The Heart's Search

by rotrude

Summary

Written for this kinkme_merlin prompt: *I'd like a story based on the Selection-Trilogy by Kiera Cass - I haven't read the books, just write your own story but based on this summary:*

*For thirty-five girls/boys, the Selection is the chance of a lifetime. The opportunity to escape the life laid out for them since birth. To be swept up in a world of glittering gowns and priceless jewels. To live in a palace and compete for the heart of gorgeous Prince Arthur.*

*But for Merlin Emrys, being Selected is a nightmare. Leaving his home to enter a fierce competition for a crown he doesn't want. Living in a palace that is constantly threatened by violent rebel attacks.*

*I'd just love to see Merlin being from a lower caste than most of the others and not liking Arthur at first and just being his usual self, before he starts to actually like the prince. I'm looking for a lot of snark and Arthur secretly liking Merlin's difficult personality.*

*There's a love triangle in the books, but I'm not really a fan of that, so I'd be very happy if it's left out of the story. Choose whatever reason you like to make Merlin actually enter the competition.*

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Chapter 1

His heart in his mouth, Merlin fled down the street, sprinting as fast as he could, his legs shooting him down the dimly lit road and round a corner.

The sound of his breathing was loud in his ears. Fast, panting breaths that sounded like those of a man at death's door almost deafened him to outside inputs. He was searching frantically for air and choking with it. And the death's door part? That too wasn't far off the mark.

He was testing his limits running like this. He wasn't built for this. To face this. He felt as though he was about to cough up his lungs. He had a stitch in his side that hurt as though his organs were twisting themselves up in knots inside him. Sweat coated his body from head to foot, freezing on his back, giving him tiny little shocks that travelled up his spine.

Even though he couldn't risk to slow down he had to take a quick look over his shoulder. Knowing what was going on was vital.

He couldn't tell how many were there, in hot pursuit, but he could distinguish the whistle of the bullets flying right past his head. You didn't forget such a sound. Ever. Hell, He could distinctly make out the yells.

God, he needed to take cover.

He tore down the avenue at his fastest pace yet and took the first left. A piece of ornamental plaster was shot right off the wall where Merlin's head had been. If Merlin hadn't rounded that corner, his brains would be spilling on the pavement right now.

Right, this was no game. As he leapt he knocked rubbish wheelie bins over. He climbed a wall at a jump and landed, a shooting pain climbing right up his shin, on the other side.

Tonight there was next to no moonlight. He couldn't tell whether this was a dead end or not. Everything was a game of shadows over here. A perimeter brick wall enclosed some kind of back garden on one side. Another wall faced the garden one. Darkness shrouded the furthest end of the narrow street. Merlin couldn't pick out anything else. If this was a blind alley, Merlin was dead.

His pursuers would eventually check this area and then he'd be cornered.

A screech of tyres rent the night. The slam of car doors. The stamping of heavily soled feet, running. "Go, go, go."

Okay, no time to quibble. He had to hide.

He stumbled down the narrow street, ankle throbbing in time with his footsteps. Glass crunched under his feet, likely from broken bottles and other discarded objects. He was sure there was more scrap yard rubbish on the ground, unmentionables Merin had better not think about. “Shit,” Merlin said. Even so he crouched down behind a big but sodden crate and held his breath.

His knees were now bleeding because he was hunkering down in a bed of broken glass shards. But that didn't matter. It was such a small price to pay to go undetected.

Now if he could just breathe more quietly.

He bit his fist.
Voices ripped down the deserted alleyway. Heavy footsteps ricocheted down the small space, advancing. “Did you see him?” a gruff voice asked.

“No, but he can't have disappeared.”

“You sure with these people?” came the reply. "But let me radio squad B.”

From behind his pile of crates, Merlin spied a flash of movement. They were so close.

He made himself smaller, curving into a ball, his head lowered so no part of him could peek out, palms on the ground. Cuts broke open on his hands. They stung. Think of something else. Think of something else. His breaths still came in painful gasps though. He tried to calm down so that the pattern of his breathing would decrease and be less loud.

Through a chink in the pile of rotten wood, Merlin spotted the person who'd spoken last. He was as wide as a door and dressed in black from head to foot. Beside his normal regulation baton, he wielded a nasty looking gun. That explained the flash of silver Merlin had caught out of the corner of his eyes. The man was also carrying a series of phials strapped to his belt. The liquid inside it was silvery and dense. Slugs.

Christ.

The chirp of the police radio rode over the sounds of the men's voices. “Group B has a neg. Target didn't go down Parkgate.”

“Then he must be hiding around here,” the man who'd spoken first said. “Bring the dogs.”

Merlin went cold from the inside out, his heart frozen mid beat. He closed his eyes as his vision blurred and darkened at the edges. A little moan escaped him. He had to clap both bloody hands before his mouth to suppress the shaky sob that rattled out of him.

Dogs, they'd smell him. They'd close in on him and find him. The dogs would get a good chew out of him and then keep him down for the Section 7 men to come and get him. And then the Section 7 men would shoot a slug down his veins and...

He had to do it. He had to use his advantage before he was cornered and dealt with. He'd heard the tales. What happened when Section 7 men got their hands on someone like him. The tales were gruesome enough. He wanted to make it back home. He wanted to get out of this. No matter what he'd promised his mum, he'd have to.

He straightened and stepped out of his hiding place.

Three guns and an automatic rifle were pointed right at him, their muzzles following his littlest twitch. Merlin saw no dart guns. Good.

“Hands up and make no move,” said the leader of the Section 7 men, his weapon aimed at Merlin.

Merlin had no illusions. He knew how well trained these men were. They had intelligence training. Shot like snipers. Knew combat techniques. If their looks weren't intimidating enough – dark uniforms, combat boots, high tech weapons – then their reputation was.

“Why?” Merlin asked, lazily presenting his palms while not holding his hands up as ordered. “What do you think a single man can do against--” He made a show of counting his opponents. “Six armed men?”
Merlin's talking back was making the Section 7 men look nervous. They arched their eyebrows at their companions, took tentative steps either back or forwards, cocked their guns. They weren't used to this, Merlin reflected. They weren't used to targets reacting. Addressing them. Being anything more than quarry.

“You're under arrest on suspicion of sorcery,” the leading officer declared. His voice was trembling, getting higher on the last word. A dreaded word. A word that inspired fear apparently. Even in such a man. A man who had the upper hand and little to worry him. “You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.”

Merlin smiled. It was funny in a way. If you thought about it. They'd still read his rights even though they'd probably be more than happy to throw away the key once they'd got him.

“Sorcery?” he asked and then raised his bleeding palm. He turned his thoughts inward, seeking his power, feeling it rush through him from the very depths of him. It warmed him from the inside out; sparked his skin on fire. A blast lit up the night and went outward.

The ground shook. The light was so blinding Merlin couldn't tell how many men he'd downed. He only knew that now was the right time to run.

He moved.

Spurred by a single-minded instinct of self-preservation, he dashed out of the dead end, legs uncoiling like springs, arms pumping wildly. He skidded, gained a straight. Continued on, muscles churning to achieve motion, his lungs, once again leaden and too small for his rapidly rising chest, gasping for air.

Before ducking into the first street he saw, he craned his head. They were still chasing him, relentlessly running him down. Hot on his heels. The tramp of boots running almost in double cadence tuned everything else out.

They were stubborn. And still after him.

He had to shake them off and do so before an entire platoon came at him. He couldn't hold off the ones in pursuit for long either. He was too tired. His limbs too heavy. He'd been doing this for too long. They were used to the hunt; he wasn't. He wouldn't be able to outrun them for long.

A shadow darted close to the side. Merlin veered off, loping at top speed across the street and in the opposite direction.

But pained bloomed through his shoulder like lightning. It took his breath as it ripped through him. Christ. His hand went to the source of pain and came away bloody. He let out a strangled gasp. The agony broke through all the same. The wound pulsed with a steady beat that radiated throughout the area. It burnt savagely.

Merlin swallowed hard, closing his eyes as a fresh wave of pain hit him. He clenched his jaw but continued moving. As dizzy as it made him he had to plough on or he'd die.

He staggered forwards, keeping to the shadows. He jogged when he couldn't run anymore, every step like moving lead across trickle.
It was the renewed shouts that made him try one last burst of speed. The Section 7 men had zeroed in on him again. It was now or never. He had to remove himself from their clutches.

But that didn't matter so much now, for he knew where he was and what to do.

Heart drumming in his chest and in his ears, he shot forwards. The bulk of Albert Bridge was stretching outwards in the dark. The tiny moulded turrets that decorated the tops of the supports standing guardian in the night.

Just as the Section 7 men rounded on him at the mouth of the bridge, Merlin climbed past the railing. Holding on to a pylon he stood on the rail. He looked back, his eyes skittering over the men gathered a few feet away from him, weapons out. He stretched one arm out, palm open.

The Section Sven men took a collective step backwards and held their fire. It was just what Merlin had needed. A moment.

He dove, his body breaking the water, pain hitting everywhere. He was under and the water was cold and dense. He experienced a momentary wish to let go, let his tired body be dragged down and hit bottom, but thoughts of his mother, of the injustice of it all spurred him to fight.

With all of the strength that he had left, he sprung upwards. He tried to swim towards the light playing on the water, following it. With one last surge of effort he kicked and broke the surface.

As soon as he did, he turned his head up and desperately dragged in huge breaths of air. His lungs were starving and he inhaled deeply for the longest time. It didn't do much but slowly his wheezing dwindled. He was only panting a little now. His heart was hammering so hard against his ribs though, it felt like they might crack. But that was all right. It meant he was alive.

Not for long though.

Yells and barks still echoed down here from up the bridge. Searchlights flooded the water, bouncing off constructions, illuminating the clouds against the inky night sky. If he wanted to get out of this, he needed to swim.

At least the river current had swept him a little way down and away from the manned bridge. Far enough away that they hadn't spotted him yet.

So Merlin swam for his life, one arm mostly limp, his legs doing all the work.

Only when all noise had died down and the darkness had enveloped him completely, did he allow himself to make for the bank. He dragged himself upwards, crawled ashore, and then let himself sprawl there in the mud and murk. When he flipped onto his back, the moon came out of a nest of clouds. Merlin let his eyelids drop closed.

He woke again when the stars were beginning to fade, the moon giving way to the sun. Sore and aching, brow on fire, he made himself stand. Then totter on.

Dawn had broken already when he knocked on Mordred's window pane.

Mordred lifted the sash and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. “What the hell, Merlin!”

Merlin was panting and dripping water on Mordred's carpet but he grinned, relief making him giddy. “Section 7 men.”

“Christ,” said Mordred, hooking an arm under Merlin in an attempt to hoist him up.
Merlin groaned.

Mordred dropped him, staring blankly at his hand. “Is this blood? Did they shoot you?”

“Yeah,” Merlin said, lips still valiantly trying for that grin even though he wanted to puke now. Mordred jostling him wasn't helping him keep the meagre contents of his stomach down. “Yeah. Told you. It was quite the night out.”

Mordred's answer made no sense. The sounds coming out of his mouth seemed suddenly distorted. The floor tilted, rose, moved in waves. Merlin's head spun as he tried to make sense of the eddies.

When he regained consciousness he was in Mordred's bed, half naked. His chest was surely bare. His shoulder was bandaged, though a splash of crimson, stained the gauze. Merlin tilted his chin down and started probing the wound.

Mordred batted his hands off. “Your hands are still dirty.”

“It won't be bacteria that kill me.”

Mordred frowned. Merlin knew he didn't quite like the joke. Mordred was always so very earnest. Believed in the cause. He joked, but never about magic, death or persecution. So Merlin knew he wasn't endearing himself to Mordred with his gallows humour. But he couldn't help himself. Using irony helped him cope. Kept him fighting the fight. Even dark humour served that purpose well. Find the bright side. The silver lining. If he couldn't poke fun at himself and at his situation, what was left? “No, the government will. What did you do?”

“Helped a little girl out,” Merlin said, remembering her dirty blond hair coming in down streaks that clung to her face. Her lost expression. Her glowing amber eyes. He hoped she'd been able to scarper. “She'd been marked.”

Mordred's breath whooshed out of him. “This shouldn't be happening.”

“And you're telling me,” said Merlin. Biting his lower lip till he tasted the acrid tang of blood. He wanted to burrow back under the covers, sink back into sleep, and forget about tonight. Forget about his plight. “I know. But there's no way out of this. Not when it's an entire government against us.”

Mordred's eyes flashed. “Actually--”

Merlin could guess where this was going, so he said, “You know I'm ready to help with Forridel's Underground and the rest.” He shifted in bed and hid a wince. His shoulder throbbed dully now. “But my mum would kill me if I started attending secret Druidical meetings.”

“But they brought up something very interesting during one of those meetings though,” Mordred said, looking away from Merlin and to his desk beyond. “Something that's made me think.”

“If you're thinking about a terrorist coup, then I'm no--”

Mordred's eyes flared. “Who do you take me for? I wouldn't do that. I believe life, all life, is sacred to the Goddess.”

Merlin licked his parched lips. “Then short of that,” he said in a very cracked voice, “I don't see the Pendragons changing their minds about sorcerers. Not after Queen Ygraine. Not after the truth about the Lady Morgana attempting to murder her own father leaked.”

Mordred nodded. He tightened the knot that held Merlin's bandage and said, “What if you could
protect yourself though? What if you could have immunity?"

Merlin laughed so hard his skull rattled and his body ached. He hissed but managed to speak through it. “Are you talking about the law giving the Lady Morgana immunity? Because if you are, you're crazy. Certifiable really. Do I have to remind you that it only protects members of the royal family? Hell, it was created for that purpose alone. To save her from...”

“Being hanged when the truth about her powers came out,” Mordred finished for him. It made sense. He was as well read as any person Merlin had ever known and made a point of learning everything there was to know about the plight of sorcerers in the UK. “I know that as well as the next person, thank you.”

“So what?” Merlin said, his voice cracking and raspy from having drunk too much foul river water. “I don't know whether I'm tired and failing to connect the dots or you're making no sense.”

Mordred rose, walked over to the dresser, and poured a glass of water. Holding it, he made a detour to his desk from which he picked up a poster-sized sheet of paper.

Back to sitting on the edge of the bed Merlin was lying on, he handed Merlin the glass and unfolded the paper.

After having coughed into his fist, and cleared his throat, he read. “In the time honoured tradition regulating marriages within the male branch of the Pendragon family, a new Selection, the first in twenty years, will shortly take place. His Royal Highness Prince Arthur James Philip Tristan, Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, Earl of Strathearn, Viscount Severn, Baron Killyleagh, Lord of the Isles, KG KT ADC(P), is coming of age and seeking a partner to love, honour, and share the burdens of his illustrious title with.

If you think you could fulfil those duties and support the prince in his life choices don't hesitate to fill the enclosed form. One candidate per Ceremonial County will be drawn at random from the number of participants who have submitted the form. They will subsequently be allowed to meet the Prince. From this number the prince himself will, on the basis of personal preference, select thirty candidates to stay at Kensington Palace, where the Selection procedure will take place. Participants will be housed at the expense of the crown, la di da, la di da, la di da.”

Merlin took a sip of water and sat up with a wince. “Are you reading me a bed time story?”

Mordred crumpled up the piece of paper he'd been holding. “No,” he said, taking the glass from Merlin and setting it down on the night-stand. “I'm not. And you know it.”

“You want me to participate?” Merlin would have sniggered if he'd had the energy. As it was a little snort escaped his lips.

“Well, to be quite honest, yes,” said Mordred. “It's a very long shot, but think about it: if you were the Prince Consort you'd get immunity for all magic-related 'crimes'."

Merlin scowled hard at Mordred, shook his head, and scowled even harder because he didn't think the first stony look he'd shot at Mordred had had any effect whatsoever as far as stopping him from spouting nonsense was concerned. “Suppose for a moment that the odds aren't against me and I'm one of the few to make the Selection. Suppose that the incredible happens and somehow, crazily enough, that git of a prince likes me and wants to marry me...”

“Merlin...”

“Suppose all of that happens,” Merlin barrelled on over Mordred. “Do you really think I'd leave
Merlin closed his eyes. He really didn't want to listen to this absurd pile of rotten shit. He hurt too much, everywhere, to be willing to listen on. “One, Uther Pendragon wouldn't let me.”

“Uther is not eternal,” Mordred suggested in a tone that was dry as dust.

Merlin flashed him a glare. “And two, what would you want me to do? Seduce the man into changing the laws for me? Would you want me to--” He shook his head, his mouth tasting like ashes. “You'd want me to what? Play him?”

Mordred smiled a secretive little smile. “You're handsome enough to...”

“And what would be wrong with playing him?” Mordred said, his face grim and closed off, his commonly gentle smile drying up on his lips. “His father is the leader of a nation whose magical population is oppressed. The man has done nothing to plead against the status quo. He doesn't care about the status quo. Why, should we consider his as yet fictional feelings for you when the victims' trump all?”

Merlin could give Mordred that. He had no sympathy for the Pendragons. Their persecution had cost Merlin lots. Even their strategy to win over the population's loyalty – i.e., the Selection allowing commoners to ascend the throne – was distasteful to him. Yet, Mordred's entire under-handed scheme was equally odious to him. “I don't care about him! I care about my conscience.”

“And that's why you ought to survive,” said Mordred, taking his hand in his, Merlin's frayed knuckles under his palm. “You're the most powerful among us. You... I know you don't want to hear it, but you've got a good heart, and you're Emrys...”

Merlin snatched his hand away and glanced at the wall opposite. “You know I don't like your prophecies, Mordred.”

Mordred's boyish smile, the uplifting one he was capable of when the direness of the situation he lived in didn't drown out the best in him, made a come back. “I'm a Druid. Can't live without.”

“Well,” Merlin said, letting himself lie back in bed. He didn't want to quarrel with Mordred. They were on the same boat after all and Mordred's scheming was dictated by fear. Merlin himself was shaking down to the core after what had happened tonight. He got fear fine. “I'll give you the Emrys rot, if you cut this Selection shit, all right, Mordred?”

Mordred nodded. He leant up, sheets rustling as he moved, kissed Merlin's forehead and said, “Sleep tight, Emrys, I'll guard you.”

Mordred may or may not have guarded him all day long and through the fever that followed. Merlin didn't know for he was mostly delirious. But when Merlin woke, an undetermined amount of time later, Gaius having administered antibiotics poached from a hospital dispensary – Merlin couldn't walk in an hospital with a government bullet in him – it was to find a letter waiting for him.

One that said he was awaited at Kensington Palace to meet Prince Arthur.

With the little energy he had, Merlin tore it up in tiny little pieces. “Where's Mordred?” he asked
Gaius, after having scanned the room for traces of his truant friend.

Gaius put his stethoscope back in its case and gave him the eyebrow. “Where do you imagine him to be?”

“Hiding from me.”

Gaius snapped his doctor's bag closed. “He only did it to save your life and contribute to the cause.”

Merlin would have crossed his arms if he could have. But his shoulder was stiff and ached in lancing pulses, although, thankfully, it didn't burn quite as much anymore. “I appreciate the wanting to help part, but I hope he knows I won't be doing it.”

Gaius picked his bag up, evidently on his way out. “Then I suggest you invent a reason to give the police when they come knocking on your door, enquiring why a poor boy like you is giving the honour a pass.”

Merlin blanched. “Gaius, they can't look into my family--”

Gaius sighed helplessly. “Then I suggest you get your head down to fooling them. Make them believe you're looking forward to the experience. I'm sure at some point or other you'll fail to impress those uptight aristocrats--” Merlin was sure a little smile was playing on Gaius lips even though they were scarcely turning up. “And be allowed to go home, unwed.” Gaius opened the door but made sure to impress a last parting shot on Merlin. “And make sure you don't look like you've just been shot. The meeting, if it's escaped you, is in a week's time.”

Merlin's mouth dropped open but Gaius was gone and there was no one he could lodge his complaints with.

“Bloody Mordred!” Merlin said, casting aside the mounds of blankets covering him. “Stupid, devious idiot.”

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Merlin was standing on his own two feet, which was more than he could have said a week before. He was only wearing a pair of rather fancy trousers Mordred had found for him and a pair of black socks that were his own. The cause of his partial nudity rested in the fact that he wanted to have a good look at his torso and in particular at the scar that decorated his shoulder.

He craned his neck.

It was healing, but slowly, and it still pained him. Looking at it from this angle the scar was a red-cored russet dimple in the otherwise pale surface of his skin. Little flame-like licks of crimson extended out of the centre. If Merlin gritted his teeth and grazed his fingers over it he could feel a little bump under the skin. Beside the pain, it was the strangest sensation ever.

“Stop fussing with that, you'll infect it and then where will you be?” Mordred handed him a glass full of a fizzy white substance.

Merlin took it from him, sniffed it, and said, “What's this?”
“Pain killer,” said Mordred. “Trust me. You'll need it if you want to look like nothing's the matter with you.”

Merlin tipped his head back and downed it. “There,” he said, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. “Happy?”

“It's not me you have to fool,” said Mordred, handing him a clean shirt that was not Merlin's and was not, going by its size, Mordred's either.

Wondering at the shirt's origins, Merlin tipped up his eyebrows, and started slipping the garment on. He slid his right arm into the right sleeve just fine, but when the time came for him to move the other one he flinched. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to override the wave of light-headedness that overcame him.

Breathe in, breathe out. The situation didn't improve; his shoulder refused to cooperate. In search of some solace he leant against the dresser behind him and let more air in through his nostrils. When the wave of nausea abated, he straightened a little and let go of his furniture-shaped prop.

“Here, I'll help you.” Mordred did help him into his shirt and, after having put a compression plaster on the wound, started to button it up. “Now you see why I had to dose you.”

“Yeah,” Merlin said, “perhaps you were right in doing so but I won't say 'thank you'. I don't think I've forgiven you for your machinations.”

Mordred swept imaginary lint from off his shoulders. “I did it for the greater good.”

“Well, let's hope they don't single me out as a magic user the moment they see me.”

“They won't,” Mordred said, “and maybe some good will come out of this.” Mordred turned him round so Merlin could have a look at the mirror. “Now, what do you think of yourself?”

Even though he wasn't into this and wished Mordred hadn't put him up to it, Merlin looked. He had to keep up the pretence for a day, after all, and if he didn't want to raise suspicion as to the reasons of his candidacy, he knew he'd better look as though he'd gone through the effort. He needed to look the part, i.e., like someone dressed to impress.

The trousers and shirt Mordred had raked up from who knew where and that he was currently wearing were better quality than most of Merlin's clothes had ever been. Though that alone didn't serve to achieve miracles. He still wasn't really dressed to the nines. No attempt at styling had been made on him – for which he was grateful, since neither him nor Mordred were cut for that kind of thing. On the bright side, he did look as though he'd at least tried to clean up. Which was, he gathered, what the other contestants would be doing.

All he had to do was look as though he meant 'it' for a day, wait to be eliminated, and go home. And hope his pasty pallor – of a hue that was a far cry from his normal admittedly pale skin tone – wouldn't be too revelatory. They'd have to strip him to find the wound and surely they wouldn't. He didn't think they took sans clothes shots of the contestant in a bid to look like pervs before all the nation. Merlin had to hope that they'd be so concerned with writing him off the competition that they would overlook the details and not care about Merlin's paleness or the circles under his eyes. Merlin had to believe that or he wouldn't be able to muster up the courage necessary to participate.

“Well, I think I'm good to go,” he said, looking at his reflection one last time.

He didn't hear whatever it was that Mordred was mumbling under his breath, but he wasn't sure he
wanted to.

As if he hadn't said anything, Mordred handed him the jacket that went with the trousers and added, “I guess all you have to do is climb into the car and wait to be chauffeured all the way to Buckingham Palace.”

Merlin snorted. “Thankfully, it'll be soon over. They'll just have to go through their list of forty eight and eliminate eighteen.”

Mordred escorted Merlin to the door of his flat. This was the last day Merlin would stay at his anyway, so this was a parting of ways. “So,” Mordred said, eyebrow climbing, a small smile held in check, “no bad blood?”

Merlin ducked his head. “You took me in and saved my life. Can't bear a grudge,” Merlin said, even though he wasn't looking forward to the rest of his day and was still ticked off Mordred had sent the form without his permission.

Mordred smiled. “I suppose it's good luck then.”

Merlin grinned toothily. “I'd be lucky if I just got the boot,” Merlin said, before turning around. “So let's go with prayers for my safe return home.” He took the steps out of the building two at a time.

There had been no goodbyes between him and Mordred, but then with the life they led there never were.

The car waiting for him was a posh one, to be sure, but less so than Merlin might have imagined. It was a black Volvo with darkened windows and a purposeful business-like appearance. With only a little pang of fear at the thought he'd be walking into the lion's den, Merlin climbed in. The driver closed the door after him and took his place behind the wheel.

Merlin's hands were so damp with sweat, he was sure he would leave palm-sized imprints on his trousers if he lay them flat on his thighs. To avoid doing this he took to talking. “So,” he said, “I guess chauffeuring the candidates to the palace must be a bore.”

“It's my job, sir,” said the driver, pulling out into traffic.

“You must have driven lots of people around today,” Merlin said, wringing his hands and shuffling in the back-seat. “Though maybe lots of participants are coming from out of London and if that's the case maybe you weren't the one to pick them up. Or perhaps you did and have done lots of toing and froing from the airport.”

The driver met his eyes in the rear-view mirror. “I'm not allowed to divulge information about the other participants, sir.”

Merlin scoffed. “It can't be so serious business. This is basically a match-making contest,” Merlin said before he could curb his tongue. He was meant to be into it, he belatedly told himself. Shut, up, Merlin. Learn how to. “I mean surely it's not as if a war” – like the one on sorcery – “--has broken out.”

The driver clacked his tongue and sighed. “The Selection is a very important event that will decide the future of our nation. It is of political as well as personal importance.”

Merlin suspected he'd just been chided. He chewed on his lips, head bowed.

“Besides, we all wish Prince Arthur the best.”
With that the conversation was cut short. The pretence was the chicanery of traffic the chauffeur had to pay attention to but Merlin knew the real reason for the ensuing silence was that he'd just pissed the poor sod off. It was just as well. Merlin couldn't tell the man what he really thought of the reigning monarch, and all attempts at inane chatter were consequently to be nipped in the bud. After all he wasn't at one of Forridel's meetings, which meant he'd better hold his thoughts in check. So it was that he bit his lip, folded his hands, and waited as patiently as he could for the car journey to be over.

Before embarking on this drive, he'd thought he would start relaxing once he was close to Buckingham Palace – at least part of the ordeal would be over by then. But instead his levels of discomfort increased. There were multiple reasons for that to happen but the biggest one became obvious the moment the palace gates were thrown open and the car made for them.

The Volvo was surrounded by a horde of reporters. “There's lots and lots of journalists!” Merlin said, both squeaking and stating the obvious. He could be excused the anxiety. The journos presence meant he'd be put under the microscope and with his magic buzzing just under his skin that wasn't the nicest of prospects. “I wasn't told there'd be journalists!”

The car inched slowly on, clearing the body of people surrounding it. The paps were aiming their flashes at the slowly moving car and tapping on its roof to get it to slow down.

“It's to be expected,” the driver told him, less unkindly than before. “Whoever wins this competition will marry the Prince of Wales. That's naturally a piece of news any self-respecting journalist will latch on.”

Before he could fully go into panic mode, Merlin was led through a special entrance and told to wait in a luxurious anteroom teeming with people. Since he counted roundabout forty-eight of them, he guessed these were the other contestants vying for Prince Arthur's hand.

Half of them were men; half women. Most of them were excitedly whispering to each other. A few were busy glaring at the opposition. Only a couple participants were quietly sitting in the auditorium.

Every time someone new entered the buzz of voices grew and a murmured running commentary was unleashed. Merlin couldn't get most of it but he did overhear a, “Well, at least he is no competition,” that was clearly aimed at him.

Whatever. It was not as if Merlin was about to take offence. He wasn't even really competing. Completely nonchalant and though he hadn't heard a thing, Merlin sat on the edge of one of the chairs that had been provided, smiled at the people who'd put him down, and twiddled his thumbs until something happened to shake up the monotony. What did was a bearded man in a starched charcoal suit. He walked in in a calm but business-like fashion and climbed the little dais that had been placed at one end of the room.

He tapped the microphone and after a few tries at clearing his throat, said, “Hello and welcome. It's a pleasure to see you all here.” He swept his gaze across the room, taking in all the candidates. “As you must have guessed, you are the 48 contestants chosen to participate in the Selection. If you're here it's because your forms have been read and deemed interesting enough to eventually appeal to Prince Arthur.”

Merlin wondered what sort of stuff Mordred had put in that form. Had he beefed up Merlin's matrimonial 'CV'? Put in a few qualities Merlin didn't possess? Had Mordred written him up as elegant and poised? Sophisticated? Well-read? Merlin thought so. There was no other reason for his being here today.
“His Highness Prince Arthur himself approved the ultimate short list choice,” said the bearded man. He cleared his throat once more – must have a bad case of laryngitis – and patted down his tie. “In a moment you will be led into that other room where Prince Arthur himself will be waiting to receive you and screen you. After this screening a further selection will take place to reduce the numbers of overall participants to thirty.”

A low murmur rose among the audience. Merlin kept twiddling his thumbs. He was actually looking forward to this culling process. In less than an hour he would be walking out of here, ready to resume his life, hopefully with no one the wiser regarding his status as a sorcerer.

He tried not to smile too much at the thought, but he was afraid he was still wearing a grin when a bit of commotion started at the furthest end of the room. Suited men wearing earpieces winged either side of a door, standing to attention, and nodded at each other.

This same door opened and the King entered. Even if Merlin had never seen him in person before, he could make no mistake as to this being him. The King was, after all, the man whose effigy was portrayed on coins and banknotes. The man who gave the nation a Christmas speech every year and opened parliament as well as a number of sporting ceremonies. He was the man who stood on the balcony of Buckingham Palace one summer twenty years ago and declared magic illegal. A blot upon mankind. Merlin had seen the videos, not something he was likely to forget.

Despite feeling a little cowed, Merlin gave him a thorough look. The King's bearing was so stiff it beat the rigidity featured in paintings portraying the man. He was elegant, looked fit for his age and had a steely air about him that was sure to scare any audience into submission.

Prince Arthur, whom Merlin had seen on the telly and on magazine covers frequently enough to be able to recognise him, followed on his heels. He looked somewhat different live.

For one he wasn't as tall as they made him look on editorial spreads. He wasn't short either, maybe an inch shy of Merlin, but not exactly the titan the media made him out to be when in a flattering mood. For another he was buff and muscular, more so than Merlin would have thought catching fleeting glimpses of him here and there.

On balance he had the sort of golden good looks that would have made him fit to be a story book prince. But that was the point, wasn't it? Prince Arthur was groomed to perfection. He looked the part. Almost to the point he cut an unreal figure. He was handsome but stiff with it. Maybe he'd been told he was cute and to keep that in check, appearing too formal for fear of coming across as a coxcomb. There had to be behaviour guides for princes.

Overall he didn't look comfortable at all. It wasn't exactly as though there was something about him that announced this discomfort. There was nothing outright awkward about his body language for example, but Merlin had a feeling he wasn't at his ease. This in spite of his perfect posture, of his easy grace, and of his self-assurance.

Still, Merlin guessed lots of people would think him the epitome of princeliness. His suit was perfectly tailored and crisp, the colour a light grey that reminded Merlin of old time stars. His haircut was on point. Unlike some foreign royals, he was adhering to etiquette rather splendidly, succeeding in doing nothing inappropriate.

Though that perhaps would make him boring, Merlin mused. Did Prince Arthur really want to marry? Did he have desires? Did he ever come unruffled? Or was he a cardboard signpost for royalty?

Apart from all that though some subtle signs of discontent started to emerge in him, especially when
he was subjected to the scrutiny of his hopeful consorts. His brow got pinched and his expression soured. He outright looked as if he'd smelt something that had gone bad. His mouth slowly flattened into a thin line and his nose wrinkled. The more people looked at him the more Prince Arthur made a point not to meet anybody's eyes but those of his assistants. In short, something told Merlin Prince Arthur was getting to be as unhappy about being there as Merlin was. And the feeling was enhanced when the cameras rolled in. Prince Arthur almost pouted at that.

At one point Merlin even asked himself why the Prince was going through with this if he was getting reluctant to take part in the proceedings, but he promptly chastised himself for entertaining the thought. He wasn't here to suss the man out. Prince Arthur could get married to all the people in the room at the same time as far as Merlin was concerned and then rue the day to his heart's content afterwards. Merlin was just here so as not to raise suspicion. A few more minutes and this would be over.

