already knew where he lived. The difficulty was ridding himself of the man himself.

Said man was frowning as though in confusion at Merlin's words. As though he'd never had anyone dispute his entitlement before. "You're supposed to –"

"Supposed to, supposed to," Merlin repeated with a deepening of his tone to parrot the man's. Another glance over his shoulder saw him visibly twitch. Merlin hid a triumphant smile in his scarf once more. "I don't have to do anything with you. I don't even know who you are, or what an Aithusa is."

"Not what. Who," the man grumbled. The loudness of his voice was as much an indicator that he followed Merlin as the scrape of his footsteps. "And my name is Arthur."

Merlin slowed to a stop and half turned towards the man. "Arthur?"

The man – Arthur – frowned at his question. Or perhaps at the mirth in Merlin's voice. "Yes. Why?"

Merlin stared for a moment before snorting and shaking his head, turning to begin walking once more. "Stupid name. So archaic."

"Stu-! How is it stupid, Merlin? If anyone's name is stupid, it yours."

"Yeah, yeah, you keep telling yourself that," Merlin called back, keeping his voice bored. His wariness had faded to amusement. He was actually quite enjoying himself, teasing the man.

"Hey," Arthur called. Merlin ignored him. "Hey," he said again, and the jumping of the light from his bio-globe signalled his jogging approach to Merlin's side. In front of him, actually, as he skirted around Merlin and drew him to a stop by planting himself directly before him. "Look, I'm not particularly fond of you, can't remember being so in the Past, but Aithusa said you have to come with me."

"No, I'm fine, thanks," Merlin disregarded him, attempting to step around him.

Only for Arthur to step back into his path once more. Steam practically sprouted from his ears in frustration. "Okay, I've had enough of this. I've got a dragon to report to and a priestess to find. I don't have time for you to dig your heels in like a rusty motor-mule. If you don't –"

"A dragon?"

Merlin's words were a gasp. He could feel his eyes widening as Arthur stuttered to a halt at his interruption. Or perhaps it was the sudden awe that accompanied his words, the indication that Merlin was abruptly giving him his full attention. He appeared disgruntled by the fact as much as it evidently met his desires, but bowed his head in a nod nonetheless. "Yes. A dragon. A dragon who has an interest in your magic."

Merlin started backwards, feeling his eyes widen further. A flood of fear, a rebirth of his wariness, coursed through him. "In my magic?"

Arthur regarded his shuffling retreat for a moment before rolling his eyes. "For god's sake, I'm not going to tell anyone. And I'm not prejudiced, even with my memories of the Past may suggest I have been, at some point or other."

"Then what –?"

"The dragon?"

"Well done, you can listen with more competency than a deaf fool."

Merlin barely heard the backhanded criticism. "A dragon wants to meet me? For my magic?"

Another roll of Arthur's eyes. "Do I have to repeat myself?"

But Merlin wasn't even listening anymore. His mind was caught upon the idea of a dragon. A real dragon! Was it even possible?

Magic had all but faded from the world in most regions. Merlin knew it without Balinor having to tell him. He could feel it. Sorcerers were the only evidence of it at all, with creatures and natural phenomena all but absent. It still sparked fear into the hearts of men and women, but magic was hardly pronounced enough to even be able to pose a threat.

Dragons were the epitome of the mystical. Even absent and long lost, nearly disregarded as legend and myth, they were acknowledged as being as close to magic incarnate as a creature could come. Merlin lived and breathed his magic, but always undercover. Always in the dark, in secret, away from accusing eyes. To see a dragon would be…

It would be…

_Incredible._

Arthur was still speaking, but Merlin interrupted him without even attending to the words he blathered. "You'll bring me to see the dragon?"

Arthur twitched once more, clicking his tongue in annoyance. He opened his mouth, an obvious objection rising, before visibly biting it back. "Yes. I can."

Merlin pursed his lips once more. He would have to tell Balinor. Would have to make an excuse to his mother, and to Kestrel who would be devastated if he left but… "Alright. I'll go with you."

The anger and frustration faded into a confused frown on Arthur's brow, the shadows on his face from the bio-globe warping it further. It looked to be a foreign expression for him. "You will?"

Nodding shortly, Merlin folded his arms across his chest, tight enough to feel the straps of his knives' sheaths tucked beneath his jumper. "Yes. But you even think of double-crossing me, any sort of underhandedness or betrayal and –" he flicked his wrist knife into his hand and snapped it to within an inch of Arthur's face, "I'll gut you. I swear I will."

To his credit, Arthur barely flinched as Merlin brandished his knife. Instead, he leant back slightly and folded his arms across his chest, a smirk curling his lips. "Funny, that, you know."

"What?"

"When we first met – for the First time – it was you defending someone else as I demonstrated my skill with knives." His smirk grew more pronounced. "How the tables have turned. We've somewhat reversed roles, it would seem."

"Hardly," Merlin sniffed, twirling his knife in a flourish and disappearing it once more. "I don't have to 'demonstrate' my skill. Anyone who does is obviously trying to compensate for something." And
stepping around Arthur, Merlin hastened towards his house at a trot. He hid a smile, tucking his chin at the spluttering of the man behind him.

An unexpected turn, the night had taken, and yet Merlin felt something profound about the incident. Something big was on the horizon. He could feel it. He felt his smile grow as he turned his gaze towards the glowing windows of his own house. The muttering and grumbles of Arthur followed him as he went. Followed, and didn't leave him for a second.

Merlin shook his head. Friends? No, he doubted they could ever be friends, even had their Pasts been more favourable, which they clearly weren't. But put up with him? Yes, Merlin fathomed that he could do that. This Arthur was a giant prat for sure but maybe, if he had to, Merlin could put up with him. Just put up with him.

He could do that.

~\The End~

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Phew! Such an absolutely monumental effort and I can't believe the story turned out that friggin' long. It was NOT that long in my head, I swear. I hope you enjoyed the story. Thanks so much for sticking with it - it was a monumental effort on your part too! If you did, or didn't, or have absolutely anything to say, please leave a comment. I'd really appreciate it :D

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!