As Merlin mulled things over, King Uther took the stand.

“Good Morning,” he said in a cold, curt tone. “And welcome. As you know, you've been picked out from a multitude of contestants to participate in the Selection. As the ruling monarch, I welcome you and thank you for participating.”

Prince Arthur kept looking straight ahead as his father spoke on.

“If things go as planned at the end of the entire Selection procedure one of you will become a member of my family,” the King said, his words smooth and clearly part of a speech he'd learnt by heart and rehearsed often. “For that to become possible though, the procedure must go on. As happy as I am to welcome you all here and as loathe as I am – on my son's behalf – to part with some of you – I must remind you that we're here to move on to the next stage. This will mean that some of you will have to retire from the competition.”

Merlin suppressed a tiny snort at the euphemism. The people around him really wanted that shot at a better life, at becoming royals, so, no, they wouldn't be willingly retiring. They'd be eliminated.

“As you will understand, our protocol is designed to ensure that the best choice is made,” King Uther said, while his son shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “For that to happen Arthur--” The King tipped his head at his son. “Will be granted the opportunity to exchange a few words with you, a moment engineered to guarantee him the chance to form a proper, if passing, judgement of you, one that will enable him to make a choice.”

There was a low murmur that Merlin read as popular excitement. Even eagerness. He wasn't sure what was going to happen next but the other participants seemed to be more aware than he was of the protocol. They all plunged into expectant silence as if they knew what the next step in this charade was.

“So without further ado, I'm leaving you to my son, His Highness Prince Arthur.”

For a panicked moment Merlin feared he'd have to go up to the stage and there exchange those 'few words' with Prince Arthur the King had spoken about. He feared he'd have to say something in public that wound go on record and that could possibly endanger him, but thankfully things didn't go that way.

Prince Arthur hopped off the dais, straightened his tie, which had got askew mid-jump, and was led to the room next to the one they were all in.

The King himself pronounced a few more parting shots and then left, being led into a third room that
faced onto another wing of the palace.

The bearded man in grey started calling names from a list. “Vivian Olaf.”

The person so called joined Prince Arthur in the next room.

When he realised that the interviews would be one on one affairs, Merlin's shoulders relaxed (which had him wincing because of the wound). With things being this way there was less chance of him saying something that would out him in public (not that Prince Arthur was any less dangerous, physically embodying the status quo as he did, but being surrounded by forty-eight witnesses less was always a plus). Overall this was an optimal situation – within the limits of the stupid quandary Mordred had put him in.

“Cenred King.”

Merlin started playing with his phone. Angry Birds was quite addictive and better than any Kill the Sorcerer games that came as apps these days.

“Vivian King.”

Merlin's score had climbed pretty high by the time his name was called. Sneakily, he slipped his phone back into his trousers pocket and stood up, patting himself down in order to de-wrinkle his suit. He passed by the bearded man, nodded, and was escorted into the adjoining room. When the doors opened, the guards stepped back, and Prince Arthur stood from his chair.

He held himself stiffly, but he smiled when Merlin entered.

Merlin froze on the spot and Prince Arthur's smile fell, froze, and reformed into another one that was somehow different from the one that had preceded it. “You're Merlin,” he said.

Merlin nodded. “Merlin Emrys.”

“Please, take a seat,” Arthur said, indicating the chair someone had placed opposite his.

Merlin didn't much feel like it. “I can stand. I suppose you want this to be quick.” He gave a look over his shoulder at the still semi packed room he'd momentarily left behind.

Prince Arthur's eyes narrowed. He walked up to Merlin, sizing him up. “Why would I want to make this quick? There's my future in the balance.”

Merlin grinned his cheeky grin, if it came across as obnoxious even better. It was not as if some people didn't think so or as if popular opinion hadn't expressed its doubts about the proceedings in the oldest form known to man: gossip.

There was nothing stopping the royal house from pushing a particular candidate. There was nothing stopping them from pushing someone – someone agreeable to them – into submitting their participation form. There was nothing stopping them from choosing the participant they were secretly backing. “I wouldn't know,” said Merlin. “Your Highness.” That bit was rather tacked on.
“So you think my family is acting dishonourably,” Prince Arthur said, eyes flashing. He took a further step forward, backing Merlin against the wall. “You – you think we're lying to the public? That I'm lying?”

“I don't know,” Merlin said, waggling his eyebrows. “I don't know your family. I don't know you.”

The stormy expression in Prince Arthur's eyes wasn't abating a little bit and Merlin feared he'd gone too far and that he'd be thrown into a bottomless pit for the terrible crime of irritating a prince. Lese Majesté was the term. Or had he got it wrong? Did that even apply? Shit, he was so bad at this. He'd just meant to be one among the many, fade away wall flower style, and be done with it.

“So you have no respect for the Royal Family. Your rulers?” Prince Arthur was going on.

“I'd have to know you to respect you,” Merlin said before he could think. Luckily he hadn't said, 'I'd respect you if you hadn't made outlaws of us', but it was bad enough as it was. He just couldn't stop. He was blabbering, free-wheeling. It was obscene the things he could say without thinking.

It was Prince Arthur being in his face that made him do it, Merlin bet. For, truth be told, Merlin had never exactly been one for backing down when he felt bullied. “You'd have to show me you deserve respect.”

Prince Arthur's mouth fell open. His brow got furrowed and his eyes went alight with something Merlin couldn't put a name to but hoped wasn't downright rage of the kind that would get Merlin arrested and questioned.

Would biting his tongue and playing wallflower have been too difficult, he wondered. Why, oh why, couldn't he just shut up! His mum had taught him better than this, had taught him to keep his head down and not attract attention. Bad, Merlin.

“So you're telling me that I'd have to earn your respect,” Prince Arthur enquired, and Merlin couldn't tell whether it was a rhetorical question or whether he really wanted to have that answered.

“I'm just telling you I don't believe in people being automatically right because of an accident of birth,” Merlin said, answering as though the question was genuine. “I'm telling you that I don't believe in stuff like the Divine Right of Kings.”

“You'd have it though,” Arthur said, backing off slightly. “If you married me, you'd enjoy the same privileges. Why sign up if you take a moral objection to them?”

Gota; Merlin thought. That was the crux, wasn’t it? And his runaway tongue had made him run right into the trap. Free-falling into it, he was. Idiot. “It was a lark,” he said, not sure if it was believable enough. Lots of people filled the form with no thoughts to making it this far, it was true, but his answer sounded too simplistic given that he'd submitted that bloody document. “Just a lark.”

Prince Arthur tilted his head, his frown deepening. “Maybe it was the money then? You wanted to become rich?”

Merlin made fists of his hands. “I don't want your money!” He had some dignity. Christ! He spluttered before he was able to speak further. “I'll have you know I have a job!”

“And what is it that you do?”

“I serve tables,” Merlin said. He might have lost his last job because of a two-week absence he couldn't explain short of saying he'd been shot, but he'd found a new one he'd be starting in a couple of days anyway. A similar one. (He was a rather decent waiter despite the broken plates that would
bear testimony to the contrary; he was a decent waiter because he was bloody nice to his clients – affable and chatty. Merlin knew his strengths.) There was no reason to acquaint Prince Arthur with the job update so the answer was truthful enough while not mentioning particulars. “I'm a waiter.”

“You say that with pride,” Prince Arthur said, as if the concept was foreign to him.

“Of course I do,” Merlin said, squaring his shoulders as much as his wound would allow. “We're not all born with a title to pad our arses.”

Prince Arthur laughed. He really laughed, long, hard and out of the blue. He gave in to it and threw his head back, his Adam's apple bulging. He was truly, bona fide, giving his all to that bout of howling laughter.

Before Merlin could stop wondering whether Prince Arthur was nuts, the Prince sobered. “Well,” he said, still wheezing a little, “that's the first time someone ever said that word to me out loud.”

Merlin thought back to what he'd said. “Arses, you mean?” He gaped a bit because that sounded so odd. It was a pretty standard, commonly used word. Not posh but certainly not a strange one. “I assure you I could have said worse. Most people say worse things daily. My former boss is an example. I think you'd appreciate the list of the names he called me if the word 'arse' shocks you.”

Prince Arthur was staring at him in an oddly insistent way, but Merlin didn't think he was angry anymore. His eyes weren't as stormy as they'd been when Merlin had criticised the royals and his posture seemed more relaxed. “It doesn't,” he said, shaking his head. “You're just... strange.”

“I can probably say the same,” Merlin muttered under his breath.

Prince Arthur slitted his eyes at him again but his righteous indignation seemed to have abated. He wasn't exactly smiling, but his lips weren't a straight line either and his muscles were no longer bunching up under the fabric of his suit. No punching would be taking place, victory. “Then we do agree on something.”

“That may be taking it too far,” said Merlin, though this time he didn't put any hostility in his delivery at all. He was done with the taunting. He'd be a sensible person and his mum would be proud of him for putting up with the likes of this spoilt prince.

Prince Arthur tapped his lip with his thumb. “Those would be interesting grounds for matrimony.”

Merlin smiled and waved the hand attached to his good arm about. “I'm sure you won't be marrying me.”

Arthur was searching his eyes, making Merlin squirm, when there was a knock on the door and the bearded man came in. “Ar--” The bearded man coughed into his fist, looking from Merlin to the Prince with an air of interest. “Your Highness, you've exceeded your five minutes.”

“Right, Leon,” said Prince Arthur, eyes wide. He exchanged some kind of look with Leon that entailed his appearance mimic that of a deer in headlights, waved his underling back, and added, “I had no idea. I, uh, will say goodbye to Merlin here and then you can send the next candidate in.”

Leon retreated, letting the door close softly behind him.

“So,” Prince Arthur said, “I guess you'll have to get back.”

Merlin didn't know what to say. The man sounded mental. Now he was polite! “Yeah, your rules, mate.” Shite, he'd called the Prince 'mate'. He was sure there was some sort of protocol that straight
out prohibited that. Merlin wanted to seriously tear his hair out. What had happened to his dreams of a quick interview and fading into the background?

“T'm supposed to give all participants an equal opportunity to shine,” Prince Arthur said, twisting his lips in apparent distaste. “Even though I'm here to scout out the one I like best.”

“So the game is a little bit rigged?”

“Only in the most obvious way,” Prince Arthur said. “It's geared towards enabling me to find the person I want, the right one for me.”

Merlin nodded and looked down. “What about the contestants though? How do you know they want you?”

Prince Arthur's eyes went round with surprise at the question. “Because they signed the form? They must want it.”

Merlin wanted to tell him that maybe not all contestants did, that maybe some of them were pressured by poverty – or in his case, shite friends who wanted to save him from a meet and greet with the executioner, but Leon poked his head in again. “Your highness?”

“Right,” Arthur said, addressing Leon while shaking Merlin's hand for a moment longer than was strictly necessary. (Probably out of a desire to bring things back to an even keel of politeness.) “I'll get to the next one.” He fixed his gaze on Merlin again. “Goodbye, Merlin.”

“Goodbye, Your Highness.”

“It's 'sir' actually,” Prince Arthur said with a wink. “After the first 'Your Highness' you can address me as 'Sir'.”


“Then call me Arthur.”

Merlin would have pointed out that there'd be no need to since they wouldn't see each other again, when Leon barged in to whisk him away. “I'm sorry but we really need to keep to the timetable, sir.” Leon smiled affably at Merlin. “Mr Emrys, please, follow me.”

Merlin did though he had the impression he had eyes on him all his way to the door. He must have been the rudest candidate to date and have left Prince Arthur goggling at the thought. Well, that would ensure he was struck off the list comprising the thirty finalists to compete in the Selection. Seeing as he wasn't the last candidate, Merlin had to wait there till the last one was interviewed.

Once this had happened King Uther took the dais again and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, the first step in the Selection has now been completed.”

He was reading from a piece of paper, looking down at it from behind a solid pair of reading glasses.

“As you'll certainly understand, this matter is very delicate. Choosing a spouse is not the work of a minute. It's a problem to be pondered with patience and wisdom and most definitely not one to be taken lightly.”

King Uther briefly looked up.
“Therefore, Prince Arthur will be allowed a few days to weigh the candidates and compile the thirty-name list you're all waiting for.” King Uther turned a page. “The results will be televised nationally so as to ensure maximum transparency. Leon here will inform you as to the broadcast date.”

The broadcast day fell on a working day. Merlin was busy bringing a pile of dishes back to the kitchen, favouring the arm attached to his healing shoulder, when the chef turned on the telly to show a close-up of King Uther preparing to make an announcement.

Merlin was securing the empties on top of a wheelie tray the dishwashers would get to when King Uther started reading out the names of the selected.

“Miss Vivian Olaf from Buckinghamshire; Miss Sophia Tirmore from Cheshire; Mr Ranulph Waverley from Norfolk.”

King Uther paused.

Chef Fisher called out to Merlin, “Take this to table four.”

“Mr Owain Knightley from the Isle of Wight,” King Uther continued droning on. “Miss Guinevere Smith...”

Merlin took up the dish, stalking towards the swing doors leading back to the floor.

King Uther said, “Mr Merlin Emrys from the City of London.”

Merlin dropped his plateful of Filet Mignon.

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Back from his late night shift Merlin jogged up the stairs to his flat. Once he'd reached his landing he found that his mezzanine potted plant, a wilted specimen of jelly bean he'd have to be-spell into a lusher state, had been moved.

Surrepetitiously, Merlin looked left and right and once he was sure the coast was clear, or rather than nosy Mrs Dochraid was nowhere to be found, he darted for it.

He picked up the vase and found a note stuck to its bottom. Merlin detached it, quickly put the vase back on its saucer, and then dove into his flat.

Only once he was safe at home did he turn on the light to read the note.

It was couched in the Anglo-Saxon of the Dark Ages, an era during which people had still thought they could harness magic with words.

It said: Becum þā niht, F

Merlin shot a look at the clock that hung in his kitchenette. It was two AM. Strictly speaking it was already morning. The morning after. But Forridel must have needed him otherwise she wouldn't have left him a note in this fashion, using their code. If there was no urgency, she'd have let things slide and waited to talk to him, perhaps choosing to do so during one of their scheduled monthly meetings. No, it was clear she wanted to see him before then. And if he looked at it in a certain way it was still night – very much so since the moon was up and only a little past its Zenith. He could still
make this emergency meeting.

Sure, he'd hoped that after six hours on the floor and an hour and some of commute he could just crash on the sofa and be done with today. But an unscheduled meeting meant something was afoot. And with the palace running interference in his life from here on who knew when he could make himself useful next.

After having burnt the note in his sink, Merlin flicked his collar up and went out again.

Even though they were inching towards spring, the night was cold. This helped him with his mission: fewer people were about to take stock of his comings and goings.

Since it was late, he couldn't take the tube. It had closed for the day hours ago. He didn't feel like taking a bus either. At this time of night on a weekday there was bound to be a limited number of passengers, which would make him appear conspicuous if he boarded one. The driver could notice him. Or some of his fellow travellers would. They could take note and blab to the coppers.

After long association with the Secret Underground Merlin had learnt that visibility was bad.

When he was a kid he'd had this secret ambition; he'd wanted to share his magic with people he liked. He'd wanted to show it to them. It didn't matter that it was illegal and that his mum had impressed upon him the need to keep his magic secret, he'd just yearned to. Nowadays he'd rather go unnoticed, unmarked.

So it was that he decided to walk. Short of someone tailing him he'd go unheeded, something that didn't necessarily happen in cramped spaces such as trains or buses.

Hands in his pockets, he marched onwards at a quick pace, traversing half the city, until he got to Elmers End. He walked the length of a residential street that wasn't far from the country park and the old sewage farm that no longer was. The place had once been, and perhaps still was, thought to be contaminated by noxious substances. The fear of heavy metal poisoning was a factor that had razed real estate prices in the area and made it more largely available to people like sorcerers, who were at the bottom of the census feeding chain, so to speak. If no one else would have it, a magic user would.

It was a known thing.

After having climbed the three steps leading up to it, Merlin knocked on a blue door, the number 236 hanging precariously from the varnished surface.

Someone from the other side asked, “Password.”

“Dragon,” said Merlin.

The door opened. Gilli's eyes went from amber to their natural colour. “We weren't expecting anyone else this late. People downstairs were getting quite het up, mate. We thought someone had grassed and you knocking was actually a police raid.”

“Just me back from a shift,” Merlin said reassuringly, closing the door behind him.

“Thought you'd given that all up to live a life of luxury.” Gilli took the narrow, dark steps down to the cellar.

Merlin sniggered. “That's all Mordred's doing. Let's say I got into a scrape and he thought it was a way out of it. I'll either back out or be eliminated. Not to worry.”
Gilli opened a door. “As long as it doesn't attract attention to us.”

Merlin stepped into the damp, bare cellar. Ten or so people were assembled inside huddling and shifting to keep the cold at bay.

Merlin knew most of them. He recognised Gilli's father and Finna Daniels. Annowre, a young woman roundabout's Merlin's age Merlin knew to be pretty powerful, and Osgar. Some knew faces were present, making Merlin proud of Forridel's recruitment powers. Freya was also there and so was her boyfriend, and Merlin's friend, Will.

Forridel was still talking when Merlin entered. “So are you in favour?”

“Are we sure this boy is a sorcerer?” Gilli's father asked. “Are we sure this isn't a Section Seven trap?”

“The boy's father has already been arrested and taken who knows where,” Forridel said, jumping off the desk she'd been sitting on and walking past each of the Underground members as she made her point. “His little sister has been advised to enrol in the after school Arianrod Project and we all know what it means. They'll secretly test her. And if they find her reactive to magic, she'll be taken, too. You don't enrol people if you don't suspect. The social stigma and backlash is too high. If you do that to someone 'innocent' you're done. They're sorcerers.”

“I'm not sure we should risk the entire group for this boy,” said Gilli's father, his voice rising. “We're doing so well and saving so many people. I don't see the use in jeopardising everything for someone whose story we can't check out.”

“But I'm telling you,” said Forridel, her eyes bright with the light of passion. “I checked his background myself in so far as I could.”

“Yet you're not a magic user,” Gilli's father said, a note of contempt accompanying the word 'not'. “You can't even be sure of the boy's powers. Yet you're saying we should follow you and stack everything on this crazy mission because it's you who's asking.” He puffed his chest out. “What makes you so special, Fo, the fact that you help sometimes?”

Forridel stalked up to Gilli's father. On any other day Merlin would have enjoyed watching Forridel ripping him a new one, especially when he expressed opinions like the one he just had, putting Forridel down for not having magic when she'd risked life and limb multiple times for them, but tonight Merlin only wanted to make sure he could offer his support to the group. He also hoped he could do something for the boy – someone just like him. “I'll take the risk,” said Merlin. “I'm supposed to what? Drive him out of London and give him over to other Underground members so the can smuggle him out of the country? I can do that.”

Will hiccuped a belly laugh. “Always cocky, hey mate?”

Gilli's father said, “And how will you pull this off while you're busy getting all cosy and shit with Prince Arthur?”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “It seems everybody owns a TV these days, don't they?” Since all eyes were on him now, he said, “I've been sneaking around my whole life. And I won't be in the competition long. I just need to ease out of it. I'm offering to do something you apparently won't do.”

"For reasons--"

The only one risking anything here is me,” Merlin steamed on. "Why object?”
“Because,” said Gilli’s father, dripping some spittle from his mouth, “If they get their hands on you, you'll rat on us. I hear they know how to make people talk.”

Gilli said, “He isn't wrong, Merlin.”

“Look,” Merlin said, taking his companions in one by one; even so his hand surreptitiously went to his shoulder. “It's a boy we're talking about. A child, right? Each one of us was. Each one of us was once a child too scared to use their magic. We know what it is to be afraid. We know what happens when the bad men come and get you. How can you hesitate?”

He could see he'd swayed part of his audience. Most members of the group were forming a circle round him and nodding their heads. Even Gilli had stepped closer in defiance of his dad. As for his father, he hadn't yet, but, if his furious lip gnawing was anything to go by, he was considering coming round too. “Okay, all right. But if something happens to you--”

Merlin grinned. “I'm on my own, I know.”

Forridel wrapped her arm around his side and tipped her head up so she could look at him squarely. “I'll give you all the details, date inclusive, over the next two weeks. Is that all right?”

“Mission accepted.”

As the others started to take their leave Forridel filled Merlin in on the details of the boy's case. When there was no one but them left in the old, musty cellar, her attitude changed. She started acting in a less business-like way; she became less the level-headed leader and more Forridel, the friend. She took to smiling and was quite lovely when doing so.

They were both sitting side by side on the desk that was the only piece of furniture in the dark room, when her smile reached her eyes, and she said, “Thank you, Merlin. Without you I couldn't have done this. I couldn't--”

“You're a fearsome leader.” He kissed her cheek. “You know you are.”

“One without magic,” she said, looking down. “And you know how that goes.”

“You've held us together through thick and thin,” he said, nudging her with his shoulder. “Never doubt yourself only because some people like to argue.”

Forridel laughed. “You know, you're quite wise for someone who wants to pass off as though they aren’t.”

“Hey, I always said I was quite wise and deep.” Merlin made his eyes go comically wide. “It's not my fault nobody listens.”

Forridel let out a long, sobering breath. “Just watch out, Merlin, will you? At the Palace?”

Merlin didn't really want to discuss the Palace and the absurd situation Mordred had put him in. Or Prince Arthur. He didn't think he could quite wrap his mind around having been made one of the thirty suitors (contestants, really) for Prince Arthur's hand. And he didn't want to contemplate the amount of scrutiny he'd have to undergo while trying to continue doing the things that mattered the most to him. Fake running for the title of Prince Consort would be so annoying. “It's nearly dawn,” he said instead. “I should get back and try to grab some sleep.”

Forridel had him pinned with her gaze. She didn't say anything for the longest time, but at last she hopped off the desk and said, “Come upstairs. It's cold outside. I'll find you a scarf.”
“By the way,” Merlin said. “Whose place is this?”

Forridel stomped up the stairs. “You don’t want to know.”

Merlin didn’t ask. A goodbye kiss from Forridel later, he was tramping back home. The sun was up by the time he sighted his building. And when he finally put his key in the lock he was yawning, wide jawed.

“Ha, Mr Emrys,” said a stocky, portly old man who’d just made the landing. “I was looking for you. I see you’re just coming in.”

Merlin froze, his chest muscles contracting. He summoned his magic quietly until his fingertips buzzed with it. The glow of it was warming him from the inside out, meaning his power could easily be unleashed, when he asked, “And you are?”

“Oh, sorry,” the man doffed the hat he was wearing. “I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Geoffrey Monmouth, King Uther's Master of Ceremonies. I come express from Buckingham Palace. I'm here to go over the Selection rules with you and to subsequently escort you to Kensington Palace as per the competition rules.”

Merlin let his magic -- and his dreams of a nap -- go. “I thought there was one rule; that's it up to Prince Arthur to choose and everyone goes home on his say-so.”

“Not quite,” said Mr Monmouth, lifting his briefcase and patting its front. “There's a few more things that we don't usually acquaint the general public with.”

Merlin let his shoulders drop with the sigh he expelled. “Look,” he said, just wanting to open the bloody door that separated him for his flat, find the nearest horizontal surface and sleep. He’d been awake for the past thirty hours. He needed rest. “I made a mistake. I just filled the form as a lark. A piece of tomfoolery? It was a stupid bet I had going with my friends. You know how it goes.”

“That's actually a punishable offence,” said Mr Monmouth, bushy eyebrows climbing. “To put it in terms a layman such as you would comprehend--” Helped by that eyebrow of his, Mr Monmouth gave Merlin a supercilious once over. “That would mean you lied when you subscribed your application. You lied – in triplicate.” Helpfully Mr Monmouth held up three fingers. “It's like misrepresenting facts in court, an offence.”

“No! No! No!” Merlin said, scratching his head. Fuck it, on so little sleep he wasn't functioning properly. “I mean, I didn't lie. Can't I just drop out?”

“Are you terminally ill?” Mr Monmouth asked.

“What? No!”

“Illness that would prevent your continued participation or that would be considered transmissible is the only grounds for dropping out of the contest that I know of,” Mr Monmouth said. “And I've read two hundred years worth of our Kingdom's annals.”

“I see.” Merlin's shoulders sagged.

“Other than that you subscribed a document--”

Merlin wasn't listening anymore. Gaius had been right. Participants participated; they didn't excuse themselves from the competition unless there was a serious reason to. If you cast your name in the bloody ballot you saw it through on pain of being a constitutional anomaly. An oddity someone had
to look up in the archives. A person like that would have to bear lots of scrutiny. “No, you're right. I don't really mean to drop out. Not really. It's just that I worked a very long shift and I'm a bit knackered.”

Mr Monmouth looked red about the face. “Indeed.”

“Yep,” Merlin said, turning the key in the lock to throw it open. “Why don't I make you some tea?”

Merlin had scarcely put the kettle on than Mr Monmouth had started freely expanding on the rules of the contest.

“I'll preface this by saying that any violation of these rules will result in elimination from the competition.”

Merlin pricked his ears. Maybe he should should pay attention. Maybe if he was caught doing what he wasn't allowed to they'd give him the boot themselves.

As Merlin put two cups (though Merlin needed more than a bland cuppa to stay awake) on the table, Monmouth droned on.

“You're not allowed to sabotage other participants.”

As Mr Monmouth harped on that theme while sipping his tea, Merlin packed his stuff up. Counting on staying at the Palace a short time he didn't take lots with him. A few changes of clothes, Pjs, and a few comic books to read at night. His laptop case.

While they were in the car and en route to central London, Merlin was introduced to rule two. “You mustn't share Palace information – of any nature, from security to gossip – with any person or persons outside the Palace, be it press, friends or acquaintances. You'll have to sign a retainer.”

Merlin could see how that was but Mr Monmouth launched into an explanation that saw them to the Palace.

Merlin knew the gardens and had spied the bulk of the building more than once, but he'd never been inside, even if part of it was a museum chronicling the lives of former Pendragons. He'd just never cared about royals enough to take a peek. Now he was peeking. The damn place was grand.

The entrance from the park lay close to a carefully tended ornamental garden surrounded by lawns on which visitors were sprawled.

The mass of the building itself was quite imposing. Red brick and a sober façade made Merlin feel small.

Thankfully, he had no time to indulge in the feeling.

The car rounded a corner and Merlin was whisked into a private entrance. He was led into a wing of the palace that wasn't as grandiose as he would have thought it from the outside, but that was still extremely posh, albeit in a more domestic way.

Rule three was expounded to him while Merlin climbed the stairs. “For security reasons you'll have to communicate any desire to leave the palace to members of staff. In most cases your motion will be approved, but there will be no trotting off the premises unattended. That's for your own protection.”

Merlin stopped short mid flight of stairs. “I have to ask for permission to go out? Even for a walk?”
“You're in the public eye now, Mr Emrys,” Mr Monmouth said, descending a step, grabbing Merlin by his jacket and herding him forward like a recreant child. “There's plenty of people – terrorists, sorcerers – who, I'm sure, given a chance, would like make a try on your life.”

Merlin was sure that no sorcerer ever would. A number of them knew who he was. And as for those who didn't and might see Merlin as an oppressor for participating in the Selection, Merlin could show them that he was just as magical as them and talk them down from any act of aggression.

If push came to shove, he could defend himself even though the last thing he wanted was to attack someone like him. Hediscounted the notion of terrorists too, for he knew that lots of magic users, Ruadan's group aside, were named as such but weren't. Terrorists, he feared, were a Pendragon scapegoat.

No, he wasn't worried about any of that. He was worried that the restrictions put on his comings and goings would stop him from helping Forridel. He'd have to sneak out and make sure nobody took notice. It could be done. He'd just have to be wise about it. But the notion still unsettled him.

“So basically I'm grounded,” Merlin said, following Mr Monmouth into the room he'd opened up for him. It was a bedroom. The walls were painted a light blue. There were two windows screened by thick damask curtains displaying a light shade of periwinkle. The bed was king-sized and came with posts carved to look like spirals. The carpet was heavy and plush, cream coloured, a neutral contrast to the richness of the upholstery dominating every other corner. All in all the room looked chintzy and posh but not grand, not stately, or like a museum. It certainly wasn't his style but he could survive – especially if that mattress was comfortable. Oh sleep. Blessed sleep. “Can't get out unless I have a shadow.”

“Body guards Mr Emrys,” Mr Monmouth reminded him. "Just bodyguards.”

Merlin set his overnight bag down. “Any other rules?”

Mr Monmouth compressed his lips. His cheek twitched rapidly, the bristles of his beard becoming more prominent, like fur. “You're free to entertain guests.”

“Finally a positive!” Merlin said in a tone he felt would annoy Mr Monmouth.

“But they'll have to be screened.”

Merlin shook his head, looking away. “Obviously.”

Mr Monmouth tapped his fingers on his arms. “Last rule: your communications with the press – and there'll be press -- with be regulated by us, which in your case, sounds like a great God-send. The Palace reserves the right to decide when you'll give out interviews or agree too press releases. The contents of the above will have to be pre-approved.”

“In other words,” said Merlin, sitting at the foot of the bed, and making a point of piercing Mr Monmouth with his eyes, “you'll be censoring me.”

“Just making sure you don’t damage your public persona.”

Merlin quirked an eyebrow. “Any more rules I should know about?”

“No, Mr Emrys,” Mr Monmouth said, doling the words out carefully, as if he wanted to say more, which, promptly, he did. “I merely recommend you follow the rules of good taste and decorum in your pursuit of the Prince.”
Merlin dipped his head in order to avoid snorting in Mr Monmouth's face. “I see. I'm sure that's what he's looking for in an SO. Someone who appreciates decorum.”

“That's certainly the kind of person the Royal House will pressure him to ally himself to.”

Merlin looked from the carpet to Mr Monmouth. “Poor man, then.” And for the first time Merlin felt that to be true. He certainly wasn't excusing the Pendragons' abuses against sorcerers nationwide and he assuredly would have wished King Uther off the throne. But though he condemned the royals, he couldn't help but feel sorry for any man who couldn't follow his heart. If you couldn't do that, what sort of life would you lead? In Arthur's case, a pampered one, for sure. But would he be happy? Merlin knew that happiness mattered. He wanted to be happy himself, not just content. Maybe, just maybe, he did have something the Prince didn't. He was free to love whomever he wanted to. Well, when the time came for that. If it ever did, busy as he was... “That's sad.”

Mr Monmouth's eyes were now drawn to slits. “I don't think I understand you, young man. The Prince is fine, not a sad human being.” He lifted his shoulders. “Regardless, I don't think this is the time or place to discuss such a subject. Better yet, it isn't your place to discuss it.” Mr Monmouth was now in full business mode. “So you won't.” Mr Monmouth took a step back towards the outer hallway. “I'll now wish you goodbye. And remember, you will be expected tonight at Buckingham Palace for an introductory dinner.”

“What, tonight?” Merlin said. He'd barely had time to get his bearings or to catch a wink of sleep. He couldn't be asked to hobnob around so soon. “I thought--”

“Tonight, indeed. Mr Monmouth said, clearly welcoming no further interjection. “No exceptions made.” Mr Monmouth wetted chapped lips. He gargled a bit and then added, “Even though the competition formally begins only tomorrow, I suggest you keep your comments to yourself during dinner.”

Merlin tried to make his lips stretch into a smile. “I'll try my best.”

Mr Monmouth cast his eyes at the heavens, took a bow – a real one – and waddled off.

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Merlin managed to squeeze in a two-hour nap before he had to rise – and not shine. Brain practically shut off, he shuffled into the shower and placed himself under the nozzle, leaning against the tiles, nose squished against cold marble, water jetting on his head. It was probably bouncing off it, but he didn't care.

Blissfully enveloped by the water jet, he closed his eyes for just a second and let his mouth drift open. The water was pleasantly warm and his thoughts rarefied, diluted to a feeling of deep-seated well-being.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there but he did yelp the moment the water ran cold. His eyes flew open and he took a step back. He tried to regulate the spray to a warmer setting, but he must have used all the hot water, for none more came forth. There was nothing to be done, so Merlin resigned himself to no more hugging flow of pleasantly warm water, lathered himself up, rinsed himself, and quickly darted out.

Getting dressed wasn't as difficult an ordeal as maintaining consciousness while being lulled by the
hot spray had been. He didn't go for an elaborate outfit simply because he owned nothing that answered the definition. His choice was restricted to what he had in his overnight bag. A the end of the day that was nothing much.

He did make a concession towards a smarter dress code in that he chose dark jeans and a dark shirt. But that was it. He did what he could to comb his hair flat but since it had dried by its lonesome it had developed a tendency to stick up in tufts.

Tough luck. It was already late and he was ready to bet lateness would piss the King off more than a coiffing mishap.

Once he had everything – wallet and phone included – he ventured out of his room and down the first flight of stairs he saw. He hoped he wasn't trespassing somewhere he wasn't meant to be. On the way in he'd spied a few body-guarderly types and he didn't fancy being manhandled because he was caught somewhere he shouldn't be.

When he got to the bottom though he felt reassured he'd made no orientation mistake. The other contestants were waiting in a fancy hallway, all dressed to the nines.

Merlin saw evening dresses and dinner jackets, a profusion of accessories and many a sample of fine jewellery.

One of the girls, a slim blonde with freckles on her nose, had gone the length of wearing a dress that was a facsimile of one the late Queen Ygraine had been photographed in just before her marriage. That photo had been pretty well-known and stamped on souvenir mugs and ashtrays before it was pulled to comply with the grieving King's wishes. Still the image had stayed iconic and Merlin didn't think that replicating it was a tactful idea.

The giggling and snorting the girl occasioned though were a bit too much for Merlin.

Merlin looked down at his his shoes. He was torn as to what to do; offer sympathy to the girl for how she was being treated – shooting down all those 'how gauche' remarks– or cringe a bit at her use of emotion to play on the Pendragons.

He was spared from having to make a choice when a curly haired girl who had a fifties-style back dress on -- one that Merlin thought looked similar to the Rear Window number Grace Kelly sported back in the day-- offered Fake Ygraine her shawl. The shawl covered part of the dress at least in one of the nicest near saves Merlin had ever seen. “I'm sure you must be cold,” the curly-haired girl said, without mentioning the girl's faux-pas, and Merlin smiled at her.

“Thank you,” Fake Ygraine answered.

The curly-haired girl smiled and said, “Don't mention it.”

She brushed past Merlin on her way back to where she'd been standing. Before she could complete her retreat Merlin said, “That was nice of you.”

Curly-head dimpled up at him. “I felt so bad for Luned. And to be honest I'm not looking forward to King Uther thundering down on us at sight of her.”

Merlin made a face. “Me neither,” he agreed, offering his hand to shake. “I'm Merlin.”

“Guinevere, well, actually I prefer Gwen,” Gwen said, returning his handshake, “but the official Selection announcement cast me as Guinevere so you'll probably know me by that name.”
“That's because Queen Guinevere has a nice sound to it,” said Merlin, half-teasing, half-thinking this girl – who'd shown some kindness to a fellow participant – would be a better monarch than those who had stood by and gossiped about her. It showed something about Gwen's character. A warmth and benignity to it that was nice to know existed.

Gwen hit him on his arm with no real strength. “Oh, shut up. I'll never be queen.”

“I think you're lovely and that you have a good chance.”

Gwen smiled, smoothing the flare of her satiny skirt. “If I didn't know you were gunning for someone else, I'd think you were flirting with me.”

Although Merlin instinctively liked Gwen, he wasn't ready to share his secrets with her. He couldn't tell her that he wasn't really after Arthur. It would be a while before he trusted her and since he wasn't going to stay long here, he may never have the chance to get to know her well enough to do so. “Just speaking it like it is.”

“You're lovely too,” she said, “and if I wasn't already committed to the Selection, I'd flirt right back with you.”

Merlin chuckled. “Far be it from me to steal you from Prince Arthur.”

“He's such a hottie, isn't he?” said Gwen, her body uncoiling, dancing from foot to foot. Her hands were joined and she briefly cast her eyes down, which Merlin thought cute.

Cute as it may be though, Merlin didn't provide an answering opinion either, but rather hummed a bit under his breath.

He was saved from embarrassing himself by stating that, yes, Prince Arthur was hot but there were reasons why Merlin couldn't even consider him, by the entrance of a woman with a clipboard.

“Good Evening, ladies and gentlemen,” she said. “My name is Catrina Tregore and I'm your chaperone. I'm here to--” Ms Tregore's eyes fell on the Ygraine look-alike. Merlin could see her cringe but noted that she didn't say anything. Tapping a pen against the side of her clipboard, Ms Tregore continued, “--escort you to the Palace. I'll fill you in on the rules of etiquette required of you en route. Now if you'll all follow me.”

Merlin followed, though now that Gwen was being silent and there was no spark of new friendship to keep him animated, his drowsiness came back with a vengeance. Even though the others were murmuring about him being uncouth, he lolled his head against the car window and only shook awake right before he was frogmarched into a Palace side entrance.

Merlin tried not to focus on the other participants -- one of whom, Cenred King, was saying, “I can already picture myself as master of this – and keep his attention on a) not falling asleep and b) enjoying the meal. With all the comings and goings he'd had little to eat as well as next to no sleep, so there definitely was something he was looking forward to.

Ms Tregore made them wait in a luxurious antechamber, while she entered the other room.

Back in the anteroom, the contestants stayed mostly silent save for a few quiet whispers and Vivian's, “My house may not be a palace but it's nearly as fine as this.”

Gwen snorted under her breath and Merlin's mouth twitched. Another contestant, Ranulph, Merlin thought it was, turned his head to the side to avoid being caught doing the same. Merlin smiled at him as he had at Gwen before. He needed to latch onto the normal people around him at the moment;
otherwise he'd go bonkers. Because of the very nature of this competition it went without saying that not many were.

Ms Tregore came back. “Now you can follow me,” she said.

They filed after her, some of the guests expressing their marvel at the surroundings in loud 'ohs' and 'ahs'.

Unlike them Merlin had something else to think about: keeping awake for the duration of the dinner. He was so out of it that wasn't a sure thing.

Neither was his coordination, apparently.

He was going on automatic, his brain so disconnected from his surroundings in the way only lack of sleep can lead to that he lost control of his limbs.

In fact right after having passed the wide set of double doors, Merlin tripped into the antique carpet. He nearly went sprawling, but before he could nose dive into the mesh of it, Ranulph righted him.

Merlin was smiling his thanks when his eyes met Prince Arthur's across the room.

The Prince was standing behind a tallish chair, his hand on its back. There was a far more imposing chair next to his, which Merlin guessed belonged to the King, but was empty. Prince Arthur had been looking in the direction of the new arrivals but when Merlin tripped he looked away, his mouth thinning.

It seemed rather obvious that Prince Arthur couldn't abide clumsy people. And to say that right that morning Merlin had been almost sympathising with him.

Merlin had no time to reflect about the stick up his arse the Prince was so clearly afflicted with, for King Uther stepped inside.

“Ha,” he said, standing so tall and proud Merlin thought his posture befit someone sitting for their portrait. “I'm glad to find you all so punctual.” He ran his gaze across the group of participants gathered before him and paled when his eyes fell on the Ygraine look-alike. He got so white and his features locked so tight that he started looking like a wax statue. Merlin saw him bunch his fingers together and stagger backwards.

Arthur followed his father's line of sight and he too went a shade or two paler. He didn't reel like his father had, or move much at all, but you could see how his body coiled tight, the muscles of his neck and the tendons lining his hands sticking out.

It didn't last long and Prince Arthur moved to place a hand on his father's shoulder, but Merlin had seen his reaction.

The filial love gesture must have shaken Uther off, for the King seemed to jerk out of his stupor. His features smoothed and blood welled under the surface of his skin, concentrating on his cheeks, giving him a more human appearance. He spoke again, recovering fast after stalling. “As Louis XVIII once said 'Punctuality is the politeness of kings.'” He eyed the crowd as if the weight of his gaze could stress the concept. Once he'd paused long enough for it to sink in he took his place at the table.

After a few seconds had elapsed, they all joined him.

Even though he couldn't put his finger on the underlying manoeuvres, Merlin felt there was some
deliberate vying for the seat closest to the Prince.

Since he didn't want to experience any elbows in the ribs and stepping on toes, he let the others scramble for a place that would allow them to brush elbows with royalty and waited to get one nobody would fight him for. He ended up sitting between his rescuer, Ranulph, and the Ygraine look-alike girl.

Vivian got to sit right next to Arthur and Sophia got to be seated next to the King himself.

Cenred King had been nimble enough to secure a place in front of the Prince so that he could hold his eyes as much as he wanted.

Merlin had to give it to him. If the point was getting closest to Arthur, Sophia and Vivian had won the scramble, but if it came to getting more room to claim Arthur's attention then Cenred was the clear winner. He had been wily enough to guarantee that he would have Arthur's eyes on him.

Good for him, Merlin thought.

As for his immediate neighbour, she had her eyes cast down on her empty plate.

The plate didn't stay that way for long.

A series of footmen pirouetted in with soup tureens and trays as if this was an Altman film. Merlin started to feel even more displaced than he had in the morning dealing with Monmouth's verbosity. At least that had been a one on one. This was entirely different and dissonant

He was never the one waited upon.

He was the one who usually served tables. He was the one who'd come in with a tray, bend low, and wait for people to transfer the entrées they saw on the communal dish onto their plate.

So when the boy closest to Merlin tripped, causing his tray to empty itself of some of its contents, it was natural for Merlin to leap from his chair and go on his knees to help mop up the mess.

He'd been there so many times before he couldn't not. In his early days as a waiter he'd had plenty of similar mishaps and been told off on countless occasions. He knew what this was and his heart went out to the footman as a simple matter of course.

“Mr Emrys,” the King thundered as Merlin was clearing up a stray piece of canapé, “you do realise that helping the help is not what you're here for? You're here to rise above that.”

Merlin stiffened. He tilted back his head so he was facing straight ahead. His hands never stopped in their task, however. “I'm proud of what I am. And it's this. Someone who serves at tables,” Merlin said. “Thinking certain tasks are only good for some people and that some are different at their core because of what they do is just classism.”

Silence plunged into the room and Merlin used the pause to finish helping the footman.

When he regained his seat, he realised he'd drawn all eyes to himself.

King Uther's were narrowed while his son's were wide. The others' expressions ranged from surprise to condemnation. Gwen was cupping her mouth. Fake Ygraine was hunching in on herself as if she was scared or uneasy. Some were trying to check smug smiles.

“So you condemn class differentiation on principle and yet you're participating in a competition that
would have you become an aristocrat if you were to win it,” King Uther said, lifting his wine glass so as to have a footman fill it. “Don't you think that's rather hypocritical?"

The very idea of this competition did clash against everything Merlin believed in and admitting it squarely would amount to outing himself. But he couldn't really live with the King's taunting logic and his opinions.

“I'm against the concept. I don't believe in prejudice based on class. I don't believe a title or aspirations to a title differentiate any human being from another.” He sneaked a glance at the sheepish footman who'd caused the spill and who was now nodding at him. That was a booster to Merlin's confidence. “I believe in equality and helping. In the value of sympathy. Making yourself useful if possible.”

King Uther's cheeks coloured. It was subtle but coupled with the convergence of his eyebrows and the tightening of his mouth it was a signal that couldn't be missed. The King was angry. Angry at Merlin for saying what he had. “Let's say that I agree with you on the usefulness factor. No one should ever be idle. But don't tell me people are born equal. People are deserving in different degrees. Levelling us all just would lead to a failure to reward those who've done best, punishing the achievers. Nobility is a reward. Money is a reward as well... Class is based on those staples.”

“Nobility is something inherited though,” Merlin said, pointing out the obvious fallacy. “I mean once perhaps it was a reward. Hey, you defended a bunch of farmers with your sword. Here, you're a knight. But today? Today it's irrelevant.”

A vein stuck out on the King's forehead. “Irrelevant? As King I have duties.” He put his hand on Arthur's arm. “So will my son. I don't see how you can sit at my table and consider those duties irr--”

Merlin could tell that he'd spoken too much, that he'd gone too far. He hadn't meant to. He'd just meant to sit through this dinner, be as inconspicuous as possible, eat his fill and then go to sleep.

His problem was not being able to stick to what he knew was a wise course of action. Somehow he was always feeling called to rise to the challenge when one presented itself, even when it was not the most prudent thing to do.

His mum had told him he ought to sit down and think before piping up plenty of times, but there was no controlling his runaway mouth. Even now he was itching to say more.

Merlin's fingers were curling inwards when Arthur spoke up. “I don't think Merlin's beef was with the duty side of things, Father.” His eyes rested on Merlin for a long moment before he finished of with, “And more with the benefits we reap because of our titles. He's not saying anything dissimilar to what you're saying when you insist on the value of working hard.”

“Dedication to hard work is praise-worthy,” said the King. “I cannot deny that. But I will stand against a system that levels us all, however, for it induces laziness. If no one is to be rewarded then there's no spur to positive action.”

“Isn't a willingness to do good a spur to action?” Merlin asked, driving his metaphorical point home by tapping his index finger.

King Uther's head whipped in his direction. “It should be. But it isn't always.”

“See, you two agree,” Prince Arthur said, swinging his head from his father to Merlin.

Merlin didn't really know what to say. Prince Arthur had left him entirely speechless. His last comment was just a big effort in twisting Merlin's words; there was no way that wasn't deliberate.
The leap he'd made was so astonishing Merlin had no rebuttal just yet.

By the time he'd managed to think of something to say, Prince Arthur had added, “Wouldn't you all agree that hard work, doing one's duty, is key to positive action and ethics?”

Merlin wasn't sure whether Prince Arthur was bullshitting them all or not. He couldn't swear Prince Arthur didn't believe in what he'd just said, but he wasn't sure he did either. But he recognised a good, politic piece of deflection when he saw one.

“Nothing else inflammatory to say, hey, Merlin?” Cenred King asked.

Arthur speared a carrot and brought it to his mouth. “This is utterly insipid,” he said completely out of nowhere and stretching his hand out towards Merlin. “Hand the salt, Merlin.”

Merlin's eyebrow went up. “Am I your servant now?”

“No,” Prince Arthur said, wiggling his fingers. “I'm not casting you into some kind of elaborate fantasy. I just want the salt.”

Merlin handed Prince Arthur the salt. “And here I was thinking you were getting kinky.”

Prince Arthur's cheeks got rosy as his fingers closed around the salt shaker. “I-- no.”

A second wave of silence fell on the group. It was thankfully interrupted by the footmen carrying in the main courses.

After that conversation resumed almost normally. Merlin just concentrated on eating and not interacting. That was certainly safer. It worked too. Having skipped a couple of meals he was pretty hungry and focusing on food was easy. He tuned out most of what was being said. That way he didn't feel the need to chip in. A few things registered all the same though.

Fake Ygraine was given the cold shoulder. Gwen was polite, classy and perfect at everything, from knowing how to use the cutlery – which Merlin did only because he was a waiter who'd set countless tables – to making polite but engaging small talk, to being radiant. Cenred was being smug, talking about his City Job and what a ‘mover' he was, someone who made things just happen. And Vivian was a little prissy, her manners more proper than King and Prince's. Overdoing it seemed to be her motto.

Dessert was rolled in on a cart. There were different cake choices as well as scoops of ice cream and flambéed sorbets.

Merlin took a taste of everything. Prince Arthur's lips were in a perpetual twitching state about this but Merlin didn't care. It was rare that he got to eat so plentifully. You could say whatever you wanted about the Pendragons and the Royal household but one thing was sure; they had brilliant cooks.

Merlin licked his spoon a lot.

When the meal was over and even Merlin could consider himself full, the King said, “You're all invited to the Blue Room for a coffee.”

Merlin covered his mouth to avoid sniggering at the mention of the 'Blue Room'. His eyelids were going down anyway, he was doing his level best to avoid yawning, and he was generally too fucking tired to get into a fight.
Instead, once in the Blue Room, he let himself fall into a plush armchair.

He relaxed into it, stretching his feet a little, the muscles in his back yielding to the comfort it provided. He let his head list just a little to the side, seeking the spot where the upholstery was hollowing out so it could cradle his head.

The fireplace was to his side and it was emanating just the right degree of warmth. It was cosy. Once again the conversation going on around him faded out for him. He much preferred listening to the crackling of the fire anyway and he just...

Fell asleep. Must have, for when he opened eyes he didn't remember closing, he woke to a room that was far emptier than it had been and to a close up of Prince Arthur's slightly slanted eyes. That was a bit surprising to say the least.

Right now those eyes were wide and twinkling a little. Or perhaps that was the light of the fire reverberating in them. What contributed to Merlin's surprise was the prince's expression. His lips were quirked. He looked both curious and somehow satisfied. The position he was in was as odd as his apparent satisfaction. He was crouching by Merlin's armchair too. “You fell asleep,” he announced.

Merlin scrubbed a hand down his face. “Yeah, I noticed. Where are the others?”

“My father was put out by hearing you snoring.” Now the prat was breaking into a smile. “So he went to bed.”

“What about the other contestants?” Merlin asked, making sure that nobody was hiding in any corner of the room.

“Driven to Kensington,” Arthur said nonchalantly.

Merlin sat up. “Am I supposed to walk back now?”

Arthur gave a light snort. “Of course not.”

“Right the bodyguard thing Monmouth was going on about.” He'd almost forgotten about those hours of his life wasted listening to the old man droning on about the competition's rules. “So who do I bloody warn to get a lift home?”

“No one,” Arthur said, pulling himself to his feet. “I'll drive you.”

Merlin gaped. “You drive?”

“Yes, Merlin,” Prince Arthur said, dusting his knees off, although Merlin could tell the floor was pristine. “I recently acquired that skill like so many other people have before me.”

Merlin's eyebrows pushed together. “What for? I bet you're driven around all the time.”

Prince Arthur's back went taut; his jaw jutted. “Haven't you ever wanted to be your own man?”

“All the time,” Merlin said without even needing to lie while locked in an exchange with Prince Arthur. “That's all I want to be.”

“Then you'll get why I want to know how to do things even though I don't always need to put them in practice.” The Prince cocked his head at him. “Now are you coming or are you planning to spend the night here?”
Merlin put both arms on the armchair's sides and pushed himself up. “I was just tired.”

“So I'd gathered,” said Arthur. His hand was on the knob but then he turned and leaned against the door, effectively barring him from opening it. “For a moment I thought it was some sort of act of rebellion.”

“Dozing off? Wish it were.” Merlin grinned. “But, no, I actually succumbed to sleep.”

“Come on, Merlin, let's get you home.”

Merlin didn't point out that no palace was his home nor would it ever be. The Kensington one temporarily housed him and he'd have to get to grips with that. Merlin straightened his shirt and walked to the door.

A little expectantly, Merlin waited for Arthur to open it, brow furrowed, but Arthur continued to stay rooted to the spot, eyebrow tilted.

At last he pulled on the handle and the door slid open. Before Merlin could pass though, Arthur placed his hand on Merlin's shoulder, his fingers digging in.

He must have done it to shepherd him outside, but as Merlin wretched, wretched luck would have it, he'd chosen his left shoulder to steer him by. Merlin closed his eyes, blew out a rattling breath, and grabbed at Prince Arthur, unable to hide the wince.

“Merlin,” Prince Arthur said, concern in his voice. “Are you all right?”

Merlin's thoughts were scattering under the weight of a white-hot surge of pain. Arthur's thumb had been unknowingly probing the tissue around Merlin's wound and Merlin had to twist free.

“Nothing,” he said, unable to control his reaction. “It's nothing.”

“It's not nothing!” Arthur said, voice rising. “You're as pale as a sheet, Merlin. That's not a human colour unless you're going for a monster of the week vibe.”

Now that Merlin had disengaged himself from Arthur he felt like he could breathe again. The sharp lancing ache had gone. He pushed air in and out of his nose and that made him less likely to keel over. “I sprained my shoulder at the gym,” Merlin fibbed. “It's still a bit inflamed.”

Arthur made a double take. “There was no mention of you being a gym regular in your form submission.”

That was because Merlin wasn't. But Merlin had no idea as to what Mordred had put in that form. He could have written virtually anything and it was not as though Merlin could guess what that was. It had seemed so unimportant at the time. “Didn't I? I must've forgotten to. Didn't seem like vital info to me.”

“I clearly remember there being a question about sports,” Arthur said, folding his arms and stubbornly staying put while Merlin wished he'd move so they could put an end to this awful evening.

Merlin shrugged with the shoulder that didn't send out stabbing pain waves when stretched. “I told you. I must have forgotten.”

Arthur accepted the answer this time. “Are you sure you don't want a palace physician to check up on you?”
That was the last thing Merlin wanted. “No, please, no!” Maybe that had been too frantic a manifestation of his fear. “I mean, I'll be right as rain in a couple of days anyway.”

Arthur emitted a small grunt. “As you wish,” he said before leading him finally out.

Arthur's car wasn't as eye-catching as he thought it would be. It was no convertible for one. It was dull and grey and it didn't make more than 140 mph.

“I'm impressed,” Merlin said, strapping his seatbelt on. “I thought you'd go for a Lamborghini or a Porsche. Something fast and powerful and very, very pricey. This is nicely understated.”

“I'll admit to owning an SRT Viper,” said Arthur, turning the ignition on. “But I'd be spotted if I took that out. I don't want to be spotted.”

“I thought the bodyguards following you around would be what gave you away.”

Arthur launched the car out of the palace gates and onto the roundabout skirting the Queen Victoria statue and down the Mall. “Hush, Merlin. We're giving my minders the slip tonight.”

Merlin was content with that. It was not as if he was eager to have people following him around, possibly snooping into who he was and how he acted. Those people were quick to gather evidence and assess threats. Merlin had a feeling they'd figure him out. It was much cosier as it was, with Arthur driving at a firm pace, no one else's eyes on him. It was soothing. So soothing that he was once again on the verge of sleep.

He was so tired that he found the motion of car very nice and lulling. Even Arthur's respectful silence was welcome. He shimmied in his seat so his head was leaning against the car window, hugged himself, and made a concession to his exhaustion in the form of a flying nap.

Not even twenty minutes later Arthur was saying. “We're here.”

“Oh, right,” Merlin said, unfastening his seatbelt. “I was cosy.”

Prince Arthur turned his head. “The beds in the Palace are more comfy, I can assure you.”

Merlin chuckled. “I have no doubt.”

Arthur breathed out and lowered his gaze so he was focusing on the bottom part of Merlin's face. It looked as though there was something wrong with Merlin's mouth. Had Merlin drooled? It was not far-fetched to think he had. Merlin wiped at his lips with the sleeve of his shirt and that shook Arthur out of his momentary reverie. He took the key out of the ignition, scratched the side of his face with it, and said, “Let me escort you to your bedroom.”

Merlin didn't say no to that, mainly because he wasn't sure he'd remember the way to it if left to his own devices.

Prince Arthur having guided him through the maze of corridors, they found themselves on the landing before Merlin's door.

Prince Arthur was still toying with his keys. “I suppose it's good night, then.”

“Yeah.” Merlin hid the umpteenth yawn of the day behind his hand. “I'm done. Totally buggered”

Prince Arthur's lips twisted sideways. “Try to catch some proper sleep, all right?”

Merlin nodded absently. “Yeah, that's my plan. I'll just free-dive into the mattress. I'll win the related
championship and--”

Before Merlin had quite finished, Arthur dove. He kissed Merlin on the cheek and said, “Night, Prattler.”

Merlin rubbed at his neck as he watched Arthur stalk off. What had that been?

Shrugging off the Prince's antics, he let himself into his bedroom and hopped into bed. He didn’t change into PJs. He only toed his shoes off, flopped onto his belly, burrowed his face under the pillows, and let himself finally drift off.

When he woke again it was mid morning. Well rested at last, Merlin stretched in bed, scratched at his face, and rolled onto his side.

It was from this position that he noticed the tray someone had put on the dresser while he was sleeping. A full breakfast was laden on it. A vase full of flowers was sitting next to a plate of eggs.

While on the one hand he was put out that some maid or valet had slipped in while he was sleeping, (he'd been known to do magic while dreaming), the smell was pretty enticing. His stomach growled.

He wouldn't say nay to breakfast so Merlin wandered over to the dresser and started taking bites out of things. Everything tasted delicious.

This food deserved more of his time. He knew good food when it met his taste buds and this was it. Since he was on life arrears when it came to delicacies such as these (the chefs at the restaurant never let him have more than day-old leftovers), he sat down and binged.

To do so while he kept himself updated as to what was going on around him, he turned the telly on for the news. He was happily munching on when the news report switched to a Selection related feature.

“Unbeknownst to the participants, the first part of the Selection process had already begun before they even knew it. In the dark as to the competition being already on, they took part in a family dinner presided by the King himself,” the fancily dressed reporter standing before the gates of Buckingham Palace said.

Merlin dropped his morsel.

“Hidden cameras were rolling while Prince Arthur's guests were gathered around the Royal table,” the journalist said into her microphone. “The footage will be available on-line for the viewing public's joy later today, but in the meanwhile let me reveal to you the name of the person that scored best yesterday evening and will therefore share a tête a tête reward dinner with Prince Arthur. The favoured contestant is Guinevere Smith! Will she be our next queen?”

Merlin was equally happy for Gwen and outraged that they'd been filmed without their permission.

“And now for the person who’ll return home--” the journalist said.

Merlin didn’t hear the name because Gwen flew into his room, clapping her hands together. “Merlin-Merlin, I'm to dine with Arthur!”

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Even though Gwen had won that meal for two that didn't mean she'd see Prince Arthur right away.

Arthur had a busy schedule that couldn't easily be altered. He had duties to see to that were considered more important than a dinner date.

Besides that bodyguards had to be mobilised and a venue scoped out for potential danger before the outing could take place. That meant that Gwen and Arthur's tête à tête was slotted a week from the day from the day Gwen's reward had been announced.

This caused two things of an entirely different nature to happen. The first concerned the Secret Underground and the boy who needed Merlin's help. Since Merlin knew security attention would be deflected from the palace and aimed at whichever ritzy place Arthur would chose to host his date, he figured that the night of Gwen's dinner with Arthur was the perfect night to bust the boy sorcerer out of London.

Following this logic Merlin sent Mordred a mail to bring him up to speed with his thoughts and plans. At first glance his message was an innocent one. If somebody read it, which Merlin didn't put past the royals, they would never get anything out of it. It was all coded.

For example, 'Say hi to our common friends' actually meant contact 'Forridel and the others'. I hope you're playing 'Grand Theft Auto with thoughts of winning' meant that he was referring to the operation. 'Count three from the full moon' was him giving Mordred a date. The coordinates as well as the date were expressed by way of song lyrics.

Whoever read his outgoing message, and Merlin didn't trust the palace's secret agents not to, would simply think Merlin was drunk off his arse when he'd composed it. That or that he was a classic song aficionado.

The second thing that happened in connection with the date was Gwen knocking on his door. He knew beforehand who it was because Gwen called from the other side of it, “Please, Merlin, let me in. It's urgent. Somewhat.”

Merlin minimised the browser page with the answer to the latest mail he'd sent Mordred – saying 'Game is On' – and opened the door for Gwen.

“What's the emergency?” he asked with a smile.

“Tonight's the night!” Gwen said, wringing her hands, but wearing a delighted expression. “I mean, maybe you don't remember but tonight's the night I'm meant to go on a date with Arthur.”

For specific reasons of his own Merlin remembered very well. “No, I know,” he said, pushing down his laptop's lid as he sauntered back centre room. “I remember. It's even on the news.” Nobody could quite avoid being informed of the progress of the Selection. To his chagrin Merlin had found that every little step of the competition was publicised, announced on telly shows or featured by the press. “And I saw a gossip magazine at breakfast the other day. They had a whole page dedicated to you and it.”

“I couldn't be sure it'd matter to you as much as it does to me,” Gwen said with a gentle smile. “I didn't want to assume. I wouldn't be sure to remember when someone else is meant to go out on a date either.”
Merlin wouldn't himself unless he cared about the outcome – he remembered being a little jealous of a boy he went to school with back in the day – or, as in this case, unless other plans depended on the secret service being busy monitoring Prince Arthur's moves. “Gwen, it's all right, I remember. What did you want?”

Gwen pulled a lock of hair behind her ear. “I need fashion advice.”

“From me?” Merlin asked, shaking his hands in denial. “I'm crap at that kind of stuff. No clothing expert whatsoever.”

“Please, Merlin,” Gwen said, joining her hands in mock prayer, a smile quivering on her lips. She was elbow nudging him. “I can't trust any of the others with giving me honest and truthful advice. They'd boycott me.”

Merlin was sure she wasn't far off the mark. The other contestants were not in the least supportive of each other. While that might be natural since the Selection itself pitted them one against the other, he wouldn't try approaching any of the others for help either. “They were practically gleeful when Fake Ygraine got the boot,” he admitted.

“They were, weren't they?” Gwen scrunched her nose up. “I tried to cheer poor Luned up. She was so sorry about the dress mess. She'd thought they'd like it, poor thing. But I wasn't doing any good. She left feeling miserable. I'm such a bad comforter.”

Merlin took her hand, squeezed, and let go. “You're precious, Gwen.”

“No, I didn't mean it like that,” Gwen said, waving the thought away. “I wasn't fishing for compliments. Just making the case out to you. I need someone to help me pick the right dress and nobody else would do. They'd rather tear me down. And you know how important these things are. You need to make a statement – one that says, I'm a sexy, smart, confident woman without overdoing it – when you want to--” Gwen ducked her head, her crown of ringlets falling all over her face. It was cute, Merlin believed. “Impress a man you might come to care for--”

“Gwen, I would,” Merlin started before she could gush more and rue the day she had. “If I was my mum or even Alice I'd follow you right to your room, go through your wardrobe and help you choose. But have you had a look at how I dress?” Merlin swiped his palm at himself as if to say 'voilà'. “Not exactly fashion forward.”

“I know,” Gwen said, little lines pursing her brow. “Not that it's horrible. Your style's fun and quirky and quite--” The air rushed out of her. Gwen's shoulders sagged. “Please, please, please, there's no one else I can trust.”

Merlin felt himself relenting. His own shoulders drooped as his defences went the way of the dodo. Gwen was quick to notice his body-language change and to pounce. She grabbed his hand and dragged him out of his room. She stomped the length of the corridor separating Merlin's sleeping quarters from hers. All the while she talked.

“I've set aside three choices. Just tell me which one is both striking, hot, but not too out there. I don't want to look like a try hard.”

Three separate dresses were indeed hanging from the wardrobe's door, still wrapped in those transparent bags laundries gave you to take clothes out.

The first one was a black dress with an elaborate bodice. The second a lime one that made Merlin think of summer and grapefruit ice lollies. The third was an off the shoulders red, flared dress. They
were all pretty and Merlin had no idea what suggestion to make.

After he'd been dithering for the better part of two minutes, Gwen said, “So... What do you think?”

“Um,” Merlin said, tapping his lip to buy time. “The red one? It's Pendragon red.” It wasn't a shade you could easily forget. There were standards hanging in a few choice corridors in the palace to remind you of the right shade of red involved. “It'd be a nice touch.”

Gwen's eyes got smaller because of the little frown lines surrounding them. “Don't you think it'd be like me assuming too much? That they could believe I think I'm already queen or something?”

“No,” said Merlin. “It's not a queen's dress. It's just a party dress and the colour's just a homage.”

“You think?” Gwen tapped her foot to the rhythm of her thoughts. “I guess you're right. It is my favourite too.”

“Well, there you go. Trust your heart.”

Gwen turned around and kissed his cheek. “You're lovely. I promise, if you win a dinner I'll advise you too.”

Merlin didn't say he hoped Gwen would go to many more of these events and the he himself wouldn't. So he smiled and said, “You’re a generous spirit. I hope you have a wonderful night.”

Gwen put her hand on her heart. “I hope I do.”

“Just one thing--” Merlin hesitated, looking down whip fast.

“What--” Gwen bumped her shoulder against his.

“Just make sure you get to know him well. Take your time.”

Gwen relaxed her body and let the lines between her eyes smooth out. “I don't plan not to.”

“Just get him to talk,” Merlin said, his jaw aching from how stiff it was. “Otherwise you won't get to know him. Marriage is about knowing your partner.”

Gwen beamed at him. “Thoughtful and wise.”

Merlin's plans for that night were quite detailed. He couldn't attempt to sneak out of Kensington Palace at eight o'clock. It was way too early and he'd be noticed. That meant he'd have to stick to his 'normal' Palace schedule.

Most dinners since the one at Buckingham Palace weren't spent in state. None of the contestants had seen the King since, for example. Nor had any visited any of the other palaces the Crown owned. Arthur himself had just dropped by once between a charity visit and a party organised to celebrate the visit of his princely cousins from the Netherlands. He'd eaten ice-cream with them, actually imbibing only a couple of spoonfuls of a coffee-flavoured concoction, before darting off to attend the event planned for him.

This meant that most evenings Merlin dined with and had only access to the other contestants. This also meant that he'd got to know some of them more than he'd had a wish to – Cenred, Sophia and Vivian – and got a little more friendly with those who seemed to be more casual about the competition, like Ranulph and a girl called Angharad.

So as not to be conspicuous Merlin acted as he would on any other day. He made his way to the
dining hall and sat with the other contestants. Except that tonight the catty spirits of some of them – the usual suspects – were out full force.

As they ate they kept the TV – one they had asked be specifically installed in the glitzy salon for that purpose – blaring on. It was so that they could follow the coverage the press was giving the dinner date.

The images on the telly showed Gwen exiting Kensington Palace on Prince Arthur's arm. She was leaning into him and his hand was on top of hers where it was wrapped around his arm. In as gentlemanly a way as you could imagine he was escorting her onwards.

Gwen looked really regal in the outfit she had chosen. She filled it very prettily and her radiant smile made her shoulder-baring dress look ten times more glamorous and perfect than it had looked on the hanger. Her curls bounced; her smile was wide and it lit up the screen.

The Prince and Gwen stopped briefly to allow the waiting paps time for a few photos, then stepped into a dark armoured car.

Gwen posing graciously despite the flashbulbs popping in her eyes sent Vivian off on a rant. “She doesn’t know how to hold herself.”

Sophia responded to this by saying, “It's not as if she's got a lot working for her. She's the shortest of us all. You can't pull off high fashion if you're short. Dresses just don't flow as nicely.”

Vivian agreed despite being short herself. “Yeah, you can't achieve the goddess look when you're built like that.”

Cenred begged to disagree. “Everybody can look good with adequate grooming. What you can't get is flair, savoir faire. Class.”

It was clear he meant to say Gwen had no class.

Merlin snorted into his glass. “Gwen is fantastic,” he found himself saying.

“Why? You made a pact with her so you're the two last ones left?” Cenred asked. “I saw you go into her room.”

Merlin put his glass down and arched an eyebrow. “That's highly paranoid of you.”

“We're all here for the same reason,” Cenred said, garnering the nodding approval of Vivian, Sophia and a few other contestants. “It would be naïve not to think such alliances possible.”

“I'm in no alliance,” Merlin said decisively. Taking a sweeping glance round the table told him he'd persuaded no one. Since trying was useless and this argument came in quite handy as fodder for flouncing, he pushed his plate aside, set the napkin previously spread across his knees on the table, and stood. “I'll be calling this a night.”

“Oh, Merlin can't stand being picked on for his shit strategising,” said one of the boys that had got cosy with Cenred these past few days. “He was hoping we didn't see he's gagging for it. Acts like he's above it all though he's all underhand planning.”

“Let him be,” said Angharad, “he's probably just tired of all this nonsense. Can't say I'm not.”

A dispute arose about nonsense having been spoken or not. Cenred maintained he was being rational and honest in admitting that they, as a group of contestants, weren't friends, and is suspecting others
of having an eye on the obvious price. Angharad said Cenred and co. were trying to foster a toxic environment to their own advantage.

With high words and accusations flying around Merlin slipped out and went back to his room. He waited for dinner time to be over and to hear people retiring for the night, then changed into a wholly black, non-eye-catchy outfit and slipped out.

Getting out of the Palace wasn't hard. As Merlin had predicted security wasn't as high as when Arthur was in. They were probably focused on wherever Arthur was now instead of where he wasn't.

Of course, there were still some guard types posted at the entrances and exits and cameras were installed and pointed at corridors and passages, but Merlin didn't have magic for nothing.

He reached a corner of the wall and flattened himself against it.

Huddling there he muttered a spell under his breath and directed it at the camera circuitry. He didn't do too much to it, aware that a major fault in the system would have security pouncing. He merely caused it to project older images for short loops. Long enough for him to slip through undetected.

Darting quick glances up and down the corridor, he moved. Using this method, he got to the ground floor. Having been lodging in the Palace for more than one week he'd learnt a little about its lay-out and knew that an exit was located at the end of the hallway he was in.

The problem was that this hallway was particularly elongated and that right before it opened up into a set of French doors there was a service room bodyguards used for recreation.

From his hiding spot Merlin heard their voices and was sure that if he passed them he'd be stopped and questioned.

Fictional accounts of magic users always made them out to be able to do the impossible like flying or becoming invisible. Merlin couldn't do that.

Though the limits of magic itself were unsounded, he doubted anyone could. It would have been great if he could mumble a spell and make himself vanish. Lots of problems he had would go that way, too. But he couldn't, so he had to engineer a way to sneak out that would be as safe as actually being invisible.

A diversion was called for. The sounds coming from the break-room indicated that the Palace security detail was watching telly. Judging from the sounds coming from within they were tuned into some kind of sports match.

“Lete,” he said under his breath.

The match commentator's words were cut short.

“What the fuck happened?” a security team member asked in outrage.

“I think the signal died?”

“I thought we had every telly package on earth and on-call twenty for hour assistance.”

“Go fix it, Beddie. Go fix it.”

Beddie, whoever he was, said, “Not alone. If I fuck up the digital connection I want to have
someone with me to take responsibility.”

“I'll come,” said a third person in a calm voice. “Let's see if we can fix it and watch the end at least.”

Two people exited the break-room. There had to be at least another two left inside but they were talking about moving cables and trying to shift the TV set to see if they could get better reception, and not minding people attempting to steal out of the premises. “Here, help me lift.”

Merlin thought they were busy enough with their reception problem for him to try. It was a dare and he did know a moment of doubt, a 'what if they catch me' ringing in his ears. It wasn't as if his last experience with militaresque people had been rife with joy. His body sagged against the wall for a second or two before he took a big breath and darted forwards.

His eyes sweeping back and forth from door to door to make sure no one would emerge from any of them, he moved quickly down the length of the hallway. Before running around the last corner he took care to check for signs of pursuit.

Nobody was about; the security people obviously too busy with the telly.

Merlin got to the French doors and not a soul was the wiser about it. He opened them, incanting a spell that would run interference with any alarms that could possibly be connected to it, and slipped out.

He was in the gardens and almost out of Palace grounds. To avoid stares, he lifted his hoodie and left the bulk of the building behind, gearing for the gardens and then, later, Bayswater Road.

He took a bus to get to Mordred's and once he was in his immediate neighbourhood, Mordred's building looming behind, he gunned for his parking spot.

Mordred's Lexus was sitting there. Merlin tried the car door. It opened. He slid inside and found the key hidden behind the visor. “Let's hope this works,” he said under his breath and started the Lexus.

Less than an hour later he was on Westferry Road on the Isle of Dogs, the soaring skeleton of an old derelict factory towering above him.

Forridel exited her car and so did the boy Merlin was meant to save. A hand on the boy's shoulder, Forridel led him to Merlin. She bent over a little, hands on her knees so she could look the boy in the eyes. He was about ten and not very big for his age so the action was necessary, the more so since his looking so tiny most probably had a component of fear to it. He was making himself look small to present less of a front. “This is Merlin,” she told the boy, flicking Merlin a brief glance. “He's here to take you to the ferry.”

The boy didn't move but he did hold Merlin's eyes.

“Merlin,” Forridel said, looking from the boy to Merlin. “This is Caradoc.”

Merlin offered the boy his hand to shake. “Hello, Caradoc.”

Caradoc scuffed his toe in the dirt. He didn't take Merlin's hand. He hunched in on himself, looking smaller and more lost than he had a right to be at his age. Young as he was he should be full of wonder and confidence in the world. Hopefully full of joy.

Merlin could understand his fear though. It wasn't as if he didn't. This boy's father had disappeared, caught into the maw of the 'justice' system; his sister was being targeted. He surely lived in a world he had reason to be wary of. Even doing normal things like going to school had to be more
challenging for a boy like Caradoc than for a boy without magic.

Merlin remembered what that was like. Remembered his mum telling him to watch out for teachers who advised taking part in programs assessing students' abilities. Remembered actively seeking to keep everything he did on the down low for fear people would find out about him.

When he was as young as Caradoc he restricted the number of friends he got pally with, dreading questions would come. He'd evade all questions that were levelled at him often as he could. In his eyes everyone was a potential snitch, grown ups and kids alike. Even though deep down he wanted to reach out and be friends, reach out and be loved, he knew he couldn't.

So Merlin understood. Caradoc needed a friend. Caradoc needed to know he wasn't alone. To show him that, Merlin went down on a knee and opened his palm. He said, “Lēohtfruma,” and a white-blue flame took to hovering over his hand, spilling pale light all around.

Caradoc smiled for the first time since Merlin had clapped eyes on him. With tentative fingers, he poked Merlin's light sphere. “I can't do one of those,” he said, pushing his finger at the energy ball until it was piercing the little glowing orb. “But I can make little stars appear on the ceiling of my bedroom when I want to.”

“I'd love to do that too,” Merlin said, smiling back. “You'll have to teach me how.”

“You've never done that?” Caradoc asked.

Merlin shook his head, the little glowing orb still floating freely above his hand. “No, never. You'll have to tell me how to do it while we're on the way to Folkestone.”

Caradoc bobbed his head. “Okay, deal.”

Merlin closed his palm and the light sphere vanished into thin air. He stood, putting a hand on Caradoc's shoulder. “Let's go on our little trip, mate,” he said. “There's stuff we've got to do on the way, right? Magic stuff.”

With Caradoc in the passenger seat, Merlin walked round the car to get behind the wheel.

Forridel came up to him, her hand around his elbow, stopping him from ducking into the car just yet. “There's a lot of Section Seven activity right about now.” She expelled air. “Just try to be prudent, all right?

“Will be,” Merlin promised. “They won't get their hands on him, I promise.”

“If there's anyone who can,” she said, her hair whipping around her neck because of the wind. “He's a good boy.”

“I know. I think we'll get along.”

“Good luck, Merlin,” she said, smiling a small worried smile and walking back to her own car.

On the way to Folkestone Caradoc opened up. He taught Merlin the trick he used to create mini constellations that played on his bedroom ceiling, said he'd miss his mum and sister while he was away, and admitted he wished he could see his dad again. “Just once.”

“Me too,” Merlin told him, an eye on the road, his mind's eye somewhere else, his thoughts going back to the last memory he had of his mum explaining to him why he hadn't a dad like the others.
“Was he taken too?”

Merlin's hands got tighter around the wheel. “You know, I dunno. My mum told me he just failed to turn up one day. She was pregnant with me at the time.”

“Maybe the laws will change,” Caradoc said, hugging himself. “And then my dad and yours will come back.”

Merlin's thoughts drifted to Arthur. He hoped that Arthur would find a way to be different from his father, that Gwen, who sounded reasonable and nice, would teach him a lesson on that score, and that Caradoc would end up getting his wish.

His own Merlin had buried too deep to access. Thinking otherwise, believing in miracles, hurt. That was why he didn't say anything in return; didn't make any promises. He just drove on in the night, never speeding for fear he'd be stopped, never going too slow for fear the same would happen.

Mordred having seen to filling the tank, they didn't stop at any petrol stations. Merlin followed the motorway, the darkness enveloping the car making him feel safer. The random headlights he sometimes encountered making him tense behind the wheel.

Trees and road signs flashed past as did the different stretches of countryside around them.

The night was pitch black; headlights flooded the carriageway every now and then and weaved across it. He and Caradoc fell silent.

In less than an hour and a half they got to Folkestone, where they met Forridel's contact.

“Merlin Emrys,” the man, balding and imposing, said. “It's a pleasure to finally meet you. You're quite well known to us.”

Merlin shook his head. “I'm not sure I know you so I don't see how--”

The man put a fist on his heart. “I'm Alator of the Catha sect.”

Merlin's shoulders went down and he eased out of his fight or flight mode. “A friend of the druids then. My friend Mordred's talked about you.”

“We know Mordred,” Alator said with a confirming head tilt. “And we know about your place in history.”

Merlin pushed Caradoc forward. “I think tonight we should be focusing on him.”

With a hand on his shoulder Alator led Caradoc to him. “But of course. There's a time for everything and tonight's the time to lead this boy out of the darkness.”

Caradoc stepped back and clutched Merlin's hand. “I'm not sure I want to go.”

“France is safe,” Alator said calmly, taking the rejection quietly but not lightly. “You're so young we ought to think about your safety first.”

Merlin pressed Caradoc's hand. “That's right, you know. You should go somewhere safe.” Merlin wasn't above using the big guns when it came to Caradoc's future, so he added, “Your mum would rest much easier if she knew you were all right.”

“If you were me,” Caradoc said, not letting go of Merlin's hand, “you wouldn't go. You'd stay and defend your family.”
Merlin released Caradoc's hand. “My mum sent me to London to get work when I was old enough to go because I was getting conspicuous in my village. She got me away to protect me. So, yeah, back then I did what you're doing now.”

“You too? Really?”

Merlin nodded. He understood the boy's reluctance to leave everything behind, but he wouldn't be doing him any favour by letting him stay in a place that was dangerous for him. “Yeah.”

Caradoc moved towards Alator. “Then I'll be going. Just like you did.”

Caradoc walked towards the ferry. Alator stayed a minute longer and told Merlin, “I'll look after him. Make sure he stays in contact with his family in a safe way.”

Merlin thanked him.

Alator made a hand gesture that must have had some sort of special meaning among his people, bowed his head, and escorted Caradoc on board.

Merlin drove back to London, parked the car on the south side of Notting Hill Gate and walked back to the Palace.

He used the same means to get in as the ones he'd employed to get out. By three and a half in the AM he was in his room, ready to change into pyjamas.

He had just finished taking his clothes off, which had left him in his boxers, when there was a knock on the door.

For a moment Merlin froze. He'd been reaching out for the white tee he slept in when he aborted the motion. Cold sweat broke out upon him and he was numbed by the thought someone had actually registered his comings and goings.

He held his breath until he heard Prince Arthur say in a loud whisper that made no sense since it probably carried along the length of the corridor, thus defeating any attempt at stealth, “Merlin? Are you awake? There's a light under your door.”

Merlin quickly pulled his shirt on to cover his bullet scar and opened the door.

Arthur was wearing the same suit he had been for going out, or at least part of it. At some point, somewhere, he'd shed the jacket and the tie that went with it and was now only wearing shirt and trousers.

His hair was a bit more messy than it had been when he'd been photographed with Gwen on the way out the palace. He wasn't dishevelled though he certainly didn't cut the same princely figure he usually did.

He was also holding a red wine bottle by the neck.

“Your Highness,” Merlin said.

Arthur smiled. He was red about the face. Maybe he'd drunk a bit during dinner and that had caused the colour to climb to his cheeks. Or maybe he'd had a secret snog with Gwen and was still flushed.

“I thought we'd agreed you'd call me Arthur,” Arthur said, pushing his way in. “I was walking by and saw the light and thought... I must share this with Merlin.” Arthur's gaze plumbed Merlin's, then
it dropped down to encompass his body, his bare legs and feet. “Were you in bed?”

Merlin mentally selected the drunk ticky box. “About to go, yeah.”

Arthur offered him a small smile, a faint curving of his lips that stopped where his cheeks were getting pinker. “Before you do go, I hope you’ll be okay with having a glass of this.” He lifted the bottle by its neck. “It’s glorious.”

Merlin laughed. “You pillaged the restaurant you dined at?”

Arthur pouted. “I paid for this bottle out of my own pocket, I’ll have you know.”

“I’m sure you can afford it,” Merlin said, shaking his head while cupping his mouth to keep in the attack of giggles occasioned by Arthur’s outraged tone.

“Probably,” he said, his voice going up and down in the way the voices of tipsy people did. “Price was still obscene.” He rested the bottle on top of the dresser and opened it. “Wine glass,” he ordered, as if Merlin had wine glasses stashed in some sort of secret cache he was keeping hidden on purpose.

“Don’t have one.”

Arthur huffed and stalked into the en-suite bathroom. “Ha, here.” He came back holding the glass that had been holding Merlin’s toothbrush.

“Thank you for the casual invasion of a space that was temporarily mine,” Merlin said.

Arthur poured the wine into the glass and shoved it at him. “Drink,” he said, arching an eyebrow until Merlin had actually guzzled some. “So, how is it?”

Merlin smacked his lips for show. Even though he was no connoisseur and had no special love for any vintage, he had to admit the wine was good. “It’s all right.”

“It’s divine.”

Merlin sipped some more. “You trying to confess your secret alcohol addiction?”

“I’m very moderate in my consumption,” Arthur said, leaning against the dresser, his hands braced either side of him. “And, no, that was not what I came here for.”

Merlin swirled the wine in his glass, mostly because he didn’t want to have more right now. “So how was the date?”

Arthur blinked. “The date?”

“Your tête à tête dinner, yes.”

Arthur’s brows pulled together in a pensive frown. “I like her. She’s a good woman. There was footage of her offering her shawl to that girl, Luned.”

Feeling he would need to test the bracing qualities of alcohol to entertain a conversation about Ygraine with Arthur, Merlin downed more of Arthur’s wine. “That was a bit--”

“Like a punch in the gut.” Arthur rushed the words out. He was now much redder in the face and if he hadn’t known better, that Arthur was too much the perfect prince to show emotion, Merlin would have said there were tears in his eyes. “I’ve never had the chance to see her... See her and remember her, I mean. And there that girl was... wanting to look like her for...” Arthur’s voice got huskier and
huskier, his drunken good humour lifting.

“I’m sorry.” And he was. Yes, Ygraine’s death had caused Uther to lash out at sorcerers. Though Merlin didn’t know what had gone down and if a morally corrupt sorcerer was really responsible, he could at least feel sorry for a woman who'd died too young. A woman who'd barely been able to hold her child in her arms.

Had she ever seen Arthur smile back at her with those gummy smiles babies were capable of? How long had she been able to hold him? Had she managed to choose his name or had that been Uther's doing?

So while her death had indirectly caused Merlin’s life to go to shit, the repercussions to magic users terrible, he didn’t blame her or feel like she’d got what she deserved. She hadn’t.

And despite feeling residual anger at Arthur for being part of a caste of oppressors, he couldn't say that he didn't understand his pain at the loss of his mother. There were days Merlin wondered who the man who'd fathered him was really like. So he guessed he knew what Arthur was experiencing.

Without quite thinking of his own personal safety, he said. “My dad walked before I was born. Maybe he's dead too and that's why he never came back.”

Arthur's head whipped up, his eyes large. He inhaled, held his breath, his eyes fastened on Merlin. “Thank you for sharing that,” he said, in a voice that was much softer than usual. “You didn't have to. I appreciate that. I—”

“Just wanted you to know that you're not alone.”

“Don't guess I am,” Arthur said, taking the glass Merlin had been holding and downing the last of the wine. “Though it always feels like that. Like your tragedy is bigger and more important because it's yours. Quite selfish of me, isn't it?”


Arthur ran his thumb up and down the glass, gazing emptily at it. “Thank you,” he said in a hoarse little voice. Merlin saw him give a little shake, a head to toe one as if he'd flinched but was now ready to move on, and knew Arthur was about to change the subject even before he did. “I didn't come here to dampen your mood though.”

“No, I'm sure you weren't trying to get me all sombre,” Merlin said in a tone that was teasing but not mean. “You came to share your fancy wine.”

Arthur put the glass down. “There was something I wanted to give you.”

“The wine, I know,” said Merlin playfully. He somehow wanted Arthur to slide back into his previous mood, when he'd been happy and tipsy and silly. He didn't even know why; he was just sure that was what he was aiming for. That he wanted to see Arthur smile goofily again.

It worked for Arthur's eyes filled up with a mellow, happier light. “Not that, I'm not so stupid as to forget something that's right under my eyes.” He wagged his eyebrows at the bottle.

“You never know,” Merlin said.

“Ha, ha,” said Arthur, “I've heard all possible jokes about stupid princes and intermarrying royals.” He put both palms up. “Wait here.”
Before Merlin could ask what for Arthur had darted out, leaving the door partially open.

Merlin wasn't sure whether he'd come back or no, so he put his PJ trousers on as though he was about to go to bed, and then drank some more of Arthur's wine, this time directly from the bottle.

“You covered up,” Arthur said, closing the door behind him and resting his weight against it for a second or two.

“No, I meant to engage in my ritual dead-of-night strip tease, but I have to have stuff on to pull it properly off.”

Arthur scoffed and before Merlin could say anything more and add to the silliness, he produced a book, a cardboard bound tome that had to be ancient given how rounded its corners were and how yellowed the pages.

Merlin laughed hard when he read the title on the cover. “The Condition of the Working Class in England?”

“Friedrich Engels,” Arthur said, “I thought with all talk about classism at table the other day you'd be interested.”

“I never got much schooling,” Merlin said, feeling heat sting his cheeks. “Started working early on compared to most blokes.” He'd been sixteen and sent to Aunt Alice, who'd put him up in the big city. By the time he’d made it past his GCSEs he'd dropped out of school. “So your book is pretty much lost on me.”

He'd done some sneaky reading in his life. Books Mordred had. Books that were passed around among Underground members. But he didn't know how to read them right. Not really. He knew people who’d had more schooling had been taught how to interpret things correctly. He’d never had that advantage.

Arthur knuckled the spine of his Engels volume, moving his fingers up and down, up and down. “Let me read it to you. You'd love this bloke. If he wasn't dead and buried.”

“Just read, Arthur,” Merlin said.

Arthur cleared his throat and opened the tome to the first page. He coughed once again in his fist.

“Show off,” Merlin told him, hurling a bed pillow at him, which Arthur ducked quite aptly.

“The history of the proletariat in England begins with the second half of the last century, with the invention of the steam-engine and of machinery for working cotton,” Arthur intoned.

He had a nice reading voice. He knew when to pause and how to make sense of the printed words. His tone was posh, educated, but Merlin didn't hate it, not even when Arthur mastered the big words with the eased denied to people like Merlin.

He liked the way Arthur read. It was nice and it helped him make sense of the words.

He had a voice that was warm and comforting, especially now that by voicing the author's thoughts he was ridding himself of his sometimes snooty tones.

Merlin was ready to hear more. And Arthur was right; narrator aside, Merlin was appreciating the contents of the book as well as Arthur's delivery of the material.
Experiencing an odd need to fall asleep to Arthur's recitation, he got into bed, sitting up against a mound of pillows.

Even as he read on, Arthur watched him move. And smiled. Sneakily smiled even though he never faltered in his recitation.

Merlin could seriously snooze to this. He wanted Arthur to continue. “You don't have to stand.” He patted the bed.

Arthur stopped over the words, “The consequences of this were, on the one hand, a rapid fall in price--” His voice was low and rough, probably strained from his reading, when he said, “I thought--I didn't want to impose--”

“Sit down and read on, for God's sake.”

Arthur's mouth dropped open, taken aback, but he shut it just as fast. The surprise rippled through him and Merlin saw it, could detect the way it changed Arthur's features. His gaze softened; his eyes danced with a sparkle that couldn't be coming from the light-bulbs, Merlin didn't think.

The faint note of pleased, proud surprise made them twinkle a shiny blue that had nothing to do with the wiring in the room.

Still looking pretty chuffed, Arthur started over to the bed, sat at its feet, and started reading again, with more gusto and more flair.

Merlin felt an odd warmth slide through as he was lullaby-ed to the rhythm of Engels' theories. “If all manufactured commodities, prosperity of commerce and manufacture, the conquest of nearly all the unprotected foreign markets, the sudden multiplication of capital and national wealth...”

Merlin couldn't help letting go of all thought and dozing off.

When he woke the next morning, Arthur was gone, but there was a body shaped indentation on the bed, the mound of pillows next to Merlin hollowed out where a head had lain.

Arthur's copy of The Condition of the Working Class in England had been left on Merlin's nightstand.

Still foggy from sleep, Merlin opened it to the first page.

He found out two things about the book. The first was that it had been printed in 1877 and was therefore a first edition. The second was that it had been gifted to him or so the words, To Merlin, whose rebel spirit could start revolutions just as Engels did with words, love, Arthur, purported

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Mail On Line:

The Backbone of Britain:
Visions of a royal wedding in our nation's future were stoked by the start of the Selection and the first candidate elimination, which has signalled a steady evolution of the matrimonial wedding process.

Britain's royal watchers are now intent on guessing which candidate is going to wear the crown.

Even though it is difficult to latch onto a name this early in the game here are our predictions as to the most likely contenders.

To begin with there's Vivian Olaf. Olaf has much in common with the Prince, as they come from very similar, noble backgrounds. As a vicount's daughter, Olaf is an aristocrat herself, the only one in the competition, and though you may not know it, if you were to write her a letter the envelope would have to be addressed to the Hon Vivian Olaf.

Titled Miss Olaf reminds one of the late queen and her family, the du Boises. She already has the etiquette know-how and wouldn't be fazed by either the attention accruing from the incumbent consort position nor by the duties going with it.

Anyone would be smitten with beautiful Miss Olaf, but the question is: is Prince Arthur?

Next is Guinevere Smith, who came to the nation's attention for winning a reward dinner with the dashing royal.

Some may look down on Smith for coming from a working class family, with an ancestor in the early 1800s that had a blacksmithing business. For generations her forebears were not wealthy.

The family recently became better off when Smith's family launched a web-based fashion jewellery line that uses the art of blacksmithing as a starting point to fashion unusual, quirky items to dazzle and bling the buyer as much as a diamond would.

We should here note that a working class background isn't so bad. Lots of us mere mortals are just as common as she is and a lot of us are going to cheer for someone we can identify with.

Besides, hasn't Miss Smith shown her true gentle nature by assisting a fellow contestant in dire etiquette straits? We all want to see someone we can deem of as nice being favoured over the rest. Call it projecting or wishful thinking on our parts, but a part of us is certainly siding with her.

As for the other commoners one in particular seems to have caught the public eye. The hashtag #emrys4thecommonpeople trended the night the first televised dinner the Selection was aired. In a few days Merlin Emrys has been blogged about more than a reality TV star. Twitter also supports him massively and his fame is now extending overseas.

While insiders and journalists who've been reporting on the royal family for years are skeptical, his following among normal folks is strong.

As Hollie Garfield, a housewife from Chester, said when interviewed, “Merlin said what plenty of people think anyway. Not all of us would have had the guts to publicly dish it out but, you know, that's what we admire. The guts of it.”
As a consequence of this internet trend, Bookies Paddy Power are offering 5/4 (2.25) that Prince Arthur and Merlin Emrys are going to end up as a couple before the competition is over.

In the meanwhile, as the guests for the May Ball are announced, ten more candidates are expected to go in one fell swoop. Those excluded from the ball are also those meant to pack up and go. Manners might come in handy for the occasion but who will stay on? Someone ready for the razzle dazzle of the glitzy society event, the Canadian ambassador is a rumoured guest, or someone not equipped for it?

What do you think? Feel free to share your opinion in the comments section:

At the end of the day, Merlin is one of us. Just what the Royal Family needs. I hope he may find his prince. He has no notion of being different from ”us” and treats us as “friends”... Not long ago he was the one to stand behind a barrier looking on at the royals. Now he is the one we are looking at from beyond that barrier, and for that I think he is amazing. We need someone who knows what's it like to be on our side.

Paul, Glasgow, 28/4/201- 00:20

Click to rate. Rating 134 Report abuse

Hooray for the real people on the throne!

Mary -, Essex, 28/4/201- 00:44

Click to rate. Rating 51 Report abuse

As someone who works in PR, it's obvious to me that this article has been written to ensure that their favourite Selection candidate somehow appears like the masses' darling. He's no such thing. Gwen is the person they ought to be referring to & so much better. That girl has true feelings and knows no spite. A real queen of hearts; the real majority of the population wants to see that. Not Emrys' hatred for the hand that feeds him.

Tillie, Manchester, 26/4/201- 00:48

Click to rate Rating 51 Report abuse
God bless Prince Arthur. Happiness after the loss of his mum x

Flo, Canada, 26/4/201- 1:34

Click to rate Rating 136 Report abuse

Vivian is hot! 28/4/201- 1:45

Lou, Chicago

Click to rate Rating 5 Report abuse

Mary - I appreciate your comment so much!

Carol, West Yorkshire., 26/4/201- 1:50

Click to rate Rating 56 Report abuse

If I can't have him; I want Cenred with Prince Arthur!!!
MAY THEY HAVE A LONG AND HAPPY LIFE TOGETHER.

Howard, London, 26/4/201- 1:51

Click to rate Rating 4 Report abuse

So many haters on here! It's really sad that people have nothing better to do than make low comments about a fine young man like Merlin. I have nothing but respect for an honest bloke like him. A hard worker. He seems lovely and cute. Think how daunting knowing you're watched and judged by the whole of the country must be for an ordinary lad like him. Wishing he wins. Emrys for the win!!!

Sarah, Sussex, 27/4/201- 2:00

Click to rate Rating 90 Report abuse

Finally a woman we can identify with for Queen. Go Gwen!!!!
If there was one thing Merlin wanted to take home with him when the Selection was over it was the bed in 'his' bedroom.

It was practically heaven. The mattress gave but not so much so as to hollow out under him, avoiding causing back pains, and stiff enough to give his limbs support. He regularly woke as rested as a badger coming out of hibernation.

Perhaps though it was better that he didn't have one such bed at home. He'd never get anything done. He'd never get out of it plain and simple.

A case in point: though there was an official breakfast planned right for that morning, one that would see Arthur as officiator, Merlin was too content where he was to move.

He was reading Arthur's book and was far into chapter four.

Marking an antique book being very bad form, Merlin had made notes on a notepad with the intent to google stuff he hadn't understood or so that he'd remember to ask someone about them. He realised that 'that' someone would probably have to be Arthur.

He was tapping the pencil against his lip when his alarm sounded. He'd set it so he'd know when it was time for him to get up and get ready. Or, to be more honest and truthful, to alert him to the moment the last viable ten minute window to get ready came up.

Reluctantly, he set the book back on the night-stand and kicked off the sheets. The moment he did, there was a knock on his bedroom door. "It's me, Gwen. Are you presentable yet?"

Merlin looked down at his sleeping ensemble. Aside from his bare legs there wasn't a part of him that wasn't covered. He had chequered boxers on and given he sported a wound he couldn't explain he always wore a shirt. You never knew when a maid or footman would decide to enter so it paid to be always prepared. And 'modestly' clothed.

"Yep, absolutely," Merlin said, "no nude peep shows here. Coast is clear. Come in."

Gwen entered and propped herself against the door frame; she peered in, smiled at him, and said, "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Merlin nodded. He was late for breakfast. They'd both be late for breakfast but he couldn't say no to Gwen's puppy eyes. He scratched at his hair and said, "Sure."
Bypassing a mound of clothes Merlin had negligently left on the floor the night before, she sat on his bed and handed him a couple of A4 sheets.

“What's this?” he asked, confused as to what he was seeing.

“A copy of an article my brother found on line.”

It was a Mail on Line excerpt. Merlin read the beginning, was bored to tears by the middle, and couldn't even bring himself to get to the part relating to him. He didn't want to be mentally scarred. “It's gossip nonsense.”

“Read the comments,” Gwen instructed.

Merlin did and simultaneously wished he was doing something else. Anything else. “It's all tripe as far as I can tell,” he concluded by the end of a perusal that had consisted more of skipping than reading.

Gwen frowned. “But they're saying that people like me. There's lots of people who like me!” Gwen took the sheets of paper from him and showed him page two. “I didn't print them all out but there were 324 comments. 234 are about people liking me!”

Merlin was sure he wasn't connecting the dots. That or Engels had fried his synapses. “Aren't you happy?”

“No!” said Gwen, balling up her print-outs until they looked only fit to be binned. Which in all honesty they probably were by nature of their contents. “That means they have expectations of me now!”

“And you're worried?” Merlin asked, deducing what was wrong with Gwen. It was a bit convoluted but Merlin could sort of see it. If he made some mental gymnastics and strained hard. Most people would probably bask in the love but that same love was making Gwen nervous.

“Yes.” Gwen smoothed her crumpled print outs out. Now they looked liked used handkerchiefs. “Because, I'm not sure I'll live up to their expectations or even get that far in the competition.”

“Even if you had to go home tomorrow no one could blame you,” Merlin said, patting Gwen's hand reassuringly. “It's not really up to you.”

“It's not just that,” said Gwen, running her fingers through her hair. She settled and resettled on the bed making the mattress bounce and creak. “There's people who see me as an example now. Some sort of role model. There's plenty of girls who think me doing well would be a symbol. If I do well know there's a chance of them doing well in future. What if... What if this isn't the best thing for me?”

Merlin was seriously getting lost. “I'm sorry, Gwen. But I don't see why you should pay attention to what some gossips on the internet say. Tomorrow they'll be commenting on something else. You shouldn't let them get to you to the point you get anxious and stuff. You'll have a nervous breakdown if you do.”

“It's not about living up to their dream!” Gwen said, her nostrils flaring. “It's about living up to mine.” She was quick to lower her head as if ashamed of her little blow-up.

Just to be safe Merlin repeated, “Yours?”

Gwen bobbed her head, but instead of addressing the subject of her dreams head on, she mentioned
Arthur. “Has Arthur...” She wetted her lips, glancing away. “I know you've had little chance to talk to him aside from that semi row with the King, but I was wondering whether Arthur has struck you as a little bit formal perhaps?”

Merlin scowled. “Was he not nice during your dinner date?” If that was true, he'd strangle Arthur himself. It was overpowering enough to be a candidate in a game like this, but Merlin had thought he could expect the Prince to know this and behave. If Arthur had been rude, Merlin would have a few words with him.

However much he didn't like to think it possible, he was afraid it was true. That Arthur wasn't... wasn't what Merlin hoped he'd be. Kinder. More of the man who had feelings stashed somewhere inside him that Merlin had had a glimpse of from time to time.

It would be sad if Arthur wasn't like that and was instead the fuckwit he'd appeared to be on the telly and to the nation at large. “If that's the case then I--”

Gwen wrapped a hand around his wrist. “No, you've got me wrong. He was perfectly nice. Polite. Gentlemanly. It was just... We talked but it never got really personal. He was formal, as I said.”

Merlin fell back against the pillows and unclenched the fist he'd unknowingly made. He was happy to find it wasn't so bad as he'd thought. Happy for Gwen and glad that Arthur wasn't as much of a prat as he'd dreaded he was. A smiled bloomed on his lips. “A little,” he said, remembering Gwen had asked a question, he concentrated on his answer. “That first time when he interviewed us? But not since. But then again what do I know? I mostly just butted heads with him.”

Gwen let out a giggle. “Yeah, everybody saw that.”

Merlin made a face, then he sobered a little. “Gwen, maybe, he was just a little shy.”

“Shy?”

Merlin wasn't sure Arthur was shy per se. He didn't talk much in a formal setting but otherwise he could express himself pretty well. He was confident and self-assured. Merlin didn't see how Arthur could be called shy. He was hesitant sometimes but Merlin thought Arthur knew his own worth. Especially with potential dates. Thousands of people across the land signing up for a chance to marry you would probably boost your confidence. He had no other explanation though and this one seemed pretty logical. “Yeah, first date jitters.”

“First date jitters?” Gwen's nose wrinkled. She twisted her mouth. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Merlin lifted both shoulders up to his ears. “I mean you had them and just hours before you went out with him. That fashion emergency?”

“But he's the prince!”

“And you're lovely and sexy,” Merlin said, not wanting Gwen to sell herself short. Life wasn't about titles. “And he knows that. It must be a little scary. Having to impress a gorgeous girl like you. Even a prince would falter.”

Gwen picked at her jeans. “If you say so.”

“I'm saying so,” Merlin said, offering as much reassurance as he could. “Now don't let all this get to you and just enjoy yourself. It's what you wanted, right?”

Merlin's snooze signal started ringing again. “Crap, we should go.”

Gwen's eyes widened. “Shit, the breakfast. You're right.” She fluffed her hair to keep it in shape. “I've got to do something to my hair! Got to dash.”

So saying, Gwen made for the door. Before retreating to her room, she dithered on the threshold for a second and said, “You're a friend, Merlin.”

Merlin just smiled, feeling so pleased he might have squared his shoulders just a tad.

When Gwen was gone though, the sound of his alarm blaring like World War III for the second time, reminded him that he'd better get going.

He pummelled the snooze button and bounced off the bed. He wouldn't have time for massive ablutions so he compromised. The basin would do.

He went straight to the bathroom and turned on the tap, cupping his hands full of tepid water to splash on his face. He cleaned behind his ears and his neck, then pulled off his tee, checked the progress of his healing scar in the mirror (not bad though not there yet), and washed under his armpits.

Teeth cleaned and hair combed, he pronounced himself fit for company. He turned off the water and walked back into his room, letting his gaze slip around it.

He found his jeans in the same rumpled pile in the centre of the room that Gwen had skirted. He'd taken them off once he'd got back to his room after a boring dinner than had seen Vivian and Cenred outdo each other in the obnoxiousness stakes, then hopped into bed with a mind to drown the boredom in sleep.

Now there was nothing for it. He couldn't be choosy as to clothing. He pulled his jeans on quickly.

He found his last clean jumper draped over the chair. He shook it out and yanked it on. He somehow struggled into shoes without undoing the laces and was out and into the corridor when he was only five minutes late. That wasn't disastrous, right?

He needn't have worried though for he ran directly into the guest of honour: Arthur. Without him people wouldn't mind his lateness. They'd probably start eating on their own and then fawn when Arthur made an appearance.

“What are you doing here?” Merlin asked, running directly into Arthur's chest and bouncing back. “Weren't you supposed to be downstairs?”

“Looking for you actually.”

Merlin tucked his shirt in. “Me? I'm not that late.”

Arthur chuckled, head down and to the side. “No, I haven't come to punish you for you lateness.”

Merlin smiled. “And here I was thinking you'd have me drawn and quartered.”

Arthur got back to laughing. He had to palm his mouth to cover it but Merlin heard him loud and clear. “No, I think our punishments are a lot more subtle these days.”

A chill coursed down Merlin's spine. He thought of Caradoc's father, who was who knew where. He thought of the magic users that routinely disappeared after a run in with Section Seven. Arthur's
words were more ominous than not. Arthur didn't know it but he was talking to someone likely to be subjected to these more subtle punishments. Would Arthur feel pity for him if Merlin was. Would he cringe now that he 'knew' a magic user. Or would he condemn Merlin as Uther would? “Uh-” he stammered, unable to form thoughts for how lost he was in the quagmire of his thoughts.

“I just,” Arthur said, though Merlin was hearing the blood rushing in his ears more than his actual words. “I just wanted to apologise for falling asleep in your room without your permission. Normally, I wouldn't have presumed, wouldn't have taken a liberty like that, sharing beds, not unless-“ Arthur checked himself, rubbing his nose, shifting his weight back and forwards. “Not unless there was a mutual agreement to, which I know there wasn't.”

Merlin's thoughts had been somewhere else entirely. “Uh?”

“And we all know that Engels can be a little boring, especially late at night after you've drunk,” Arthur steamed on, uncharacteristically verbose. “So I apologise.”

“Apology accepted,” Merlin said, in a thready voice. He wanted to rid himself of the images Arthur's words concerning punishments had summoned in him but couldn't quite.

Arthur wrapped a careful hand around Merlin's arm. “Are you all right? You're not... angry or upset that I slept by your side?”

Merlin shook himself. “No, I, no--” And that was true too. He wasn't angry with Arthur, not directly. More at the state of things in general. “It was okay. I actually appreciated your reading efforts. And I understand snoozing off when you're sleepy.”

Arthur repositioned himself, coming to stand with his legs hip-width apart. He was smiling proudly now, his eyes rounder, gentler. It was an odd mix of stiff and imposing, positioning himself as if – something he seemed to have in common with the elder Pendragon – he was about to have his portrait taken, and boastful. “Well, everybody knows I was a member of Pop at Eton and took parts in many events. I announced lots of official stuff.”

Merlin felt the pall of darkness lift, washed away by Arthur acting like a little kid proud of his skills. Arthur, Arthur, Arthur. Maybe Arthur would be the one to understand that sorcerers were normal people. Maybe Arthur would continue treating him like this even after he was told Merlin was magic. Not that he'd be. That Merlin would tell him. But maybe one day Arthur would be the one to make a difference for magic users. A smile slowly broke on Merlin's face. “Of course you would be.”

Arthur's lips budded poutily. “Hey, no laughing at me. It was an honour.”

“I'm sure,” Merlin teased.

Merlin was chuckling at Arthur's expense when Arthur went serious again. “Merlin, can I ask you something?”

Merlin's eyebrow went up. “All right, yeah, fire away.”

His back to the rest of the corridor, Arthur moved his body so he was closer to Merlin, his head bent as if he wanted to murmur in his ear. He didn't do that. His throat worked once, twice, then he said, “if I had asked tho--”

He didn't finish the sentence because Gwen left her room right then, closing the door softly behind her.

That was Arthur's cue to stop, make a tactical retreat. His eyes were oddly dilated, as if he had been
caught red-handed while giving away secrets.

Maybe that was what he feared. People, in this case Gwen, thinking that he was being liberal with the rules of the competition. Acquainting Merlin with details regarding it Merlin oughtn't know.

To save him from any further embarrassment, Merlin broke the spell, acting as nothing was out of the ordinary. Which, it wasn't. He called out to her, “Gwen, wait up for us!”

“I'm already late, Merlin!” Gwen said without even turning around. Merlin was confident that if she'd known Arthur was there she would have slowed down, but she seemed to be under the impression that the 'us' Merlin had referred to didn't involve the Prince so she steamed on.

Merlin jogged up to her to tell her they were in no hurry since the only man with the authority to pronounce them late wasn't at the breakfast yet.

It was his getting closer and the fact that a ray of light shone through the window that allowed him to see the piece of white string that had been tied from one end of the banister to the other.

Gwen had her knee bent to descend that step when Merlin shouted, “Gwen, watch out!

But it was too late; Gwen stumbled.

She would go down the flight of stairs and hurt herself. Even badly.

Reaching down inside him, Merlin accessed his magic, hoping nobody would realise he had. Gwen was too busy falling and since Merlin had sprinted forwards to catch up with her, Arthur had tarried behind.

The air became thick with his power and time slowed. He could feel it become as dense as trickle. When it had slowed so that even a second took an age to tick by, Merlin incanted a spell under his breath. The spell cushioned Gwen's fall and, before he'd righted time, he'd managed to reach out for her and grab her.

Unfortunately, though Merlin stopped her from crashing down the stairs, he couldn't stop her ankle from twisting.

 Probably surprised by the shot of pain, she tried to right herself but as she did so she went tumbling down two steps, dragging Merlin down with her.

This time it wasn't so much his magic that was cushioning her fall but Merlin's body padding her landing. The breath rushed out of him and he gave a gasp of pain.

It burnt through his shoulder and sent hot flares down his chest. It lanced through sinew and skin an made him dizzy and nauseous. His face contorted without his say so and his breathing got fast in the hopes that oxygen would relieve the ache. What did though was Gwen crawling off him.

She moved to a sitting position, using the tread for support, and stayed there for a moment sucking air through her teeth and rubbing at her ankle. “I think I twisted it.”

Merlin nodded, absently palming his shoulder. He'd seen it happen and didn't doubt that hurt a lot. He stood too, grimaced, and regained his balance. In an attempt to look as though he hadn't been shot and wasn't suffering from the after effects, he slowed his breaths to normal. “Can you walk on it?” Merlin asked, concern in his voice, a concern that allowed him to forget how his shoulder was on fire.
“I don't think so,” she said, massaging her swelling ankle. “Maybe if I take off the shoe...”

“No, don't” Merlin said, putting a palm up as if that could prevent her. He'd had to do enough emergency patching up on fellow sorcerers rough from an encounter with S7 to know that footwear helped contain the swelling. “Believe me. Better keep it on till a doctor has seen you.”

He was picking Gwen up to get her back to bed when Arthur made it to them. “What happened?” he said, while Merlin waddled back up the stairs with Gwen in his arms.

“Somebody tried to hurt Gwen,” Merlin said, gaining the landing. “Go check. There's some kind of waxed string still on the landing.

Arthur looked torn between helping Merlin carry Gwen and checking for himself. He opted for a quick jog down the stairs. When he'd satisfied himself about the string and the attempt on Gwen he caught back up with Merlin.

By then Merlin was close to Gwen's room and when Arthur said, “Shall I take her from you?” Merlin refused. If they thought him fit enough to do this, he'd be clear of all suspicion anyway. That was reward enough for the strain on his poor shoulder. “If you could open her door though?”

“I'm okay, Merlin,” Gwen was meanwhile insisting. “You can put me down.”

Arthur sprang forwards and opened the door.

Merlin tottered into the room and gently laid Gwen on the bed. When he was clear of then weight, he cradled his shoulder, hoping to pass it off as mere strain. Arthur didn't fail to notice it, Merlin thought, his eyes following Merlin's movement. Hopefully, he must be thinking Merlin's gesture was due to the phantom gym sprain he'd never really undergone.

“We should call a doctor,” Merlin said to deflect Arthur's attention away from Merlin's healing shoulder and onto Gwen's ankle.

“Yes, right,” Arthur said. “I'll get Sir Thomas Aglovale from the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital. He's my father's doctor and he's also a Senior Lecturer in Trauma and an honorary consultant of theirs.”

“Go right ahead,” Merlin told him while Gwen was saying, “No, there's no need. I'll just put my feet up on a pillow, like this.” She pulled a pillow from under her and placed it under her foot.

“I don't have my mobile with me,” Arthur said, patting his pockets. “The nearest phone is in the breakfast room.”

Merlin wasn't looking forward to meeting the other contestants. One of them had to be behind the attack on Gwen. But them overhearing the phone call might not be so bad. If they did they'd know their comeuppance was waiting round the corner. “Let's go then!”

Arthur joined him by the door and they were almost out by the time Gwen called them back. “No, please, don't bother any famous doctor for me.” To prove that she was fine she stood and put her foot down with her weight on it. And winced. “Okay, all right,” she said in a pained voice. “Get me a doctor.” She sank back down.

By then Merlin and Arthur were already out the door and speeding down the corridor. Merlin didn't say anything about the obvious conspiracy that was going on, more concerned for Gwen for the moment, but he did mean to address his fears later. Talk to Arthur. For now, though, he'd better keep
up with him on his way down.

Before entering the breakfast room, Merlin put a hand on Arthur's arm. Arthur sucked in a deep breath and held Merlin's eyes. That was just as well because Merlin wanted him to pay attention when he said, “Arthur, you know that Gwen falling was no coincidence, right?”

Arthur stiffened all over; his eyes searching the stairs behind Merlin. “Of course I do. That's why we have those rules about participants not boycotting others in place. Attempts like this have taken place before.”

“Good,” Merlin said. “Because whoever did that is dangerous.”

It had been too much. If Merlin hadn't used his magic Gwen might have tumbled all the way down, broken some bones, or cracked her skull. It was horrible to think about. He couldn't fathom how someone could stoop to that to get some sort of advantage in a competition, but he couldn't not put two and two together.

Gwen was doing well. Arthur liked her and might have a thing for her already. The people liked her as well, which fact would probably convince Uther she was the best candidate too. If Merlin thought about it he'd have to deduce that her positive influence by the populace might outdo the scandal that had flared in the wake Morgana's attempt on the King. Gwen becoming a royal would bring some popularity back to the institution.

It was easy too see why one of the contestants had acted now. Merlin just didn't understand how they could have brought themselves to. “Gwen might have come to some serious harm,” he said in a bit of a growl.


Of course. Arthur's main concern would be Gwen. Getting the culprit wouldn't be his top priority. Making sure the girl he liked was all right would be. “Lead on MacDuff,” Merlin said.

Arthur pushed the door open. When he saw Sophia on the phone, nonchalantly twisting the device's cord round her finger, he said. “Miss Tirmore, I'm afraid I need the phone. It's rather urgent.”

Cenred, who was forking a mouthful of scrambled eggs, was caught mid action and said, “Why? What for?” His plate of runny eggs with their palely bleeding yolks drowned in Worcester sauce looked rather disgusting to Merlin. “What's happened?”

“Somebody tried to harm Guinevere,” he said. “They used a length of waxed string to trip her.”

Sophia put her phone down. “How terrible.”

Arthur stalked over to her and lifted the receiver.

“Wait,” said Cenred, casting his plate aside. “You mean to say you think this piece of string wasn't there just accidentally?”

Arthur held the receiver to his chest. “It can't have been. It wasn't a short piece. It wasn't even common string. To all intents and purposes it was a tensioned cable, not something anyone in their right minds would leave on the stairs.”

Cenred tutted. “Allowing that, maybe it wasn't meant for Guinevere though. Some members of staff have kids and maybe these kids were horsing around.”
“Not on that floor,” said Arthur, still not dialling. “It's mostly only meant to house two contestants at a time. Only the maids cleaning the occupied bedrooms have access. Them and security personnel. I'm not suspecting the security personnel.”

“Then you must be right,” Cenred considered.

Sophia made a small noise of assent as she regained her seat. Vivian looked doubtful as did most of the contestants.

“I think I am,” Arthur said grimly.

He was about to push a key when Cenred interrupted him again. “How did you find out about this in time to, I gather, rescue the fair maiden?”

“Merlin saw the waxed string,” Arthur said, the muscle in his cheek spasming. He afforded Merlin a look that was full of gratitude. “Without him something much worse might have happened. He actually did all the knight errantry required.” Arthur shared a soft smile with Merlin.

“Isn't that strange?” Vivian asked, catching Cenred's eyes. “That he should have seen the thing go down? That he should have noticed?”

“Indeed,” said Cenred, lacing both arms behind his head. “It's plenty odd. It looks to me...”

“What?” Arthur barked. He slammed the receiver down and turned round to face Cenred with both hands on his hips. “I don't like allusions.”

“It seems to me,” Cenred continued, “that it's odd he noticed this piece of string when you didn't, Your Highness. That he should have alerted you and the fair Guinevere to its presence but not in time for him to prevent her from coming to harm. I gather she's been harmed or you wouldn't be calling a doctor.”

“Speak plainly,” Arthur ordered, hands firmly planted at his hips.

“Well,” said Cenred, his body language a display of languorous confidence. “It's plain to me. He's the only one with legitimate access to that floor. I can't see a palace maid wanting to try and have Guinevere hurt. What would be her gain? But another contestant, like Merlin, might find something to gain from Guinevere going back home.”

“Yes, I see it,” said Vivian, eyes going preternaturally large. “Gwen, for a reason I don't see, has been favoured by Your Highness. Merlin must have felt jealous.”

“And thought that he might just do enough harm to cause Gwen to go home,” Cenred continued for her. “He even pretended to notice the trap so he could play hero and shine himself. I gather it's typical of disturbed personalities.”

“Typical,” Vivian agreed.

Merlin felt all the blood rush to his head. It should have felt full and throbbing but he went light-headed instead. Nauseous. It was true that he'd wanted to be kicked out of the competition.

It was true he'd at one time thought of breaking the rules on purpose so he would be. But he didn't want the world to think he'd hurt Gwen. Most of all he didn't want Gwen to think he'd be capable of that. Or even Arthur. It was monstrous. His cheeks went fever hot, his body hardened as if in readiness for the physical demands of a battle, and he knotted his hands into fist.
He protested his innocence. “I didn't bloody do it. I like Gwen! She's my friend. I'd never ever do anything like that to her!”

Everybody was staring at his outburst.

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“Yes, I'm sure we all believe your protestation of innocence, Emrys” Cenred sneered.

“I do,” Arthur said in a steely voice. His eyes were flashing and his nostrils flaring. “I believe Merlin.”

“Could I ask why?” Cenred asked. “He's got everything to gain from Gwen going home.”

Arthur swept his gaze across the room, not failing to take in a single participant. “So does everyone else.”

“It happened on Merlin's floor though,” Vivian pointed out, tapping a nail against the sheer veneer of the breakfast set.

“We're talking about a sneak attacker,” Arthur said. “Do you really think a person like that would stop at such a consideration as floor access?”

Vivian and Sophia exchanged glances. There were some general murmurs of agreement from a number of participants as well as an equally fair number of protestations of innocence.

Merlin, for one, didn't care to listen to those. They could shriek till they were hoarse. He was sure someone in this room had done the deed. He wasn't too focused on that now though. He was sure he would be more interested in the others' behaviour later on, but the current goings on were paling in comparison to Arthur standing up to him.

Even though they didn't know each other very well and even though he had no reason to be his friend, Arthur had believed him.

True, a little voice in Merlin's head was telling him that Arthur would probably stop trusting him if he knew Merlin had magic, but he effectively shut it up so he could appreciate Arthur's gesture in peace.

It was moving.

“But the person would have to have slipped past security,” Cenred said, breaking Merlin's reverie. “I'm sure palace security would have caught anyone doing so. They clearly know how to do their jobs.”

“They're looking for threats from the outside,” Arthur said in direct answer to Cenred. “Not from threats coming from you.”

Arthur stressed that word so much Merlin started to think Arthur suspected Cenred above the others. Not that Merlin would put it past him, but there were a few other participants Merlin could suspect of being just as treacherous as Cenred.

“I see only one solution,” said Angharad in a matter of fact tone. “We should put this to the King and see what he decides.”
A lick of fear slithered up Merlin's spine. Merlin wasn't afraid of Uther. Okay, Merlin was marginally afraid of Uther because the man was just that imposing and imperious. But what he truly dreaded was an investigation being launched to look into the attack on Gwen. If the police got involved it would be bad news. Some officers knew tricks geared to weeding sorcerers out. What if Merlin ran into one of those?

He'd rather not think about it. What he instinctively wanted to do was throw his arms up in prayer and plead for the authorities not to be involved. But he couldn't really do that, could he? It would look suspicious.

He'd have to hope he'd fly under the radar even if the police was entrusted with this.

Arthur wasn't reacting as Merlin would have expected of him either.

Instead of being happy to defer to his father's authority, he looked as if he was as little pleased at the suggestion the King step in as Merlin's himself was.

His Adam's apple plunged in his throat and he shut his mouth in such a way little lines formed around it. “That will have to wait,” Arthur said, walking back to the dresser and the phone. “Do I have to remind you that Miss Smith is still in pain and waiting for a doctor?”

“I thought she was enough of a peasant to trust the NHS and drive herself to the A&E,” Vivian said, but quickly bowed her head when she received a couple of glares from her fellow participants. Lots of contestants were middle and working class and none of them appreciated the insult.

“Now if you'll let me,” Arthur said, placing the call he'd delayed making while people were so busy accusing Merlin of crimes he hadn't committed.

As Arthur talked to Sir Thomas on the phone, Merlin bit his nails. When he was done, he looked up at Arthur in concern.

Arthur kept his cool but it was clear there was something he was itching to say. “Come, Merlin,” he said, herding him back towards the door, “I'll interrogate you while we wait for Sir Thomas to get here.” That statement seemed to have been made for the contestants' benefit. Or it looked that way because Arthur's gaze fell on them as a group while it was being delivered. And because he didn't fail to add, “The same honour will fall on each of you in turn.”

Merlin couldn't see what effect Arthur's words had had on those present, though he would have wished to, because Arthur shepherded him outside.

“Arthur,” Merlin said, but Arthur effectively shut him up by answering, “Not here, Merlin.”

Instead he led Merlin to the ground floor and to one of the palace's private entrances. This entrance gave onto a courtyard Merlin had never seen before. One that was surrounded by other brick buildings – the cottages that formed a part of the whole construction that was the palace – on three sides, and a wrought iron gate on the other.

“I can gag the press,” Arthur said, his gaze directed away from Merlin and towards the gate. “But I can't stop them from going to my father with this.”

“You're not interrogating me,” Merlin said. He'd expected Arthur to be true to his word and do that. Question him about him motive and alibi. But this didn't seem much like a piece of questioning. All right, Merlin only had the telly to go by where the art of extracting the truth from someone was concerned – thankfully – but he was pretty sure this was part of no grilling procedure. “You said you would.”
Arthur's head whipped his way. “I was buying time and space to warn you. I thought you knew that.”

“How was I supposed to?” Merlin asked.

Arthur dug the toe of his shiny loafer into the gravel, making patterns only he could see. “I thought you knew that I--”

“That you?” Merlin pressed him. Christ, making sense of Arthur's words was like pulling teeth, and firmly entrenched molars at that.

“That I wouldn't be so easily taken in,” Arthur said with a certain fervour in his tone that made Merlin suspect he was angry. He was also gesticulating rather fast. “And that I'd never think you capable of harming anybody.”

Merlin felt a tug at his heart. And like a horrible, horrible person too. Merlin was very capable of harming people. Some of those Section Seven men he'd hurled his magic at might have been hurt. (Merlin hadn't cared to linger and check.)

Arthur thought him unable to injure someone but Merlin had done it before. He wasn't even sorry. He didn't feel guilty. Arthur would think him a monster for that, for that dark side Merlin had, but Merlin couldn't help being what he was. Having that chequered past and morals that were of necessity ambiguous. Bad even.

Uther might have nourished it in Merlin thanks to his laws but who was the most guilty didn't matter.

Uther bearing part of the burden was irrelevant. Arthur would flinch at knowing Merlin's dark side.

Sure, Merlin thought Arthur, too, had one since he had a hand in upholding the laws that made Merlin a sometime criminal. And for that alone Merlin should not care for Arthur's easy condemnation nor think him a better person than himself.

Arthur had the advantage when it came to acting honourably. Doing so wasn't hard when there were no obstacles rearing their head against you. Condemning was easy when the laws were in your favour.

If and when it came, he should ignore Arthur's condemnation. He could.

But that wasn't true either. It dug under his skin. It wasn't something he wanted. He wanted Arthur to think Merlin was a good man through and through. No matter how untrue. “I wouldn't do anything to injure Gwen, I swear. She's... I think we've become friends.”

Arthur's eyes bore on him. “I've realised that. That you two are getting close. You can sense it when someone gets close to you, Merlin. You're that kind of person. An easy read when it comes to love or... the absence of it.”

Merlin didn't know what exactly Arthur meant but he was glad that he was on Merlin's side and trusted him on the Gwen issue. “I'm glad you don't think I did--”

Arthur ploughed right over him. “And out of all the others you're the only one who'd never do something like this, not for me, not to get me.”

“I hope you don't think that I would resort to hurting my 'rivals' to get a title and--”

Arthur's glance encompassed him from head to foot all over again, frowning. He kept eyeing him up
and down until he burst out with the following words, “No, no, I realise you don't think I'm-- I don't think you're there, in that mental space.” Arthur cocked his head in his direction as if he was studying some complicated puzzle he couldn't solve. “For you I'm not something to--”

“Kill for? I hope bloody well not, Arthur,” Merlin said exasperatedly. Who in their right minds would kill or in jure to get a man? “If I were you, I would try and find the person who thinks it's peachy to break the law and attack people. I wouldn't be wanting to marry them. They're completely bonkers.”

Arthur leant away sharply, probably not liking Merlin invading his space, gasped as though he was in need of more air, then, once he was at a distance he was happy with, he started fiddling with his cuffs. All the while he was nodding thoughtfully. “No, you're right. That's surely something to avoid. It's not what marriage is about.”

“It's certainly not a cut-throat competition, inspiring people to go go about masterminding ways to do away with the others,” Merlin agreed.

“No, no, that's not what I think marriage is.”

“Agreed,” said Merlin. “I mean I'm not sure the Selection is a wise idea or what marriage is truly about but I do know you want to steer clear of the cuckoo suitors.”

“You don't know what marriage is about?”

Merlin shrugged. “I told you. I never knew my father. If my mum had boyfriends she never introduced them to me. I don't have great reference material.”

Arthur seemed interested in that; his gaze sharpened at the very least and he bridged the gap between them. “But even if you don't know what the institution's like you must know what love is.”

“Not sure either,” Merlin said, thinking back to his past: short-lived love affairs, flings, school crushes when he'd been very young.

In between he'd only been with magic people like him. It was one less secret to keep.

Him being magic wasn't something he wanted to bring up between the sheets. He wanted to be honest when he made love to someone.

The problem was that in his search for honesty he hadn't followed or allowed for real passion much. He'd never been in love with any of those sorcerers.

His few past partners matched a profile he'd thought of as suited to his. A good rational fit. He'd decided he'd go for people having a good sense of humour and, most of all, magic. Magic coming first.

But since the magic part had been the priority, the top scoring card, love had fallen by the wayside; being totally mad about someone in a no-holds-barred way hadn't been an option for him.

He'd gone about finding love in a very backwards way. “I don't think-- I mean--”

“One day you'll find out,” said Arthur with the certainty of someone who had been at least a bit in love. “And then you'll know. What it does.”

Merlin briefly wondered who Arthur had been in love with. Maybe a school fling he'd had to cast aside to abide by the rules of the Selection.
Arthur was so young, a tiny bit older than Merlin, but young enough he couldn't have that chequered a past. His love had to have been a teen passion. Someone had once told Merlin those burned very bright. Perhaps that was why Arthur remembered.

Merlin would have ruminated some more on the subject if the car carrying Sir Thomas Aglovale hadn't rolled into the courtyard.

Sir Thomas, doctor's bag in hand, walked up to Arthur. “Your Highness,” he said in an easy way Merlin would never be capable of mastering. Merlin sounded either defiant or like an idiot when he tried honorifics with Arthur. The doctor seemed to have practised his courtly manners though and came off as perfectly smooth.

“Sir Thomas,” Arthur said, shaking the man's hand. “Thank you for coming at such short notice. I understand that it's not in your job description.”

“I like to call myself a friend of your family's,” Sir Thomas said. “And I always go out of my way for my friends.”

Arthur smiled politely. “Thank you, doctor.” Arthur remembered Merlin then, and said, “This is Merlin Emrys. He's—”

Merlin was expecting Arthur to refer to him as a Selection contestant because that was what Merlin was. Instead Arthur introduced him as “Merlin Emrys, a friend of mine, and of your patient's.”

“A pleasure,” Sir Thomas said, proffering a second hand shake. “And now for my patient?”

“Yes, follow me, please,” said Arthur, leading the way back inside.

As Sir Thomas examined Gwen, Merlin and Arthur waited outside her room.

They didn't speak much now that they were back in the palace, both aware of potential witnesses having it in for Merlin. What they did say concerned mainly Gwen and their worry for her.

On that score they were soon relieved by the doctor's words. “Well, nothing's broken. It's a minor sprain and she should be back on her feet in a few days. I recommended the usual; rest, ice, compression and elevation. If she's still in pain in a few days we'll see about an x-ray.”

“Thank you, doctor,” said Arthur. “This is great news.”

“I did nothing,” Sir Thomas told Arthur, moving his bag from hand to hand. “I know of no doctor who wouldn't help a patient.” He turned to Merlin. “By the way, before I forget. Miss Smith wants to see you, Mr Emrys.”

Merlin nodded thankfully, said goodbye to the doctor, and slipped into Gwen's room.

She was lying where he'd left her before going down to the breakfast room to seek a doctor; that was on the bed with her foot up. She had an ice pack pressed against her ankle but was looking a bit better already. She wasn't pinched anymore and she smiled when she saw him. “Hi, Merlin.”

“So how are you doing?” he asked, locking his hands behind his back.

“Better,” said Gwen. “This icepack is a godsend.”

Merlin bobbed his head. “I'm glad it's working.”

“I've also been prescribed a mild pain killer,” she said, saying 'mild' as if she was dismissing the
extent of her injury. “I’ll be well in no time.”

“I’m glad.”

“But I think I want out of the competition.” Gwen shifted the icepack. “I heard what you said about someone else tripping me.”

“What, no!” Merlin said. This wasn’t what he wanted. If Gwen went then some obnoxious person could well win. And then Arthur and the obnoxious winner would be co-rulers. Merlin feared for the sake of magic users if someone didn't temper the Pendragons' anti-magic sentiment like Gwen could. Not that he knew her stance on sorcery but surely she’d be more of a peace loving person than all those backstabbers downstairs? “Why would you do that! You'd be playing into their hands.”

Gwen sighed. “I just don't think it's worth it. I don't want to have a hand in this mess if it's to be like this.”

Merlin was perhaps being a little bit selfish in pushing Gwen so, but he didn't want any shitty people by Arthur's side. He wanted someone good, with morals and a sense of justice. Because they'd be a good influence and because he was starting to think Arthur truly deserved it. Who else might do?

Angharad might be okay as might Ann. But neither of them had caught Arthur's fancy as Gwen had. And Merlin wanted Arthur to marry for love and be happy.

He wouldn't be too happy or if he was saddled with one of the partners the Selection had foisted on him. The only good person in their midst -- and that Merlin liked for Arthur -- was Gwen. So Gwen it had to be. “Please, Gwen. You can't throw in the towel.”

“Why not?” Gwen asked, moving so the icepack slipped off her calf. “What's the point?

“I thought it was marrying Arthur,” Merlin said pleadingly. “I thought you said he was hot. That he was what you wanted.”

Gwen lowered her head. “I'm just so confused, Merlin.”

Merlin went over to sit by her side. He moved the ice-pack so that it’d stop dampening Gwen's blankets and put it back where it belonged, on her foot. “I know. Some people make you re-evaluate things.” And wasn't that right. Merlin had always thought he was easy going unless the subject of magic hatred was touched. But Cenred and Vivian were testing his patience. Hard. He couldn't blame Gwen for wanting to back out of such an unpleasant situation. “I just don't want you to believe that their reception of you is what matters.”

“I know it's not,” Gwen said, pulling her knees up and putting weight on her foot, even though she shouldn’t, not with her aching ankle. “I knew my rivals wouldn't love me. But this. This takes the cake. It's not an atmosphere I want to live in. Not for the sake of a girlish dream. Plus, it's making me paranoid. If I stay, I'll spend all my time watching my back. You realise it could have been anyone.”

Merlin flinched and thought of the accusations hurled his way. “About that. You'll hear about it one way or the other but I want this to come from me. Cenred accused me of being the one behind the nasty attack that was pulled on you.” Merlin breathed out and used the pause to take courage. “I need you to know that I would never, ever--”

Gwen put her hand on his mouth, preventing him from babbling. “I would never suspect you. I wasn't talking about you. It would never enter my mind.”

Merlin tried to speak despite Gwen's effective method of shutting him up. “Dweeen.”
“No, no protestations of innocence.” Gwen dropped her hand when she was sure he wouldn't argue more. “You didn't do it, I know it, and that's it.”

Merlin smiled, relieved. Gwen believing him was a huge deal. “Thank you for trusting me.”

“Did you think me that bad of a friend?”

“No,” Merlin said, shaking his head. The corner of his mouth quirked sideways. “But we haven't known each other long and, you know.”

“Merlin,” Gwen started telling him off. “You should learn to trust people more, to--” She was warming on the subject and would probably have expanded on it when she was cut off by a knock on the door. “Come in,” Gwen said.

Arthur peeked his head in, zeroing in on Merlin. “I'm sorry to interrupt you but, Merlin, I'm afraid Cenred went to Geoffrey to lodge formal accusations against you following what happened to Gwen. You've been summoned by my father.”

Merlin gulped. This was the worst news ever and it drove the chill in his bones. It was nothing short of a death chill.

Uther Pendragon was not a man to be trifled with in normal circumstances, but if he believed Merlin capable of injuring someone then he'd likely order an investigation.

If he did, things might come out and if his magic was discovered then Merlin was done for. There'd be no pity.

Not only because he was a warlock but also because they'd think he'd infiltrated the royal family for nefarious purposes. Once the magic was out nobody, not even Arthur, would believe he'd taken part in the Selection for the sole purpose of protecting himself. Arthur might even come to believe he was Merlin's true objective, that Merlin was trying to assassinate him. That he'd tried getting close to him for that very purpose. The thought made him feel like vomiting.

He wanted Arthur's good opinion, he realised with a certain amount of shock. He wanted Arthur to think well of him. For him to know that Merlin wouldn't ever voluntarily harm him. Cold sweat enveloping him, Merlin said, “I can back out of the competition. If they think I did it because I want to win I'll show them it doesn't matter.”

“You won't,” Arthur said and it was more of a direct order than anything else.

“Why shouldn't I?” Merlin said, raising what he thought was a pretty valid objection. “It seems reasonable to me, doesn't it.” He turned towards his other companion. “Gwen?”

Gwen tutted but didn't commit to a reply, rather watching Arthur and Merlin keenly.

“But--” Arthur opened him mouth to say something, stopped himself, then began again. “Because I'll clear your name. And because that might still not be enough. Even if you back out that doesn't cancel the incident out. The attack on Gwen. You don't want the police to press charges, do you?”

Merlin didn't want that. “Obviously not.” He had more reason than anyone else to fear that.

“Then you'll do as I say,” said Arthur decisively. “I know how to deal with my own father.” He opened the door some more. “Now come. The King won't wait.”
After having bidden Gwen goodbye, Merlin scurried after Arthur, dreading meeting with King Uther, not actually knowing what to do, and wanting to curse Mordred aloud for having put him into this situation.

During the drive over to Buckingham Palace Arthur instructed him on how to deal with his father. “Don't mouth off,” he said, counting items off his fingers. “Even if you're eager to, don't. I don't think Father likes you so don't irritate him further. Wait for him to ask you questions. Don't pre-empt him.”

The driver chuckled even though Merlin didn't know what was so funny about it.

Arthur continued. “Let me speak for you.” Arthur's eyes bore on him, a squint to them. “Got it? Let me handle my own father.”

“But--” Merlin protested. “How am I supposed to prove my innocence if I don't speak up? When the trap for Gwen was laid you weren't there. It's your opinion against--”

Arthur cupped Merlin's shoulder, squeezing tight. “Please, for once, do as I say.”

Merlin nodded although he wasn't sure Arthur's was the best possible plan.

He reconsidered when he was ushered into Uther's presence. If looks could kill, Merlin would have been atomised, pulverised even, before the King was done with his once over.

“Mr Emrys,” said the King, taking a handful of documents from Mr Monmouth, who was standing guard behind his ample desk. “I gather that you're in trouble.”

Arthur answered for him. “It's a misunderstanding, Father.”

Merlin put in his two pennies worth. “I didn't do it. I never would.” He didn't say 'I wouldn't hurt anyone' because that wasn't true. Merlin was aware he could. He had done it in the past. So he wasn't lying now. In case they found out about his magic he'd at least have this to fall back on. He wasn't deceiving anyone. He was just omitting details. “It's Gwen and she's my friend.”

“Regardless,” said the King, picking up the paperwork Mr Monmouth had handed him. “Here's a petition from the other Selection participants asking me to investigate the subject of the accident that occurred earlier on today. Your fellow contestants are now, and I'm quoting, 'living in a state of fear that what happened to Miss Smith might also happen to them’.”

“It might,” said Merlin, taking a step forwards and forgetting Arthur's words about being tame. “As long as the culprit is around and free.”

“Regardless,” said the King, picking up the paperwork Mr Monmouth had handed him. “Here's a petition from the other Selection participants asking me to investigate the subject of the accident that occurred earlier on today. Your fellow contestants are now, and I'm quoting, 'living in a state of fear that what happened to Miss Smith might also happen to them’.”

“It might,” said Merlin, taking a step forwards and forgetting Arthur's words about being tame. “As long as the culprit is around and free.”

“Most of the other contestants subscribe to the theory that it's you who did it,” said the King curtly. “And I'm very tempted to believe them. It'd rid me of you.”

“Yes,” Merlin agreed, jaw set. “You'd also be doing the real guilty party a favour, keeping them at large and ensure they have a chance at Arthur.” Despite being a little afraid of him, Merlin made sure he was looking the King in the eye when he added, “Worming their way into your family.”

He was warming to his own peroration. He might be defending himself but he was also telling the truth. Given the scenario, someone needed to watch out for Arthur.

“Very shamefaced of you to put it like that,” King Uther said, ignoring his son in favour of verbally lashing at Merlin. “I could be said to be doing the same if I let you be part of the competition.”
Arthur stepped forwards, throwing an arm out, either barring Merlin from moving closer to the King or shielding him from his wrath. “But you have no way of knowing it was not one of the others. True, they say it was Merlin but that's rather convenient, don't you think, Father? Especially since all contestants share the same motive.”

King Uther forked his glasses and picked up the contestants' petition again. “They say here--” The King followed the script with his finger. “That Merlin Emrys was the only contestant enjoying access to the floor the accident was staged at.”

“Father, do you really think that anyone capable of acting so lowly would stop and rethink their actions because they have no way of obtaining sanctioned access to a specific floor?”

King Uther dropped the petition he'd been trying to quote. “Why are you so sure it wasn't Emrys?”

“Because I trust him,” Arthur said with certainty.

Merlin's mouth fell open. It was one thing to witness Arthur defending him before the other contestants. Arthur had no reason to fear them. Quite the contrary, he was the one who called the shots when they were present. But Merlin believed Arthur stood in awe of his father.

He'd seen him behave rigidly, like a schoolboy trying to do well, when the King was around, just as he had during that first Selection meeting.

Merlin had reason to think Arthur would bow before no other man but his father. This time though he was holding his head high. He was doing so for Merlin's sake.

“That's very naïve of you, Arthur.”

“No more than accusing Merlin and trusting the others blindly would be,” said Arthur, making a point Merlin thought more valid and reasonable, albeit less personally flattering, than the one that had gone before. “Besides, I know Merlin better than the others. Please, believe I'm not a bad judge of character,” Arthur finished.

Uther didn't like this, Merlin could tell. His mouth was drawn in such a thin little line it practically disappeared. His eyes sparked with ill-suppressed rage the more scary because it was kept at bay. Merlin didn't doubt it could be very easily unleashed. But for now the King was keeping his cool, well, seemingly. “You'll have to give me more than that.”

“I'll find you the culprit,” Arthur said, looking to Merlin. “I'm sure that's in everyone best interests.”

“I'm sure security or the police will do a satisfying job of it, Arthur,” said King Uther.

“Not as thorough a job as I will,” Arthur insisted, one of his fists bunched up in peroration. “I know these people better than the guys from security do. They've been courting me a while but they don't know they've exposed themselves more than they think while trying to lure me in. I have an in. Please, Father.”

Uther drummed his fingers on his desk. Merlin was sure that the King wasn't merely trying to keep the suspense up. He was honestly weighing his options. He most probably would have loved to go with his instincts, accusing Merlin and giving him up to either security or the police, but Arthur's words had left a mark.

It could go either way.

“I'll give you three days to get to the bottom of this,” said Uther, menace oozing from his terse tone.
“After which Mr Emrys gets handed over to the police.”

“Perfect,” said Arthur, showing more bravado than was wise. “By then I'll have handed you the culprit's head on a silver platter.”

Merlin didn't even hope it was metaphorical since it would be his head on the chopping block if Arthur couldn't prove his case.

“Very well, then,” King Uther said, dismissing them both with a wave of his hands. “I trust you, Arthur, to be mature enough to see to this and not be led by your... let's say nose.” The King squinted angrily at Merlin. “As for you, rest assured I won't let you hurt my son.” The King turned in his seat to address Monmouth. “You can go,” he dismissed them as an after thought.

Merlin had never been so relieved to leave a room in his life.

Trotting after Arthur, Merlin asked, “So how did you intend to prove my innocence?”

Arthur stopped short. “I haven't the faintest.”

“And to say my life is in your hands,” Merlin only half-joked, though he let humour lace his voice.

Arthur took to walking again, taking the grand, carpeted stairs leading to one of the multiple exits two at a time. “I guess I'll have security hand me over the tapes from the surveillance cameras. We'll start from there.”

Even though Merlin would have appreciated a better laid plan that didn't possibly entail ending tits up and with his life on the line, this one seemed as good a starting point as any. “Okay, then. What are we waiting for?”

“Only for the chauffeur to get us back to Kensington Palace.”

Once there Arthur didn't waste a minute before he went looking for the head of security. He made him give him the recordings of the cameras pointed towards the stairs leading to Merlin's floor and ensured that no material was left behind. “That's it?” Arthur asked. “Four DVDs?”

“They go from yesterday night to this morning,” the head of security said. “I don't think anyone could have done the deed before dinner yesterday, so, yes, Your Highness, that's all we have. 12 hours, two discs per angle.”

“Now I see what you mean,” said Arthur, accepting the discs. “Merlin didn't trip on his way back to his room yesterday, which means there was no obstacle to trip over. That's a nice time frame to work from. If we could just narrow it down even more.” Arthur tapped his fingers against the disc cases. “Pity I didn't use the main stairs this morning to, um--” Arthur stopped talking abruptly. Merlin realised that he hadn't meant to share his earlier location with anyone. Merlin didn't see how that was feasible at this point, but he understood the thought process. If Arthur was associated with Merlin, he wouldn't look like much of an unbiased investigator. “Anyway thank you, Balan.”

“It's my job, Your Highness.”

“Thank you all the same for being so thorough,” Arthur said, making Merlin appreciate his politeness. Arthur could have easily bossed the head of security around without bothering to sound appreciative. Instead he was complimenting him and rewarding a job well done.

Arthur wasn't as much of a spoilt prince as Merlin had imagined. He knew when to commend people and how to boost their self esteem. It could be a good quality in a king. If he could just change his
mind about magic...

Merlin was lost in thought, thinking of Arthur and magic, when Arthur started pulling him down the length of the corridor close to Balan's office. “Come, Merlin. You heard Father. Time is of the essence and we've got twelve hours worth of video to scan.”

Merlin spluttered while he tried to keep up with Arthur. “Can't we fast-forward?”

“It's your head on the line.”

Merlin got to terms with the idea of fast-forwarding as little as possible. “Where are we going?”

“My rooms, Merlin,” Arthur said, steering Merlin upstairs by the shoulder. “I don't want to do this in public.”

Arthur stalked down corridors and turned down corners, entering another wing. At last he pushed a set of double doors open and led Merlin into his suite of rooms.

They were luxurious, though not to excess. There were no frills but the furniture, while sober and heavy, was rich. The materials precious and sumptuous. From the type of timber used for the panelling down to the drapery, every item was of the best quality.

Arthur's bed though was another matter entirely: it was as decadent as the rest of his furnishings weren't. While the other pieces of furniture were excellent but functional, the bed was just grand.

It had to have been custom made to be so big. The mattress looked so tall and soft you would have needed to stack three regular ones one on top of the other to reach similar heights of comfort.

The bedspread too looked inviting and made you want to do nothing better but take a flying leap at the mattress so you could wrap it around you. It was of a deep, generous colour and looked as if it could keep you warm even through the harshest winter. It was very inviting.

While Merlin fell in love with Arthur's bed, Arthur stomped around, looking for something. “Ah, there it is,” he said at last, picking up his laptop. With it in hand he moved to sit on the floor by the bed. Thankfully he'd parked his arse on a square of plush carpet. Patting the spot next to him he said, “Come, Merlin, two eyes are better than one.”

While Arthur loaded the first disk, Merlin sat down next to him, his back to the bed.

“So we're hoping the bastard who tripped Gwen was caught on camera?”

“Basically,” Arthur said, fingers on the touch-pad. “Now pay attention.”

They watched three hours of footage and nothing that seemed to matter happened on screen. They were just treated to the same image; a swathe of stairs and a glimpse of the landing. The light from the window playing on panes and carpet-runner. “There's nothing there and my bum is sore.”


Merlin pretended to be affronted, “Oh, so now you've been reduced to critiquing my arse. Very royal of you.”

Arthur chuckled, a bridge of colour spanning his nose. “Be grateful I didn't go for a raunchier line.”

Merlin didn't know what possessed him. He and Arthur didn't have that kind of relationship, but nonetheless he said, “Enquiring minds want to know. Was the line about what could have made my
Arthur going wholly pink wasn't unexpected this time. Merlin had been making allusions. Sometimes Merlin did. He wasn't a saint. Though usually he did make those kind of jokes with friends he was comfortable with or with people he was intimate with. Arthur's answer though was surprising in its honesty. “Yeah, maybe I was steering the conversation there.”

For the first time ever with Arthur Merlin felt his cheeks heat. Yeah, sure, it was the nature of the conversation that had done the trick, had caused a frisson of something Merlin couldn't name to go through him, but he hadn't thought of his and Arthur's relationship in that light so his reaction was startling. “I--”

He needn't have worried about finding the words to finish his sentence. Even though they'd dried in his mouth. That was because things went like this: Arthur took to watching him cautiously, his eyes big and dark. Then his gaze fell to Merlin's mouth, who instinctively wetted his lips.

Before Merlin could check his instincts, Arthur had leant forwards and kissed him, his mouth moving from his chin, to the corner of Merlin's lips, to the bow of them.

Arthur's tongue had just poked the tip of Merlin's when out of the corner of his eyes Merlin caught an image on the laptop. A figure. A person moving in the dark.


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Arthur was slow to react. Though he'd inched away he was still very close to Merlin and his eyes weren't on the laptop but rather on Merlin's mouth.

He wouldn't move his gaze away and he hadn't quite backed off either, his breathing sticking to a rather fast cadence. Seemingly unconsciously, he was smacking his lips together, licking them, his expression surprised and more than a little out if it, his pupils over large and darkening his eyes, making them look sluggish. If he hadn't known better, Merlin would have said Arthur was stoned.


Arthur coughed. “Yeah, right. The video.” He turned around and thumbed the touch-pad, calling up the programme's command bar. He rewound the recording and once again Merlin saw the scene unfold.

A dark blur moved at a crouch, stole past the landing window, and then crept towards the banister, where it paused.

“It's a man,” said Arthur, his eyes flickering from Merlin's face to the laptop screen. “But I can't make out much more than that. I certainly can't tell who it is.”

The image being too dark, Merlin could see as little as Arthur had, but he'd caught a glimpse of something else, just a fleeting impression. He had a hunch there had been something else there, waiting for them to notice it, a detail, a sign. Maybe it was nothing. Or maybe his subconscious was trying to tell him he'd subsumed a clue and promptly forgotten about it. “Rewind again. I think there was something there.”
Arthur obeyed and Merlin watched more of the same scene all over again. The person crawling forwards, making it past the landing and then working the piece of string around the banister. “Shit, you still can't see who it is!”

Arthur snorted. “Very elegant of you, Merlin.” Arthur's levity was short lived for he replayed the segment featuring the shadow Merlin had caught a glimpse of. “But you're right. You can't make the person out.”

“Pause it when he makes the landing,” Merlin told Arthur.

Arthur did as Merlin had asked. “You're right; there's something there. Something on the man's shirt.”

“Yeah,” Merlin said, squinting at the monitor. “That symbol. Isn't it--”


“That's something, isn't it? I mean it's a clue,” Merlin said, thinking that not all male participants could possibly own a Puma item of clothing. And the one who did was likely the attacker. “There's eight men left in the competition, right? What are the odds more than one of them owns a Puma hoodie?”

“Slim,” said Arthur. “I say we call this a clue.”

“It's better than!” Merlin said, already feeling relieved that the truth was surfacing. There was still a chance all would end up well and that he wouldn't be exposed as a sorcerer. “You just ask the guilty person to produce the hoodie and, voilà, case solved.”

Arthur blinked. “That's stupid, Merlin. If I do that Gwen's attacker will have all the time in the world to get rid of the hoodie and with it of all incriminating evidence. No, we must make sure he won't have time to.”

“How do you plan to do that?”

Arthur grinned. “I'll make an announcement. I'll say that in light of what's happened to Gwen I want to speak to the candidates in the main parlour. Hear what they have to say, reassure them. They'll be waiting for me to turn up and all the while I'll be searching each suspect's room instead.”

“I want to come with you,” Merlin said. He believed in helping himself if at all possible; plus, he was loath to part with Arthur right now. There were one or two things he needed to ask about. Because he was somewhat confused as to the kiss and what Arthur had meant by it. In all honesty he was confused as to what he'd felt while it was going on too, so he wanted to latch on to Arthur because he seemed as befuddled as Merlin. Misery loving company and what not. But most of all he wanted to be clear as to why Arthur had done it. Although, he guessed, they had another priority, finding the attacker. Maybe wanting to know what was going on in Arthur's mind wasn't so important. “I'm just as keen to find out who it was as you are.”

“But they'll wonder where you are,” said Arthur, spluttering a bit. “They might even suspect you of planting the item if we don't do it by the book.”

“It's not by the book anyway,” Merlin said. Arthur wasn't the police and though the Pendragons had a police state going where magic users were concerned the same could not be said for ordinary people. Till proven guilty the attacker was just one such ordinary person. Arthur searching his room would be against the law. “Come on. I want to be involved.” He ticked the reasons why off his fingers. “One this bastard hurt my friend. He, whoever he is, accused me of doing something I'd
never do, almost costing me Gwen's friendship, so I'm pretty cross with him. Three, I'm not letting you go alone.”

Arthur's Adam's apple slid up his throat. “I'm glad.” He ducked his head. “That you'd want to do this with me and...” He smiled to himself, losing the thread of his thoughts. “It's going to be an adventure. Since leaving Eton for my gap year my life's been sadly lacking in adventure.”

Oh, so that was what the kiss had been, Arthur seeking a thrill. Maybe Merlin hadn't been too wrong thinking Arthur had had a school crush, one he'd said goodbye to because of the Selection.

Perhaps this chasing Gwen's attacker business had brought back the memories of that time, when he'd been free to do what he wanted and be a little reckless. That was what had moved Arthur to act.

Merlin didn't know how this made him feel; he was still a little bit shaken, and if he was honest with himself he hadn't disliked the kiss either. That contributed to the confusion.

It wasn't odd that he should be confused. Because of who Arthur was, things were complicated. Liking Arthur's kiss wasn't like enjoying a random bloke's kiss. A kiss from a Pendragon, an enemy to magic, was something to think about. As far as gestures went, it was at odds with everything Merlin stood for.

But Arthur had been a good kisser and Merlin... Merlin had liked it. Had liked – briefly – snogging the Prince.

That didn't make him a traitor to his cause. It didn't because he could never love Arthur. Not if Arthur believed magic was intrinsically evil. So he was safe. Safe from harbouring feelings for him or developing a crush.

Safe from making a fool of himself and fawning over him because Arthur Pendragon wasn't just a hot guy like the others saw him, but a possible enemy.

He was safe to joke around and yank Arthur's chain and maybe even kiss him. He was because there was nothing dangerous about it in that Merlin could never see Arthur as his life partner.

“I see it now,” said Merlin, injecting his tone with a little bit extra hilarity he wasn't perhaps feeling. “You're going all Miss Marple on me because you miss faffing about with your public school toff friends.”

Arthur's head snapped back in his direction. At first Merlin thought he was angry but then his gaze mellowed and he said, “So that's what you think of me. What I'm like. What I was like.”

“Am I far off the mark?”

“Would you accept it if I told you you were?”

Merlin held Arthur's gaze and probed it. “Yeah, sure I would.” He shrugged and then narrowed his eyes at Arthur. “Am I? Off base?”

Arthur shook his head. “No, no you aren't, but--” Arthur bit his lower lip. “You don't like it. Him. The kind of person I was.”

“I don't know,” Merlin said, “I should have known you to be able to judge.”

“And now? Now you know me,” Arthur began, moistening his lips. “Do you think that makes a difference?”
Merlin would have surely answered that question if Arthur hadn't fiddled with the controls in a way that caused him to fast-forward the DVD contents.

The recording was now showing Gwen's fall.

In a few more moments Merlin would appear on the scene and do magic. Merlin wasn't sure his spell would show. Most of the time nothing visible happened when he incanted, but his eyes regularly went gold. He wasn't certain that the colour change would show on tape but he couldn't risk it.

He couldn't be outed like that!

He had to stop Arthur from looking at it. Somehow. He thought fast and came up with only one possible solution. Quick as thought, he pulled Arthur's head to him and took his lips for a kiss.

It was a short one but Merlin saw Arthur's chest fill and his eyes go round like saucers.

For a moment Merlin thought that Arthur had seen Merlin's eyes glow gold in the video and that was the reason why he'd looked so stunned. But since Arthur was kissing back, tongue dipping in Merlin's mouth, sobbing, breath hitching, thumbing at Merlin's neck with a gentleness that didn't scream 'I know you're a monster', Merlin dismissed the notion.

It wasn't a bad kiss, after all.

If Merlin hadn't been so scared about the images playing on the screen he'd have enjoyed himself.

Arthur wasn't selfish when he was kissed. He gave back. He was sweet and thorough and brought his tongue into play in ways that were certainly nice and sent little thrills down Merlin's body. His lips were soft and they rubbed at Merlin's playfully, gently. His teeth sharply bit when a bit of roughing up was needed. Merlin's heartbeat even spiked when Arthur sucked on his upper lip with gusto and determination. As far as diversions went this was a good one.

“What was that for?” a breathless Arthur asked when the screen saver had come up and Merlin had released his mouth.

“Nothing, I just wanted to.” Merlin rubbed at his nape.

Arthur smiled a doped-up smile. “Okay. That's fine by me. And you're welcome, should you want to again.”

Merlin smiled too but saw fit to change the subject. “So aren't you going to go and make that announcement? Summon the others so we can go snoop in their rooms?”

Arthur looked around as if he was becoming aware of his surroundings only in that moment. “Yeah, you're right. Yeah. I should.”

A plan of action decided on, they left Arthur's chambers. Arthur went to Leon, who, Merlin found out, was Arthur's secretary and charged with running some important aspects of the Selection. Arthur told Leon to gather the candidates in the parlour downstairs. “And don't let them out until I text you.”

“Am I to gather that you're not actually going to show up?” Leon asked.

“Yes, that's it,” Arthur said. “Oh and Merlin's exempt.”

Order relayed, Arthur and Merlin waited for Leon to give them the all clear. When Leon texted Arthur saying all the participants were with him, Arthur said, “Okay all right. Let's go.”
“What if they've locked their doors?” Merlin asked as Arthur, a map of the palace with details as to each occupant's lodgings spread out in his hands, took to climbing the stairs.

“We'll force them open.”

“That's so low and illegal.”

“Technically, this is my place.”

“Technically, they're your guests,” Merlin deadpanned. “Aren't they sacred?”


They started from the top floor.

Ranulph's room was the first to come to their attention. It was tidy and orderly. Unlike at Merlin's, there was nothing out of place in this room.

No clothes draped over the backs of chairs or armchairs, no shoes scattered around, and nothing was on the floor. A book sat on the night-stand, bookmarked midway through, and a mobile charger lay on the desk. Nothing else had been left on display.

“You get the wardrobe,” Arthur instructed. “I'll go through his drawers.”

He and Arthur went about it like a team. Since Ranulph was so orderly and hadn't brought too many clothes along, their task was easy.

“Anything on your end?” Arthur asked.

“An Adidas T-shirt,” Merlin said, holding it up. “And one that's in need of a wash at that. No hoodies.”

“None here either.” Arthur placed his hands on his hips and scanned the room. “I could look under the pillows but I don’t think we’re going to find what we’re looking for here.”

“Me neither,” said Merlin having a last look around. “And he's a nice guy too. I never thought, not even for a moment, that it was him.”

“To be honest neither did I,” Arthur said, lips quirking. “Even though you never know, he doesn't strike me that way. Though one good thing has come of this. Now that I've seen his temp digs I'm positive I'd never marry poor Ranulph. He's got to be anally retentive to be this tidy.”

Merlin snorted. “You aren't supposed to make judgements like that. Not when you're searching a person's room without their permission.”

“Oh come on, Merlin. I saw your face when you looked through his wardrobe. All those jackets stacked by shade?”

“You're being mean,” Merlin said, shrugging his shoulders. “Picking on one of the nicest men in the competition! If you're so choosy you'll end up with no one, you know.”

Arthur herded him out of Ranulph's room by the neck. “I know what I want, Merlin. There's nothing strange or mean about it.”

Merlin hummed assent though more because he wanted Arthur to stop manhandling him than because he was agreeing with Arthur. Not that he was disagreeing either. He knew that tastes were
tastes and a very personal matter at that. His agreeing though was a way to cut short the conversation and get to moving onto their next objective.

Which was Pell Griffith's room. He was one of the guys Merlin had no clear recollection of. He couldn't even remember his face. He was a candidate, sure, but Merlin had never talked to him and therefore had been left with no lasting impression of either him or his personality.

A few things though emerged from their frisking of Pell's room.

Unlike Ranulph, Pell was more like Merlin when it came to organising his own living space. He was messy. Perhaps worse than Merlin. He had a tendency to strew all his things about and must have pigged out in bed because there were crumbs all over.

The real surprise however came when he and Arthur opened the chest by the window. The chest had looked like a perfect stash for clothing you wanted out of the way, so they'd gone almost directly for it. “Well, that's quite the array of dildos and...” Merlin picked up a spiked collar. “And other recreational stuff.”

Arthur had gone a deep red that diverted Merlin. “Indeed.”

“Oh, manacles,” Merlin said, trying one cuff around his wrist. “I guess the man is into a bit of BDSM.”

Arthur eyed Merlin's wrist, his pupils bulging. “You into it?” he asked roughly, latching onto the other cuff and yanking on the chain, wrapping it around his finger.

“No.” Merlin had reason enough to fear handcuffs in real life to want to bring them into play in the bedroom. He wasn't willing to mentally go there because he didn't know how long his freedom would last. “Not my scene.” Merlin tried to dispel the pall of darkness that the thought of him being arrested had cast upon him. He went for a quip. “Why, is it yours?”

“No,” Arthur said, pulling on the links so Merlin had to lean closer. “No. Not my thing either. So you like it how? Rough? Slow? Sweet?”

Merlin thought of a series of sexual acts. His imagination supplied a wide variety of them and what more the fantasies he conjured all starred himself and Arthur.

This got him hot and bothered and he had to pull on his collar to be able to breathe properly. Arthur's voice having gone lower wasn't helping either. “I like it fun. I like it energetic. I like... Being held. I like it if he can make it last. On the other hand, I love holding my partner down.”

Arthur made a series of low noises.

That served him right.

"Hey, you asked.” Merlin lowered the chest's lid. “Come, I don't think we'll find what we're looking for here.”

“Don't know 'bout that,” Arthur mumbled, though Merlin didn't know what he was driving at, given that they'd gone through Pell's room with a fine tooth comb and found zero items of interest.

Merlin didn't make that his rejoinder and followed Arthur out of the room and into the next.

The clock ticking, they searched another five rooms with no results whatsoever before they made it into the last one. Cenred's. “Don't like the guy,” Merlin admitted as he searched his things. “Not a
“Ruffled your feathers accusing you?” Arthur asked, opening the wardrobe door, moving the jackets hanging in a row from the rod to search the bottom.

“Hardly,” Merlin said. “It's just that Cenred is a dick.”

“I know you wouldn't do what you accused you of, Merlin,” said Arthur as he continued hunting for the Puma hoodie Gwen's attacker had worn. “No need to get touchy.”

Merlin was riffling Cenred's drawers. “I want you to know that...” His tongue got tangled and he started again. “I want you to know that I may not be a saint but there's some things I'd never do.”

Arthur chuckled, unruffled. “I know that, Merlin.”

Merlin didn't think Arthur actually knew what Merlin meant but it wasn't as if he could put more of a stress on his words than he already had.

There was being reassuring and then there was sounding completely guilty.

It was just that Arthur could be so naïve and fail to scratch under the surface of people's real nature. Thank God he had teams of bodyguards protecting him or his lack of insight on the subject of people's grudges could potentially get him killed. “There's nothing here either,” Merlin said, stumped. He'd been so sure that that hoodie would turn up at Cenred's he didn't know what to do now. “Maybe it was a girl.”

“The figure was tall. Taller than any girl in the competition.”

Merlin had to concede. “Maybe the attacker got rid of the clothes he used just in case he was caught on tape?”

“Maybe,” said Arthur, eyes searching the room. “That would bring us back to square one.”

“Yeah,” Merlin was saying, when the door to the en-suite creaked on its hinges. “Or... we left something out,” he said, barrelling over into the bathroom.

There it was, sitting on top of the laundry basket. Merlin picked the hoodie up and splayed it against his chest. The size was right and the logo at chest level was the same as the one pictured in the video. “Arthur, I found it!”

Arthur bounded over and ruffled his hair. “You're not entirely bad as an investigator.”

Merlin beamed with pride, a toothy grin firmly in place. “So what are we waiting for?”

Arthur took the hoodie from him. “We're doing this properly. And in a way that can't be hushed. Let me deal with it.”

Arthur's way of dealing with the proof they'd found was not dealing with it. For two long days he didn't say anything about the video and the hoodie.

For two long days he 'sat' on it.

Merlin was looked askance by all participants but Arthur didn't say a word about his find.

The day of the ball for the Canadian ambassador came and Arthur hadn't mentioned the proof he'd collected to anyone at all.
Merlin was starting to doubt Arthur. Every time Vivian scoffed when Merlin passed her or that Cenred crowed at his deed having gone unpunished, Merlin wondered what was going on with Arthur.

What if his magic acted up while he was in the limelight? And such a malevolent brand at that.

More, he wasn't keen on having each and every security guard's eyes on him. The reason he was being put under such scrutiny was pretty easily fathomed. They thought he'd done it too. But whatever the reason being spied upon was a horrible experience.

At last, the event of the season, drew so close it was a few hours away.

Merlin was told by a leery Monmouth to change into his best clothes and attend the reception. “It may well be your last.”

The reception in honour of the Canadian ambassador was held amid the most colourful decorations Merlin had ever seen. To make it a little bit more grand, it was hosted in the Great Hall of Hampton Court, where great kings had once lolloped around.

Merlin had no doubt this was the last time he saw such splendour. But just as long as Arthur cleared his name and let him fade into blissful obscurity, Merlin would be happy.

That was why when he caught sight of Arthur, he flailed, waved and hissed at him. (He didn't give a shit about the official protocol.) “What about the proof!” he mouthed.

Arthur didn't answer though and rather kept shaking hands, holding himself very stiffly and properly, and smiling inanely at this or that head of state.

When he realised Merlin was about to have a conniption then and there and that his flailing wouldn't stop, he mimed the words, “Be easy.”

“Be easy, be easy,” Merlin mocked after him. "It isn't that easy."

As Merlin huffed, Arthur climbed a dais surrounded by more flower arrangements.

A full blown orchestra was hidden in a small pit at his feet and Arthur himself stood behind a microphone stand, looking for all the world like a proud conductor.

He tapped the mic and when he was certain it was working, Arthur spoke. “Good Evening, ladies and gentlemen. We're here tonight to celebrate our long-standing relationship with Canada. We're here to sponsor togetherness and the convening strength of family; we're here to confirm the "deepened" links that tie the Crown to the nations that have chosen my father as Head of the Commonwealth. We attach great importance to this link--”

A round of applause welcomed Arthur's words. Arthur acknowledged it with a pause and a smile, a little lowering of his head.

When the noise had died down, Arthur continued. “It's also an honour for me to be standing here to welcome the new Ambassador to London.”

This time the clapping was occasioned by a man, whom Merlin took to be the Ambassador, standing out of the crowd. He was dark and handsome and took to the shower of applause like a duck to water.

Once again Arthur paused, waiting for the noise to die down. Then, acknowledging the members of
the press present, he added, “As some of you know today is also the day a further elimination in the Selection process is made.” He winked and fished a piece of paper out of his pocket. “Ten people are scheduled to go. And we thought we’d make the official announcement today.” Arthur unfolded the piece of paper and started naming names. “Pell Griffith, Mark Galehaut, Ganieda Williams--”

Merlin couldn't believe his ears. Arthur was going on with the normal elimination procedure when the more pressing matter, Cenred's guilt, wasn't being discussed.

It wasn't so much himself he was thinking about but the injustice of it all. Could Merlin have misunderstood Arthur? Could Arthur be on Cenred's side?

He believed not. He was sure that Arthur, despite being blind with regard to magic, was a good sort. But why the silence then?

Even though he was lost in the crowd of well dressed guests, Merlin elbowed his way forward so he was in sight of the little custom built stage Arthur was on.

He was trying to make signs and squint his way into getting noticed, when Arthur, finally, changed tack and said, “These are the eliminations you were all expecting, but I'm afraid I'll have to add one more name to the list.”

Silence fell on the crowd; a blinding effusion of light from photographers’ flashes went off. For a second Merlin dreaded his name would be spoken and that he would be thrown to the wolves: the police.

“One of the rules of the Selection is that no candidate is allowed to boycott, harm, or otherwise sabotage another candidate.”

There was a murmur as if the crowd was collectively admitting knowledge of this rule.

“Unfortunately,” said Arthur, “just such a thing has happened.”

Merlin didn't miss his name being mentioned. It was on the lips of more that one guest and came together with disapproving moues and frowns.

“After a private investigation I myself have led,” Arthur continued in a sober tone, “I've closed in on the guilty party.”

A chorus of, “Who is it?” and “I'm sure Emrys will be kicked out,” served as running commentary. Arthur chose to only address the first question. “The person I'm eliminating next is the one I know broke the rules.”

No matter how many protocol rules he was breaching, a reporter stepped out of the crowd and yelled, “Your Highness, can you tell us who it is?”

“I intend to,” said Arthur nodding at the reporter. Merlin had the distinct impression Arthur was wanting for nothing better. “The name of the person who broke the rules is...”

There was a collective gasp that drowned out Arthur's voice.

Arthur had to say the name again to make it intelligible. “Cenred King.”

Merlin's shoulders slumped.

A group of security guards stepped out of the corners of the great hall to make a grab of Cenred and
escort him out. Cenred was resisting, shouting, “I didn't do it alone. Let's discuss this. I can give you a name if you give me a chance!” but nobody was listening to him, not even Arthur.

Arthur, in fact, was smirking at Merlin from up the stage. He gave a little shoulder lift, not really a shrug, and caught Merlin's eyes as if to say, “Oh ye of little faith.”

Merlin smiled. He wanted to give Arthur the thumbs up but knew he couldn't in public.

Arthur turned to the microphone. “And with that seen to, I declare the reception open. Feel free to choose your partner for the first dance. With some luck they'll have you.”

With that Arthur jumped off the stage and prowled up to Merlin. With his shoulders thrown back and his proud air, he looked pretty chuffed with himself. And happy.

In truth he made Merlin want to grin right back at him. Maybe it was because, in their small way, they'd seen to it that justice was done. Or maybe he was grinning because he was feeling complicit, experiencing something like camaraderie. Or perhaps he was just basking in Arthur's happiness.

The fact remained that when Arthur bowed to him he was still grinning. And when Arthur went all formal, voice deep, demeanour plucked out one of those Regency romances that often ended up being aired on the telly, and said, “Will you do me the honour of the first dance?” Merlin was still doing the same.

“Yuppers,” he said, ignoring Arthur's eye roll and taking his hand instead.

He didn't even mind he had all eyes on him. Arthur led him down the floor and opened the dance and Merlin danced to the silly number and he didn't mind one bit.

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The music changed on them. It went from modern and jazzy to slow and completely orchestral. If Merlin wasn't much mistaken – and he didn't think he was – this was a waltz.

Arthur was standing a pace away from him and when the tune swap took took place he looked to the orchestra too, an air of surprise on his face.

Merlin eyed Arthur instead, wetting his lips. “I guess I should walk back to the sidelines now that the first song is done with.”

Arthur made to reach for him but dropped his hand before he could, as if he wasn't quite sure the move was a proper, sanctioned one. “Why, no. I asked you to dance.”

“Yeah, you asked me to open the dance,” Merlin said, angling his head towards the orchestra pit. “We did. I thought you'd have to ask someone else now.” Merlin wasn't really sure about the rules but he believed this was a fair assumption. He couldn't hog the prince. “Besides, this is a waltz.”

Arthur examined Merlin's face. “And?”

“And waltzes are for couples.”

Arthur extended his hand to him, the music swelling in the background. “Will you?”
Merlin let his mouth drop open for a second or two, then he smiled and touched Arthur's waiting, open palm with his. “I don't know how to waltz though, I have to warn you.”

“Doesn't matter,” Arthur said, placing his right hand on Merlin’s waist and letting it drift towards his back while he extended his other one to Merlin's side, grasping Merlin's. “I'll show you.”

Merlin looked sideways at the dancing couples executing perfect twirls and snorted at the thought he could ever achieve that, but he did place his hand on Arthur's shoulder. “Is this you leading?” He turned his head again to lock eyes with Arthur's laughing ones.

“You said you didn't know how to waltz,” Arthur said, pulling him to him.

“Yeah, but I want to lead too,” said Merlin, allowing himself to be yanked into this odd waltz number. Who would have ever thought he'd be waltzing one day. “Once I've got the hang of it.”

Following the completion of one turn, Arthur said, “You never do what you're told, do you?”

“I pride myself of being contrary.” He and Arthur twirled around the big hall. “It's just my factory setting.”

“I realised,” said Arthur, dancing around the length of the room with Merlin in tow. “You're quite something else.”

“I just wanted to make a point,” Merlin said, spinning around and trying to match his movements to Arthur's. He thought he was getting the hang of this, personally. “That's all.”

“And what's that point?” Arthur asked as he rather smugly swept Merlin into another crescendo set.

“That I'm a man who likes having his way,” said Merlin, a little light-headed for all the spinning. “Just as much as you.”

Huffing a little laugh, Arthur leant closer to whisper in his ear. “Believe me, I know.”

Having got the gist of this waltz thing, Merlin took the lead.

He stepped forward though less than gracefully, causing Arthur to follow in his wake and do the opposite of what Merlin was doing, thus moving back.

It worked without them incurring any accident because of Arthur's innate grace. “Didn't want you to misread me,” Merlin said. The music became louder and more dramatic, forcing Merlin's pace and causing him to stumble right into Arthur's chest. So as not to trip, he clung to Arthur's arms for a moment. His muscles were nice and firm, inspiring less than pure thoughts. “Wanted you to know who I am.”

“You know,” said Arthur, slowing down to the point they were almost no longer dancing. “Sometimes I think I do know you. And sometimes I think I am misreading you, but there's one fact that I think I've got down pat. You're one stubborn, determined man who's not easily led by the nose.” Arthur lowered his head a little, tilting it to the side, his eyes on Merlin's despite the veil of his fringe. “God, you're the only person I know who's ever talked back to my father.”

“It wasn't on purpose.”

Arthur shook his head while biting his lip. “Only you would do something like that not on purpose.”

“I'm sure I'm not alone.” They were dancing still, though they were moving so slowly the word
'dancing' was being misapplied. Arthur's hand was sure on his back, providing warmth and support. "There must be plenty of people around with little to no control over what they say."

"Me right now," Arthur said with a puff of air.

Merlin's eyebrows climbed, showing his confusion. "You're not running away at the mouth."

Arthur's gaze moved to Merlin's lips. "I'm about to." Arthur breathed out and then unleashed the words that were on his mind. "I know I shouldn't. I shouldn't let them see. Not yet. Not now. Not when I don't know what you really think. Can't lose face publicly. But I want to kiss you."

Merlin felt a shortness of breath that made his chest seize and clench and feel way too small to host his expanding lungs and heart.

This was so strange. He was feeling giddy and not understanding why. It had to be the set of circumstances.

The smell of starched linen from Arthur's shirt filled Merlin's nostrils as did Arthur's own more subtle scent. It was spiced with cologne but Merlin could tell Arthur's natural odour apart. It was nice and inviting. It was dizzying.

Raising his gaze from Merlin's lips to his eyes Arthur took to staring at him as if Merlin had just achieved some great goal instead of simply dancing badly to an old-fashioned tune.

The music flowed around them and swelled, inspiring big gestures. It was all a little befuddling in the way of forces that swept you by without you giving them leave to. "Don't risk it then."

The light in Arthur's eyes deadened. It hurt to see. Arthur looked ten times more endearing when there was a mischievous, entitled sparkle to his eyes. "I see."

Merlin took several long breaths to settle his thoughts. "You can do it somewhere private."

Arthur's eyes twinkled. "Can I?" he asked, turning his face so that his nose was just an inch away from Merlin's. "Can I, Merlin?"

Merlin found he wanted to say that he could. He was so taken with tonight's atmosphere that he wanted to tell Arthur they could kiss all night long if he wanted. "Yes, you can."

Arthur took a step backwards, hand still reaching out to him. Sparkling blue eyes looked across to him. "I know of a place. Follow me."

With an ability to sneak around Merlin wouldn't have given Arthur credit for, they left the great hall behind them. They poured into a courtyard and then into another one, which gave access to a third one. "Where are you taking me?"

"Wait and see," said Arthur, towing him by the hand. "Wait and see."

Arthur showed him the way to some sort alleyway of green corridors, taller than a man's head.

"What's this place?" Merlin asked, blinking at the greenery array.


"Like a labyrinth! Are you sure we're not getting lost?"

"Hush, Merlin," said Arthur, taking a sheer turn, "I've been coming here since I was a child."
It seemed to be that way because Arthur soon found them a bench. He straddled it sideways and pulled Merlin down too.

The night was so calm there were almost no clouds. Night birds cooed in the trees and insects buzzed. The air was balmy with the scents released by the surrounding walls of foliage. Merlin felt heady and his heart gave a pleasant little jump in his chest.

Smiling up at the sky, Arthur tipped his head up. His was an unaffected smile, one you wouldn't easily attribute to spoiled princes who kept ignoring the plight of a slice of the population, but one you'd think typical of a good upright mean who had a great heart.

Arthur's smile looked pure and heartfelt. Merlin wished that he could let go of prudence and tell Arthur how beautiful magic was, how wonderful, as in full of wonders that would gladden any heart.

He was sure that if the time and place were right, if he wasn't influenced by the King, Arthur would come to see how mistaken his views were. How his passively abiding by his father's rules was wrong. And then he'd be just perfect. Just the way he looked in this moment. Even perfect for Merlin.

That was wishful thinking though.

For now though he let Arthur be and look as happy as he did. “The stars are doing me a favour tonight.” He levelled his head to Merlin's and slid an inch closer. “Shining so bright and lending a hand so maybe I have a chance tonight.”

A gentle hand cupped Merlin's chin, forcing him too look into Arthur's eyes. All colour had been leached from Arthur's face thanks to the silver moonlight but even so there was no mistaking the banked fire in his eyes.

Even as Merlin gazed, the face before him twisted in a wry but hopeful smile. Unable to help it, Merlin dimpled back at him, stomach flip flopping.

Arthur's own smile deepened and he bent forwards to press a kiss to Merlin's lips.

The first touch was soft, lips stroking lips. Arthur nibbled at every inch of Merlin's mouth, one of his hands travelling round to cradle the back of his head, pulling them bodily together.

Merlin, for his part, nipped right back at Arthur's pouty upper lip, his tongue flicking and poking at the seam, till Arthur's mouth opened and their tongues met, joining in the same wet space.

As their kiss deepened Arthur's free hand cradled Merlin's cheek; he tangled one hand in the back of Merlin's hair, pulling his head back, angling it to his specifications.

Mouth opening around Arthur's, Merlin gasped into it. Arthur's tongue probed deep into his mouth and in answer Merlin sucked on it.

His arm dropping to Merlin's waist, his eyes flaring as they looked up close into Merlin's, Arthur gave a throaty cry.

The glint of lust and softness in Arthur's eyes forced air from Merlin's lungs in ever sharpening gusts. Something inside Merlin shifted, turning everything Merlin knew about his world upside down. His universe was tipping off its axis and hurtling through space in a bizarre dimension he wasn't sure he understood.

He only knew that he liked what was going on. He didn't want it to end. This moment was just so
perfect he wanted it to go on. And on.

He was not in control of his emotions or rather spurred by them and not in touch with his rational brain.

So, in short, he only knew he was throwing his head back to allow Arthur's lips to slide towards his neck.

Arthur was biting and sucking, careful not to leave marks.


Arthur drew back. His mouth was red for all the kissing they'd done and his eyes were this side of too bright. “At the risk of sounding redundant after what we've---” Arthur gesticulated with one hand as he wiped wet mouth with the other. “--done here, but I like you. And I need to make sure we're on the same page.” Arthur gave him a long searching look. “What I want now is you. I want you. I want you in my bed tonight. Will you--” Arthur blushed -- "share it with me?"

Merlin didn't stop to ask himself whether accepting Arthur's pass would go against the Selection rules or not. He viewed himself as outside of them – it -- anyway.

He didn't even bother to decide whether Arthur was breaking them himself or not.

The Selection had been created to ensure that Arthur could choose a partner of his liking. Sex was certainly involved in that choice. Arthur was surely meant to look for sexual compatibility in his prospective future consort.

Yet he wasn't probably supposed to actually bed someone he'd then reject as the process continued. There were so many issues with that and it could be scandal fodder.

Merlin wasn't sure whether Arthur was doing what he was meant to or saying the hell with everything and acting on instinct.

That consideration lay at the bottom of Merlin's list of priorities. To be honest, it didn't even make it on that list.

Something else should have mattered too: Merlin was envisaging going with the flow of this fantastic feeling he was experiencing. He was seriously thinking of having sex with Arthur, aka someone who didn't know Merlin had magic. Someone who'd probably not like his magic.

He couldn't come out and admit the truth though. He couldn't risk his head for a night with someone, however much he was anticipating it.

But he couldn't say no to Arthur and see him go all grim and proper as he most certainly would if he thought himself rejected.

Somewhere deep down Merlin knew that what he was doing was wrong, that he was lying, and was going to do so with his body, but he wanted Arthur too. He couldn't stop from taking him up on his offer.

Arthur had been lovely and nice and he'd made Merlin's heart go a little wild. It hadn't happened in a long time and Merlin was tired of being prudent. He was young and he wanted to be rash. Not think about this. Not at all.

He edged forward on the bench and cupped Arthur's cheek. He pressed his lips against Arthur's.
was meant to be a quick kiss but it lasted a while, tongues connecting, Arthur tugging him forwards by the collar of a shirt that had been meant to be Merlin's nicest but wasn't anymore thanks to Arthur's creasing.

Merlin wrenched his lips from Arthur's and pushed him away with a shaky hand. “Yes,” he said, raggedly. “Find us a place and yes.”

“I thought you'd be okay with doing it here,” deadpanned Arthur.

Merlin had a quick look around the premises. The night was splendid. It could have been summer it was so fine, just a breeze lifting the dust from off the ground.

But the bench wasn't big enough for comfort. They couldn't lie back and enjoy. At most they could get each other off. A little awkwardly. Well, this was a gift-horses scenario, right? He guessed he could make do. “All right. How do you want to--”

Arthur giggled. Really and truly did so, burying his head in Merlin's neck, his shoulders shaking. Merlin only belatedly understood that he had been baited, taken the mickey out of. “Idiot.” Merlin thwacked Arthur in the side. Doing it wasn't so difficult. His arms were basically around him anyway. “You're one big stupid oaf.”

Arthur was smiling against his neck, putting kisses under his jaw. “This is a big palace. So many rooms. I can't believe you thought I couldn't find us a nook.”

“Aren't most rooms part of tourist visits trails or something?”

“Yes,” Arthur said, touching his lips to Merlin's jaw and sucking. “But there are rooms the public has no access to. Not state rooms, but serviceable rooms. What do you say?”

“And here I thought we were going to do it on Anne Boleyn's bed.”

Arthur's nose brushed against Merlin's neck. “Would you have liked that?”

Merlin may not have had much schooling but he knew the poor woman had died at the hands of a king she'd married. “No, no, I really wouldn't.”

Wearing a smile Merlin could feel against his skin, Arthur kissed his chin. “Then you're in luck. We're only getting a plain bed.”

“What are we waiting for then?”

“I don't really know because I'm getting hard here and I want nothing but to be naked with you.”

The mental image fired Merlin into getting up, towing Arthur after him.

Once they'd stolen back inside, it was Arthur who led the way though. He knew the grounds while Merlin didn't. Merlin trusting Arthur to lead the way would get them somewhere private faster.

For as long as they were crossing the palace's hallways, they didn't touch. They didn't hold hands or kiss or even brush fingers. Arthur had even adjusted his tie and smoothed the creases showing on his suit.

Gait quick and assured, he walked ahead as if he had nothing like a night of sex on the mind. From the outside he looked as cool as a cucumber, proper, formal.

Merlin was trying to be as nonchalant as Arthur was, though he wasn't sure he was completely
succeeding. He wasn't cut out for dissimulating like this, presenting a smooth façade.

But he was giving it a go for Arthur's sake. At least he wasn't giving off any 'I'm going to secrete myself away to do the nasty' vibes. Most probably.

Merlin could almost confidently wager that if you had had a look at them from the outside you wouldn't have been able to tell what they were up to.

Not unless you could put your fingers to Merlin's pulse point and know it was racing. Not unless you were in his shoes and could feel the buzz playing under his skin. Not unless you were Merlin and you could experience what he was experiencing. The pre-sex jitters.

Their trip to the first available room didn't last long. Arthur showed Merlin into one opening at the end of a deserted corridor and locked the door behind him.

He smiled goofily, a little manically, at him, grabbed Merlin by the waist, and put a soft kiss to Merlin's cheek. “Told you I had a place,” he said, flattening his palm against Merlin's chest and pushing his jacket aside.

It fell behind Merlin with a soft sound of fabric rustling.

Arthur kissed him. A moment later Merlin's mouth had opened against his. Arthur's hands were busy kneading his sides, undoing his belt, tucking his shirt off and skittering up Merlin's spine to settle once again at the small of his back.

Merlin's breath caught as Arthur moved to kiss down the side of his neck, opening his shirt's top buttons to get better access. “I've fantasised about you,” Arthur told him. “I've been thinking about you all the time. You're just so, so--”

Whatever Merlin was Arthur didn't seem to be able to say. He just kept staring out of unfocused eyes that gave him an addled expression, brushing his mouth against every inch of skin of Merlin's that was bare to the touch.

Merlin himself was too mellow to press for Arthur to cross the Ts. He was too much on a high to. Besides, what did it matter what Arthur had fantasised about? This was here and now.

And now Merlin wanted this moment to happen. Words were too distracting and brought him back to a reality he wanted no part of.

Tomorrow he'd wake and he'd have to put all this behind him. But for now he could have this and he wanted to enjoy it. Him. Arthur. He wanted him so much. There was so much about him that Merlin was so fond of. Most of all he wanted to express that by way of touch.

That was when it really sank in that nothing stood in the way of his doing so. That he could do more than ogle or try to divine the breadth of Arthur's shoulders from beneath the layers of clothes. He could touch. So he did.

He palmed Arthur's pecs and ran his hands down his arms. He slid his hands under Arthur's jacket and tugged his dress shirt out of his trousers. His palms slid up under it to find the warmth of his skin.

The first time his hands felt Arthur's flesh he felt the thrill of it down to his marrow.

Arthur's stomach was ridged with muscle but not so impossibly toned as to not allow for softer and more vulnerable spots.
Merlin tried to map them all with his touch. At the same time as he did this, he felt Arthur's hands under his own shirt, leaving a trail of goose flesh on his stomach and then up his chest.

While his hands were wandering, Arthur sucked on his earlobe, an easy find considering the size of Merlin's ears, and down his neck, his face buried itself into Merlin's shoulder as he sucked on his neck affectionately.

Merlin's breath quickened. Vibrations stirred under his skin. He slid even closer to Arthur, so he could see how his eyes went wide and sense how his breathing got shallow and rapid.

Before tilting his head he stared at Arthur's mouth once more, probably signalling his intention. “I'm going to kiss you again, Your Highness.”

"Merlin," Arthur said, his pupils growing larger and engulfing the blue. “If you don't I'm going to be severely put out.

Merlin ran a knuckle down Arthur's face, saying, "Then I will."

Not to belie his words he kissed Arthur again. Arthur sank into it immediately, opening his mouth to Merlin's.

Unlike before it was rougher, harder, Arthur's playing on Merlin's lip, his hand spread out across the side of Merlin's face. Arthur's tongue was in his mouth, plunging in deep, taking and taking and Merlin was so fine with it he wanted to get things to progress.

He ripped his mouth away, saying, “Bed, please now.”

Panting, Arthur kicked his shoes off, then his jacket and shirt.

More naked than before he once again walked into Merlin's arms only this time he did so to be in a range that would allow him to strip him.

At first Merlin was too engrossed in his own need to realise – and Arthur's knuckles brushing across his crotch didn't help – that Arthur had undone his shirt to the last button and pushed it off.

He had been made too silly by the promise of sex to get that all that remained between Merlin and upper body nudity was the lone white tee he'd worn under his more formal shirt.

But then he did see.

“Stop!” Merlin said, wheezing, voice rising with the fear that suddenly crashed on him. Fear of being discovered. Fear of Arthur hating him when the discovery took place. “I want to do it with my shirt on.”

Arthur cocked an eyebrow. “Is that a kink of yours?”

“Can't a man have one?”

Merlin thought Arthur would question him, ask him why he waned to have partially clothed sex. He did see a shadow of doubt cross his features and that was when he bolstered himself for the worst. But as soon as it had appeared that shadow lifted. “Okay, all right. Would you like me too keep my clothes on too or?” He flailed his hands

Merlin laughed in relief. “No, I'd rather watch you strip.”

Arthur's grin was lewd and mischievous, complicit and self-deprecating all at once. He committed to
giving a show, taking off his remaining garments one by one and ever so slowly, until even the fear Merlin had just experienced wasn't enough of a dampener.

Merlin's cock rose between his legs, hardening the longer Arthur watched him pointedly, the confines of his trousers becoming too much of a cage for him to keep them on.

As Arthur shucked off his boxers, Merlin decided to do the same by his trousers and briefs.

He'd barely hopped off the latter, when Arthur practically charged him, propelling him towards the bed and onto it, before landing on top of him. His eyes were laughing when, head tilted, he said, “Hello.”

Merlin chuckled against his mouth. He moved his hands up and down Arthur's back and over his arse. “Are you making my cock's acquaintance?”

Arthur propped himself on his elbow and cupped Merlin's prick, holding it against his belly. “You could say I am, yeah. I've been newly introduced.”

So saying Arthur slid farther down the bed until he was level with Merlin's chest. "Can I roll your shirt up a bit?"


Arthur pushed Merlin's shirt up to reveal a bit of his torso from his pectorals down.

Gliding his fingers along his skin, he brushed parted lips down it, his mouth against Merlin's ribs, forming kisses against the hollows that planed down into his belly.

Merlin's breathing became harsher when the sound of Arthur's lips putting kisses to his lower body filled the room.

Some of those kisses landed on his tummy, some on his hips, most of them fell just a little shy of his ever reddening cock.

Arthur took his mouth away from the hollow of Merlin's jutting and bony hip. "I want to suck your cock, Merlin, can I?"

“God, you even need to ask?”

Arthur's chin scraped a patch across Merlin's hip, stubble reddening the skin. “I'm always polite. I'm a prince, aren't I?

Arthur sucked a bruise on the bone, Merlin hips arching off the mattress, cock bouncing obscenely. “There's being polite and then there's being a tease, sir.”

“Oh, now he remembers the proper forms of address,” Arthur said, flicking Merlin a look that was a lot of things at once: amused, sweet, challenging, proud, confident, aggravating, wary.

Merlin would have retorted. It just in his nature to, but Arthur put a kiss to the tip of his cock right when Merlin would have. And then he sucked on it, taking the littlest inch in his mouth.

That silenced Merlin.

Instead of being vocal, Merlin clenched his hand in Arthur's hair and he hissed through his teeth. “Fuck, that's wet.”
Arthur released his cock with a wet plop. “That's called saliva, Merlin.”

Merlin was sure they'd engage in some sort of diatribe but Arthur went back to work without interjecting a word more; wetting up his dick, fitting his tongue against Merlin's slit until Merlin gave in, not caring what he looked like anymore.

He alternately writhed, lips lifting, or lay there open-mouthed and gasping, breath short, heart beating so fast Merlin believed it could crash.

Arthur slowly licked around the head of Merlin's cock, let it gradually fill his mouth.

In direct response Merlin found that he had thrown his head back, his throat bare and arched in sharp a curve that made his Adam's apple stand out, his lips open in a cry that didn't come.

He must have bucked and gagged Arthur into he bargain for Arthur drew back and released Merlin.

Merlin cursed.

But Arthur wasn't done. He lapped his tongue around the length of him, swirling it down the fat of Merlin's cock in a spiralling fashion, fluttering along a vein, touching a spot connected with what looked to be all of Merlin's nerve endings. Merlin had to bite his fist so as not to shout.

Then Arthur covered the head with his mouth and sucked him as deep as he could and Merlin's pursuit of restraint went out the window. He might have shouted but at the very least he grunted out loud.

He surely lost control, the muscles of his stomach shivering. His movements convulsive, he found his legs under him and fucked upwards to the point Arthur had to alter his grip on Merlin's hip and push him back down to stop him gagging him.

Merlin back under control, Arthur kept pulling on his cock with his mouth, continuing to pleasure him.

The ache of it was so beautiful and sharp Merlin couldn't contain it. He thought he'd disintegrate in a pool of nothing.

Warmth seeped inside him and his orgasm came from a place deep down, the tightness in him unravelling like a gush of hot water.

He spilled and spilled till he felt like a boneless rag, his breath sharp and fast.

Merlin had barely recovered, when Arthur turned him and half mounted him from the side, his cock poking Merlin’s backside, its tip wet.

His breathing was as ragged as Merlin's and his body felt as hot as a furnace. Low and guttural, hips getting away from him till the moist, dull head of his cock poked Merlin's hole, he said, “Please. Please.”

Arthur had an arm round him, a leg topping his. He was shaking in place, his fingers curling and uncurling on Merlin's stomach. “Merlin,” Arthur breathed in his ear, pulling at his hair, so Merlin would turn his face around.

Merlin did, caught Arthur's mouth with his, the kiss all tongue and shared breath. “What you waiting for?” he asked.
Arthur sprang into action. Barely leaving the bed, he managed to find lube and a condom in his trousers pocket.

With them on their sides, he opened Merlin up as best as he could, his fingers feeling blunt and thick inside Merlin. “Let me,” he said, his voice like gravel. “Let me.”

Merlin pushed one of his thighs upwards, widening his stance. He took a deep breath, released it, face probably going as red as a ripe tomato.

And all the while Arthur scissored his fingers and moved them in and out of Merlin, causing Merlin's breath to catch when one of them was curled just right.

Merlin leant his head against the crook of Arthur's arm and shoulder, little breaths pushed out of him as Arthur put his fingers inside him, jabbing and stroking. His fingers weren't that thick, so he slid a third one inside Merlin, to prepare him more properly.

Merlin thought he was riding the edge of a fast approaching meltdown, his guts feeling heavy, the small hairs on his skin raising, his heart beating in his throat. Maybe his pulse jumping was even showing in his neck. His cock stirred and twitched and started filling once more. Grew to half mast at least.

Arthur crooked his fingers inside him and Merlin bucked and gasped, vision whitening. Christ, he thought he might possibly come dry.

“You are so hot,” Arthur murmured, before pulling his fingers out. “I'm going to be inside of you,” he said wonderingly. “I'm-- Merlin I--”

Arthur breathed out and placed an open kiss against Merlin’s nape. His hard, hot prick nudged between his cheeks. More kisses were scattered across the top of Merlin's back where his shirt's collar rode low. “God, Merlin, you don't really know, do you?”

He pulled Merlin's thigh higher up still, so it fully bent at the knee.

Arthur’s stomach, damp with sweat, pushed against his lower back, which was free of Merlin's rolled up shirt, just as his muscles jerked while he checked the now random pattern of his breathing. “Do you have any idea what you do to me,” he said, a little incoherently, the question so rhetorical it didn't need to be answered. “Do you?”

There was fiddling behind Merlin. That was probably the condom being ripped out of its packet and Arthur putting it on.

When he was done with that, Arthur's hand skimmed down Merlin's tender cock, even as he dragged Merlin back into him and into his helpless thrust.

When Arthur slipped inside him Merlin arched his back, grunting. It both hurt, the stretch burning its way up his nerve endings, and gave him pleasure.

Inch by inch Arthur filled him, giving him time to adjust. Arthur was long enough and thick enough to stimulate him properly so that was good. Something Merlin tried to get more of.

He clutched around him, making Arthur groan and moan. He pushed back and clamped on him.

Creating friction, Arthur retreated an inch, then thrust upwards, hitting Merlin's prostate on his first try.
His initial slow, steady and firm strokes felt huge to Merlin, earth shattering, ground breaking, remaking him into a new mould.

His breath hitched in an effort to contain a moan, a moan that was very much about how overcome by pleasure Merlin was.

It was in every part of his brain, his body, down the very centre of him. God, it wasn't supposed to be this good, this deliciously perfect. Merlin wasn't supposed to love Arthur's body so, but he did. It was just perfection. A thing of beauty that could move him by virtue of being.

Cock throbbing between his legs, Merlin keened. Firm hands clutched at his waist, almost painful, then went round him more properly for a full body hug.

Arthur's strokes were strong and powerful. Deep.

Their rhythm matching the cadence of Arthur's sobs, Merlin sucked in a series of sharp breaths. He pressed against Arthur, arched into him, shortening the distance between their bodies.

The more they moved the more Merlin's pleasure spiked and bloomed.

Too fare gone to care about being restrained, not showing Arthur how into this he was, Merlin drew him deeper inside him, clutched his thigh for support while his other hand went to his prick.

Biting down on the tendon running from Merlin's shoulder to his neck, lapping at it and drooling on his shirt, Arthur let his hips do the work for him.

He thrust and pulled back, slammed and retreated, his breaths sounding short in Merlin's ears, his nose nudging Merlin shoulder, his fringe tickling Merlin's skin.

Likely wanting to bring Merlin off, Arthur slid an arm round and found Merlin's hand on his cock. He joined their fingers together and began to jack Merlin off. “God I love it. That you're hard for me again. I love you.”

Arthur seemed to go wild then; started to go hard on Merlin in a frantic back and forth that was all about how his cock dragged and ploughed over Merlin's resistance. Again and again, he brought his hips forward, circling them and hitching them.

Merlin's body seized anew, so hard he was afraid he'd break him this time. And break he did, or almost, as a brand new orgasm was ripped out of him, cock only leaking a few ropey drops that soon ran out.

As much as Merlin was done, Arthur wasn't.

He rolled Merlin onto his back, leaning over him, losing their connection, but entering him again as fast as thought. He pumped his hips in a jerky rhythm twice or thrice more and then froze, even his grunts silenced, biting on a breath he didn't release.

And then Arthur just slumped atop him, sucking the damp, salty skin of his neck. He laughed gently, and still nuzzling, purred, “So?”

Merlin softened in his arms, smiling into the pillow. “So?”

“No comments?”

“No, not particularly,” Merlin said, closing his eyes and Eskimo kissing his pillow. “I think I'm all
okay now.”

Now that he was soft Arthur's cock slipped out of him. “Okay, just okay?”

Merlin's exhale was shaky he was so tired, “Would satisfactory do?”

Arthur turned him round bodily and slid up to him, his arms enfolding Merlin. His eyes were fully open but slow, a little lethargic, full of something like awe.

Arthur's smile was just as soft as the silly expression in his eyes, the mad twinkling in them that made them look like a spring sky. “Don't you want to have another round just this minute?” Arthur took Merlin's hands in his and locked their fingers together. “Don't you want to fuck me stupid?”

Merlin's breath stopped in his chest but he made himself say, “No need of that. You're stupid enough on your own.”

Shit, he couldn't be, could he? His subconscious wasn't falling for Arthur Pendragon just because he was sweet, had a body Merlin thought lovely, and fucked like a well-endowed pagan god.

He wasn't going there. Merlin was made of sterner stuff.

“What, you don't want a re-match?” Arthur's voice was still hoarse from all his previous grunting. “No re-do in a few or in the morning?”

Even though he was pleading in a persuasive tone Arthur looked as knackered as Merlin, burrowing as he was his head against the pillow.

Even so he scooted closer, rolling his forehead against Merlin's, so they were nose to nose and Merlin could see Arthur's lashes fan down. His lips formed a pout against Merlin's, pressing against them. "Hey, Merlin? What do you want to do tomorrow?"

Merlin didn't answer because he wasn't sure there could be a tomorrow.

As much as his heart was breaking in two with fondness for this man, who was displaying this new side to him, he was certain he couldn't hide his scars or his magic indefinitely. He couldn't, could he. And he couldn't commit to an answer about tomorrow.

So he kissed Arthur.

He sucked on his top lip, drawing it into his mouth, and then moved on to the his bottom one.

Arthur's s arms tightened around Merlin's waist, Arthur's strong hand rubbing little soothing circles on Merlin's taut back. “All right, I'm sort of drowsy too. We can postpone everything and do it tomorrow.”

So saying, he closed his eyes.

Once he had Arthur was fast to fall asleep, his facial muscles relaxing, his mouth opening and releasing soft snores. Pale light washing in from outside fell in creative shadows across Arthur's torso and flickers of an ashen tint mottled the lines of his body.

Like this, Arthur was really handsome. Looking sweet and dear and beautiful like a prince from a fairy tale. A hero prince who could set the world to rights.

Against his will Merlin smiled and grazed his lips before letting his own eyes fall closed.
Feeling the warmth and softness of the bed under him and the blissfulness of being very tired and perfectly sated, he gave up all conscious thought. Sleep was washing over him anyway so he let his mind drift.

It dragged him down into its warm darkness.

He didn't know how long he slept on undisturbed; he could only tell that it hadn't been long given that the room was still bathed in the relative darkness of a moon-lit night.

Arthur was snoring more loudly than before, signally a deep phase in his sleeping pattern. But it wasn't Arthur's snores that had nudged him awake.

When he heard the sound again, Merlin realised it was his mobile buzzing.

Tiredly, he scrubbed a hand down his face and climbed off the bed.

On shaky legs he padded over the spot where his clothes lay. He felt his trousers' pocket and pulled out his mobile.

The screen blinked with an in-coming text. With a design to find out who it had been that had been contacting him, he paged through his phone and found that the latest message was the third of a series.

Crap, he must have been done for not to have awaken at all despite all the vibrating his mobile must have been doing.

He would usually have been much more alert than this, even at this hour, but sex with Arthur had truly blissed him out and into complete and utter uselessness.

Merlin clicked on the last message. The number it came from was unknown but there was no doubt as to the sender. Not after reading the first few words.

“We have another one. The crow is onto us. Need your help. Meet us at the factory. E14 3DR.”

With a lump in his throat Merlin read the text a second time to commit it to his memory before deleting it. Then he flicked a glance at the calmly sleeping Arthur, then one aimed at his mobile screen.

A muffled sob was torn from his chest but then he started getting dressed. When he had everything back on but his shoes he tiptoed back to the bed.

He knew he shouldn't. He was aware of the risk of waking Arthur, but he had to. Couldn't go without this, not after what they had shared.

He could put things – events like those that had transpired that night -- behind him but that didn't mean he was so cold-hearted as to forget them.

Fetching a sigh, he stamped his lips on Arthur's forehead.

For an instant, a fleeting moment, he thought he had disrupted Arthur's sleep.

His exhale didn't come when Merlin had expected it to and his body seemed less lax than it had been but a moment before. Arthur's lashes even looked like they'd quivered, as if on the verge of lifting.

But Arthur didn't open his eyes. He didn't move at all barring that exhale that he did eventually release.
There was no reason to think Arthur would have played possum if he'd woken so Merlin could
assume that he hadn't.

His shoulders sagged in relief. He removed his lips from Arthur's forehead, combed his fringe back,
and took a step away.

He allowed himself a last look at Arthur's sleeping form.

And then he scammed
“I'm so sorry,” Mordred said, jogging to him across the dilapidated landscape of the old Isle of Dogs factory. “I swear this is the last time we resort to you with the Selection going on, but we had no other way.”

From more of a distance but equally crossing over to him, Forridel said, “Aeredian knows our plans.”

Mordred reached Merlin and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Otherwise we'd have wished you safe and away from this mess.”

“What's up?” Merlin asked, looking from Mordred to Forridel's background shape. “Something must have happened.”

“There's someone we need you to to help out of the city,” said Forridel, closing the distance between them, her raincoat fluttering behind her in the night breeze. “We're being dogged by the Section Seven élite this time, so we need your powers.”

Mordred cringed. “We want you well out of their grasp but we have no one to pit against them if worst comes to worst.”

Merlin nodded. He understood the thought process behind their asking him to be there. He wouldn't have wanted it any different himself. “Who is it and where are they?”

Forridel turned towards the relic of the old factory. “You can come out. It's safe. It's Emrys with us.”

Merlin stared out into the darkness but nothing happened; no one came out of the ruins of the old plant. The abandoned factory continued to look every bit as decrepit as it had always been.

The edifice was a pile of cement, rust, peeling paint and cracked concrete, nothing human seemingly haunting it.

The hulks of long-abandoned chimney stacks towered above the ground. The building was only lit from without by the glare of the moon reflecting off the surface of the large windows that lined the façade. Those were chambered and shattered into sharp, jagged fragments.

A large hole now gaped where formerly a solid wall must have been. Shattered bricks lay strewn over the ground on the way to what had once been the main entrance, with small shards thrown over a wider area.

A massive hole replaced a good portion of the roof, where the weather had punched it in, making it cave or working holes in the layers that had gone into constructing it.

Some of the other walls were bowing inwards, beams like jagged fangs.

The doors leading to the main factory floor hung open, the both of them rotting away from their topmost hinges.

From out of them two shadows slinked out. One remained firmly behind, hidden by a pillar of
darkness, but the other advanced.

At first Merlin couldn't make out who it was, whether man or woman, whether familiar face or stranger. But then the person continuing to prowl forwards was bathed by moonlight and Merlin recognised his features.

He looked to Mordred with alarm. “No, he's a terrorist.”

“He was a druid before,” said Mordred. His mouth was grimly set but his tone was pleading. “He was in the same group as my mentor, Aglain, before he died.”

“Yes, and then he changed his mind and tried to blow up an élite military school.” Merlin said, remembering the headlines clear as day, “which makes us all look bad. And then he allied himself to Princess Morgana. And it's very clear she doesn’t only want to kill the King but to punish anyone she can for her sufferings.”

Mordred fetched a big breath. “I know. Look, I know. But his old allegiance to my mentor still stands.”

“He's done us some good too,” Forridel interjected. “We're not in a position to pick and choose who to help.”

Merlin begged to differ. If they didn't make a choice, if they didn't align themselves with the good magic users then they'd be judged in the same way as those who stepped out of line. The criminals. “I'm not sure that's right.”

“Merlin,” Mordred said, eyes round and innocent as any boy’s, mouth thin and pale, a mirror to his worry. Mordred's looks posed a contrast that made Merlin wonder at the lives they led, the people they'd be without this conflict, without the strife Uther Pendragon had created. Mordred looked like an innocent and yet knew compromise. He could accept grim prospects most men would have baulked at without batting an eyelash. Merlin was positive he would have been different if not for Uther's war on magic. Yet things were as they were and no amount of whimsical thinking could change that. “Time is of the essence here. We lost the Section Seven men tailing us, but we don't know how long that'll hold.”

Merlin knew he had to decide. Wasting time would only get them all killed. Yet what they were proposing made him instinctively recoil. Left to himself he wouldn't have made friends with Mordred's new ally. He jiggled his leg and hummed while he tried to reconcile his morals to the situation.

Here was a man that had killed innocent soldiers who weren't Section Seven but army. You could argue they worked for the oppressors but if you started thinking that way then everybody was fair game. Every civilian who didn't raise their voice against the Pendragons would be turned into an enemy.

It wasn't as if Merlin hadn't felt any resentment against the government. Or uncaring civilians for that matter. It wasn't as if he didn't dislike people who let others think for them to the extent they were ready to condemn magic on someone's – even a crowned head's – say so. He did.

He'd had his dark moments and he was far from free of sin himself. He'd killed. He'd used violence to protect himself. He had done those things.

But if he didn't try to make a difference and choose the right path then how could he convince others that a magic user was no more dangerous than the next person?
How could he make people understand that sorcerers were no more of a freak of nature than someone who was left-handed?

How could he claim they weren't a risk to non-magical folks if in truth they were and used their powers to foster a climate of fear?

“Mordred!” Merlin said, clucking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, “you're putting me between a rock and a hard place. If I say no I condemn him. If I say yes--”

He was cut off by Ruadan himself speaking out, his burr decisive. “I can choose death in the name of my mission but at least save my daughter.”

Merlin looked into the shadows and back to the figure who'd never come out of them. He didn't know Ruadan had a daughter. But then they were all something to someone. Mostly. The silhouette wrapped in shadows had to be her. “Your daughter?”

“Yes,” said Ruadan, extending a hand back to her to urge the girl forwards. “Take her to safety and I'll--”

It all happened at once. Ruadan's daughter stepped out of the lingering darkness. A glint of something lit up the night and a shape darted from side to side at the top of the old factory building.

Merlin would have loved to be able to think it was nothing. A bird perhaps or a shadow. But he knew that the odds of that being true were very slim. Not with Forridel and Mordred swearing they had been followed until they'd briefly lost their tail.

He was perfectly aware of how unlikely that was. The more so since he'd sighted the odd luminescence just as Ruadan's daughter had shifted. It seemed like too much of a coincidence.

Especially now that the girl had come out from her hiding place, making both her and Ruadan sitting ducks.

Merlin's suspicions were confirmed in the blink of an eye.

He saw a red dot from a laser gun sight shine off the girl's white shirt.

Judging from the red dot's small jerky movements, the person wielding the weapon behind the tracking device was not a very accomplished marksman.

Though Merlin had wasted lots of time embroiled in his moral qualms, there was still plenty of it. Still time to save everyone.

Merlin reached his hand out, splaying his palm, and called forth a defensive wall, roaring, “Ámundae!”

Blue light as tall and as shimmery as a wave appeared.

The sinuous drapery of magic drew with it spouts of white, like churning crests of water topping a foaming ocean. Toppling spears of light shot forwards from the little dancing wave crests. They lifted higher and higher, silent like a hushed breath.

They were soon surrounded by a curtain of sheer magic that glowed in a pale blue display that encapsulated within it rainbow bubbles that were like spheres within spheres.

Tendrils of light coming in muted shades twined around Ruadan and Sefa, Mordred and Forridel,
melding into a coiled shield of power that shone as they watched, encasing them in a sort of protective pall that would last as long as Merlin was there – and strong enough – to incant.

Merlin shouted, “Look for shelter; go to the cars. Go!”

Ruadan shouted and waved the girls away, “Go, Sefa. Go with Forridel.”

But nobody was ready to betray the other members of their group, so they stayed.

Sefa in particular didn't want to go, for she clung to her father's arm and tried to drag him in the direction she wanted. “Not without you! Never without it.”

Ruadan looked to Mordred. “Take her to safety. Please.”

The delay caused by Sefa's hesitation allowed the sharp-shooter sitting on the roof to get his bearings again. He tried to fire.

Merlin saw the red laser beam being levelled at them again. He lifted his other hand to make sure the shot wouldn't land, that a specific protection could be raised against it, but the sound of footsteps on gravel and a voice calling out to him stopped him.

He pivoted, so he was half turned around, when he saw him. “Arthur,” he said. "You followed me."

Because Arthur was standing there, his fists balled at his sides, cords standing out in his neck. A frown sat on his brow, his lips were pushed together and turned down at the corners, and there was an expression of disgust on his face. His eyes though were wide with fear. “You lied to me.”

Merlin couldn't say he had been as honest as he might have been, but he wanted to protest Arthur's words.

He'd never so much lied as concealed the truth. He wouldn't have needed to had the world been different and a better place. He was guilty, true, and felt it deep down.

When he thought of how he'd behaved by Arthur he wanted to kick himself and do penance. He wasn't sure he'd be able to look himself in the mirror again. He was dying a little on the inside too.

The bitterness in Arthur's gaze was killing him and would never make that feeling of self-loathing he was currently experiencing go away. But there were extenuating circumstances, “Arthur, I--”

The sharp-shooter shot. Merlin whipped round again, raising his shield. The shot bounced off it and travelled back the way it had come. A muffled cry filled the night. A corpse fell off the roof.

Arthur shrugged his powerful shoulders; his eyes devoid of any light and as black as night. “And you're a killer too,” he spat out. He took in Merlin's companions, who were all frozen on the spot as they might well be, if they had, as was highly probable, recognised Arthur. “A killer and a liar.”

“I never lied to you,” Merlin said, unable to lower his defences and call down his magic so he'd look less dangerous. “Not really.”

Arthur clenched his jaw tightly. “You lied by omission then.”

“And with good reason!” Merlin shouted. Couldn't Arthur see that his hand had been forced by circumstances? He did feel guilty but there was no way he'd accept all attacks that didn't take into account the position of magic users.

Here was proof that they were hounded, attacked, killed. Special police corpses were trained to track
them down, arrest them and make them disappear. They had special permits to use weapons – like
guns and rifles – that the ordinary police wasn't allowed to carry and all that because magic users
were equated to terrorists. “They're hunting us down.”

“And with good reason,” Arthur said, using Merlin's own words, voice as cold as a razor blade.
“You think I don't know who that man is?” Arthur tipped his chin at Ruadan. “You think I don't
know who your pal is? What he's done?”

Merlin had a reply to that but Ruadan fought him to it. “I'm a freedom fighter!”

Arthur twisted his body so he was looking mainly at Ruadan and widened his stance. “You killed a
bunch of army recruits, green lads who'd never done anyone any harm. You're an ally of my sister's,
who shares the same creed as you regarding innocents. Great freedom fighter you are.”

“That choice wasn't an easy one to make!” Ruadan said, with as much vitriol in his tone as Arthur
had laced his with. “You have to fight fire with fire and hate with hate or you'll always be on the
losing side. That's something Princess Morgana taught me.”

Arthur wasn't listening to Ruadan's diatribe anymore though he winced at the mention of his sister.
He once again angled himself towards Merlin. His lower lip was sticking out before he said, “So that
was the plan. Fight hate with hate, right? Enter the Selection, befriend me--” A shiver ran down
Arthur. His throat moved up and down once, twice. “Get me in a vulnerable position, I expect.” The
look Arthur was giving him was filthy, full of hatred. “And then kill me.”

Merlin dropped one of his hands, while still maintaining the shield. “No!” He shouted that at the top
of his lungs and putting everything he had in it. The mere thought Arthur would think him capable of
that left him bleeding open, seeping all his strength. Even his airy magic wall became flimsier and
less resistant to attacks.

He'd perhaps taken Arthur for granted. Thought of his blooming affection as a new given in his life.
Now that it had been taken from him Merlin felt like he'd been gutted and left with nothing.

The coldness in Arthur's eyes was ripping his heart to shreds.

He wanted to curl into a ball and pull at his hair. He wanted to drown in self pity and find the will to
cry. He wanted to re-wind time and re-do things.

He wished he could have Arthur's affection back, see the friendship shining in his eyes once more.
He longed to go back to Arthur's arms and find himself in his bed so he could kiss him with all he
had and lie with him once more. He was certain he could prove Arthur wrong with his body.

His body had never lied.

Something clogged his throat like a ragged lump that wouldn't go away.

He hiccuped and gasped for breaths between muted sobs. He was feeling sick with this. His body
hurting from the anguish Arthur's words and Arthur's cold looks had caused him.

He guessed there was just one explanation for why he was hurting so, why he was mourning
Arthur's friendship, companionship and trust. Mourning the night they'd had together.

It was because Merlin, like the idiot he was, had allowed himself to go with the flow. He'd let
himself grow close to Arthur and know him. He was feeling like he'd lost a chunk of his heart
because he had.
Without knowing it or deciding it was okay to, that he'd be safe, he'd gone and fallen in love with Arthur Pendragon.

The irony wasn't lost on Merlin. For as long as Arthur was kind to him Merlin hadn't appreciated it.

At first he'd been thinking of him as someone to be wary of. Then Arthur had grown on Merlin even though Merlin had always had a clear sight of his goals and future.

He'd thought Arthur wasn't part of them or it. His future was the fight for magic. But he'd let Arthur past his defences. He'd let him in and now he was in love with him. Right on time for Arthur to hate him.

The pain of it pummelled him from every direction. “What happened happened in spite of what I am. Because I wanted it to.”

“Sorry,” said Arthur, his mouth thinning in contempt. “I don't believe in coincidences.”

Merlin's eyes widened for the hurt. “You think I... what?

“You know what I think,” Arthur answered, in a terribly level voice that gutted Merlin more than a shout would have. “That you never loved me. That you never even liked me.” There was no inflection to it. No anger. Merlin would have preferred either or both to this lack of interest. “And more. Not hard to guess.”

“I would never do that to anyone,” Merlin said in a rising voice that got Mordred looking at him as if he'd grown two heads. “And if I'd wanted to kill you I wouldn't have needed to sleep with you.”

Mordred's eyes shone with understanding.

Forridel used the pause to decamp; she looped an arm around Sefa and led her to the MPV she'd parked at the fringes of the stretch of industrial wasteland the old factory still stood upon. The vehicle drove off before Arthur answered.

“It would surely have made your job easier,” said Arthur.

Merlin swallowed his resentment at being thought capable of what Arthur had accused him of. Using his body to fool someone only to better off them. “I could have killed you from afar easy. A state visit. A speech given at a charity venue. I could have walked within range, cast a black magic spell and you'd be dead. If I'd wanted to, I wouldn't even have needed to be in the same room as you.”

“You that powerful?” asked Arthur sarcastically, challengingly.

“Yes,” said Merlin, holding his head higher as he acknowledged all that he was and that he'd always played down. “So don't give me that.”

“You can't tell me you were in the competition for me,” Arthur snorted out loud. “I was a fool to think you were. You can't tell me you were like the others and wanted 'me'.” He banged a fist against his own chest. “So what were you doing? Tell me, Merlin, why were you in the Selection at all if not for some nefarious purpose?”

Merlin opened his mouth to explain when a roaring crash fended the air. Four armoured vehicles rolled into view, halting to a screech of tyres. Five Section Seven men jumped out of each vehicle and quickly pulled out their weapons and equipment.

Merlin's eyes widened and he placed himself before Mordred and Ruadan, one hand out, his magic
still fostering the enchanted wall protecting their rear. “You called them. You called Section Seven!”

Betrayal stung bitter in Merlin’s soul and hurt like an open wound. Thinking that Arthur now hated him so much that he'd handed him to Section Seven was like a gut-stabbing pain. How could he have misjudged Arthur so? “You sold us to death mongers.”

Arthur's face crumpled, his mouth opened, and he said, “No, I, no--”

Merlin had no time left for him. He had magic users to protect. Yes, even Ruadan.

The Section Seven men were scattering into formation, wedges of them formed, mixed, and re-formed, as perfect as shapes cut out of a miniature theatre playing soldiers.

As soon as they were grouped they hoisted their shields. A few officers fell on their knees, using them as a prop to aim their weapons at Merlin, Mordred and Ruadan. They were providing their colleagues with cover this way.

Some others held up their batons, ready to jab them at any sorcerer they could spot.

More men poured out another on-coming vehicle. They hopped off of it, holding in check snarling and snapping dogs straining on their leashes.

They advanced relentlessly on Merlin and the others, formed in two flanks, a tall man in their wings, marching to their beat.

He wore a dark overcoat and his hair glinted steely grey in the moonlight. Merlin had never had the displeasure of seeing him in person but he knew very well who the man was. It was The Crow: Aeredian.

Aeredian stopped a few yards away from Merlin and raised a hand, holding the attack that was about to happen

Merlin understood the tactic.

Aeredian was looking to wreak havoc in their minds for psychological effect, allowing them to think they had time to organise their response and run away. It wasn’t true.

Merlin had seen too many reports about the man's victories against the 'riots' began by magic users, tales of his successes and strategy, to be fooled.

He, Mordred and Ruadan dropped back step by step, keeping a margin of about twenty yards between themselves and the Section Seven men.

Mordred's eyes were already glowing fierily and while Ruadan's weren't Merlin knew he was poised for attack as well.

There was nothing else they could do.

With at least one sniper cutting off their retreat and Aeredian's people in front there was no other way out of this other than ploughing right past every single Section Seven man they were facing.

Aeredian leered at Merlin. “Get them,” he said to his men. “I don't care how you do it. Just get them for me.”

Arthur stepped in. “I'm sorry but that doesn't seem legal to me. You surely have some protocol to abide to. You can negotiate with them. Get them to stand down.”
Aeredian's scoffing wasn't unpredictable. “You don't understand, Your Highness. We are at war with magic users. We'll be using any means necessary to blot out the plague that they are.”


Aeredian wasn't the kind of man to let the law thwart him, Merlin was aware. Arthur could argue for the value of upholding the current jurisdiction, which was basically one giant loophole created to discriminate magical people, as much as he wanted – it'd probably help him sleep at night – but Aeredian wouldn't be stopped.

Confirmation came when The Crow raised his hand and said, “Secure the scum rats.”

Arthur shouted.

The Section Seven men put on their gas masks and reached for the tear gas canisters that were part of their gear. They dropped the pellets and a mist was released. A cloud of fumes hung in the air, acrid smoke wafting towards Merlin and his friends.

As soon as it hit, the gas made Merlin nauseous. It burnt his lungs and nostrils and made his vision swim. But before it could get worse Mordred started incanting.

A red mist enveloped the tear gas one and snuffed it out.

“Shoot them!” Aeredian ordered.

Shots volleyed towards them. A bullet whistled past Merlin's temple. Right, the party had truly started.

With the bullets rattling high around them, Merlin summoned a shield similar to the one he'd conjured to guard his rear.

Now that Merlin's magic protection was in place, the bullets started ricocheting off it like hail, some even hitting the Section Seven men, or glancing off other surfaces, bursting into a series of hollow echoes.

As this happened, Merlin spared Arthur a glance. Though he'd been betrayed and sold to a man Merlin saw as the devil incarnate, he couldn't let Arthur be hurt.

He didn't know why he felt this way, couldn't explain it to himself, but his magic still forced Arthur away, sucking him into a protective bauble that couldn't be pierced by bullets or magic.

Once trammelled by the bauble, he pummelled his fists at it but Merlin wasn't letting him out any time soon.

Meanwhile, with some of his men falling to Merlin's counter-attack, Aeredian blasted words into his walkie-talkie and then sought cover.

Boots thudded somewhere behind Merlin, Mordred and Ruadan's position. Shadows darted this way and that, hiding behind cement pillars and the hulking shapes dotted around the scrapyard that had become the ground encircling the factory building.

More shots came from its roof, raining on the first magic wall Merlin had erected. Merlin craned his neck to see.

Section Seven men were crouching at positions along the top of the roof and firing down at the area
corresponding to the entrance, where Merlin and his were.

In short they were surrounded.

Merlin didn't want to think about how bad things were. If he let fear eat at him they wouldn't get out of this alive.

He'd got out of scrapes that were almost as bad as this one and lived to tell the tale. So he could do it again. He could do it even if he was tiring. Even if holding two shields up (and the bubble protecting Arthur) was leeching his strength, eating at his life-line.

Sweat was pouring down his face in rivers; his legs were like a flag in the wind, getting wobbly and weak. His whole body was going away from him, the drain on his magic required by such potent spells heavy and burdensome.

Merlin wanted to stay upright, present a strong front, but it was a hard fight.

His palms were wet, his heart was pounding out of his chest and he could barely breathe now. He hoped it wouldn't show. That he could still drive the fear of God into those Section Seven Men.

Some were indeed cowering, retreating, falling back. But Aeredian barking orders put a stop to that.

The remaining Section Seven men marched relentlessly forward, shooting directly against Merlin’s magic wall, firing several rounds that ricocheted around and occasionally drilled holes into the fabric of Merlin’s gossamer protection shield.

Mordred and Ruadan attempted to patch it up with their own spells but even combined their power was not as strong as Merlin's. The patches gave like fabric that went threadbare, holes replacing them as soon as they were created.

“It won't hold forever!” Ruadan roared. “We must do something.”

“There's surely something we can do,” said Mordred, clearly trying to sound calm and reasonable. “We have Emrys.”

“I respect the prophecies as much as the next man,” Ruadan told Mordred, while he held off a surprise attack that took place at the margins of their magic shield wall, “but take a look at him. He's trembling, he looks like a corpse. He can't do this all night.”

“Then you have little idea of who Merlin is,” said Mordred. “He's--”

Merlin cut Mordred off. At other times he would have been politer, but now he had no time to beat around the bush. “Ruadan is right. I'm tiring.” Well, if his rough voice wasn't telling them as much, his admission would. “We can't stay here.”

“We only need a plan.” Mordred gave him a hopeful smile.

“I have one,” Merlin said, ignoring both Mordred’s hopeful look and Ruadan's wary one. “I'll lower the shields, the both of them.”

“You can't!” said Mordred. “We'll be riddled by bullet holes before you can peep.”

“Not necessarily,” said Merlin, his breath coming fast with the strain coming from using so much magic all at once. “Not if we use a diversion. And I mean to. Just dart towards Mordred's car quick enough and you'll be able to get away from here.”
“I'm fine with that,” said Ruadan, launching a spell that made an assault rifle backfire in the hands of its wielder. “It could work.”

“What about you?” said Mordred. “You're implying we should leave you behind.”

Merlin hinted at a smile. “I'm stronger than you and you know it.” He paused to play his cards just right. He even went puppy eyed to make sure Mordred would yield to persuasion. “Trust me.”

Mordred gnawed on his lip, looking conflicted. Yet as a man of the Resistance he was quick to think and quick to come to decisions. You couldn't not be when you did what they did. “All right. But you know where to find me... after.”

Merlin was nodding when Mordred wrapped a hand around his forearm. “It's always an honour, Emrys.”

Merlin couldn't do anything but mirror Mordred's pose and bite back the tears that wanted to gush out. He couldn't let them so he grinned as toothily as he had when he was seven and stolen all the jam. “Now go before they one-up us.”

Mordred released a sigh and nodded, before letting go of Merlin. Ruadan tilted his head to signal he was ready.

They both prepared to sprint.

Merlin let himself stumble to his knees and placed a hand on the ground. He lowered all shields barring the air bauble encasing Arthur, and shouted, “Ábife brytengrúnd!”

Mordred and Ruadan hared off towards Mordred's car.

Merlin found his magic at the core of him and followed it back to its source, its tie with nature.

There were coils and tendrils of his magic linked to the earth's own. He rattled and poked at those so they sparked and fired. In response the earth started shaking.

The ground opened up in places. The few intact windows back at the factory shattered. One of Aeredian's trained goons fell from its roof, crying out on the way to his demise.

It didn’t matter. The sound was muffled out by other and more portentous noises. The air roared. Crevices run from one side of the forecourt opening up before the old industrial plant to the other.

Crevasses engulfed Merlin's enemies and their weapons, hurling them into oblivion. The sky shrieked with such violence Merlin feared he'd torn the canvas of it.

Mortar debris fell thick around him; dense clouds darkened the fair, luminous night. Loud thunder came from up in the sky even though it sounded like a lament emitted by the bowels of the earth.

The Section Seven men were scattering and Merlin let hope colour his thoughts.

But then a bullet grazed his neck. The pinprick of pain was nothing but added to the drain on his energy all his incantations had wrought it took its toll.

A moment of inattention on Merlin's part was enough for those of Section Seven officers that still had their wits about them.

They leaped from their positions to engage him directly. Their shooting positions were recalibrated to hit him.
Letting go of the clump of earth he was still cradling in his palm, Merlin darted forwards, not wanting to be a static target.

But then Aeredian came clear of his men, brushing past them, leered, took aim with his dart gun, and fired.

The slug dart embedded itself in Merlin's thigh.

A wailing noise rose from Merlin's lips and tore at the night.

He fell back in a heap but that didn't matter. His soul was breaking in two. His magic was bleeding out and dying inside of him, shutting out organs, squeezing at his heart till Merlin thought it would stop. And welcome. He didn't want to live like that. He didn't.

The blackness was already coursing inside him, taking everything he'd ever been away from him. It clawed in his abdomen like a beast wanting to tear its way out of him, doubling him up, forcing his knees into his belly, and making him writhe and shake, run fiery hot.

He wrapped his arms around himself, hugging himself as tears of anguish spilled from his eyes.

The Slug's venom travelled from his guts to all his nerve endings, thousands of stabbing pinpricks making him want to shed his skin. It was like being pierced by a series of red hot splinters.

His vision blurred, and the world turned grey. He could still see the sky and the shapes looming around him, closing in, but he perceived them as if through a milky veil.

His flesh was on fire and then it began all over again. He could feel it coming. He knew he couldn't take anymore of this, he was so drained, so hopeless.

There was nothing. Nothing left. What had they done?

He rolled onto his back, nearly convulsing, his body given to shakes and jitters, thrashing. The pain was so intense that he opened his mouth, crying out like a wounded animal, “What have you done to me!”

And then Arthur danced in his field of vision. He cradled Merlin's head on his lap, swept his hair from his forehead, his thumbs under Merlin's ears as he kept him positioned.

There were tears in his eyes but he wasn't shedding them. Then he lifted his head and addressed someone else Merlin couldn't see his eyesight was failing so much. “What's the matter with him?” He ripped the dart from Merlin's thigh. “This is not a bullet,” he rolled the cartridge with the chamber containing a quarter of the dense substance it had held before Merlin's body had absorbed it. “Why is he down?

“That's a Slug,” said Aeredian, confirming what Merlin had known from the moment he was hit. “They deprive sorcerers of magic.”


“Adverse reaction,” Aeredian said in a cold voice. “Most magic users are so connected to their magic they need it to live. When you cut them off from their magic, there's no way of weaning them off it. They either become like barely human shells or die. You see how that makes arresting them easier.”

“So you're crippling them?”
“That's the only way we can drag them before a tribunal and execute them,” Aeredian said, kicking Merlin's foot. “Otherwise we wouldn't be able to hold them in custody, not the powerful ones.”

Merlin whimpered.

Arthur said, “But if they're dying even before they can be judged then you subvert all law principles.”

Aeredian chortled. “The tribunal is only a formality. Our aim is to wipe magic users from existence.”

“I don't--” Arthur began, eyes flaring. “I know they're evil but isn't that extreme?”

“No.” Aeredian pulled his normal gun from the holster that hung low at his hip. He cocked it and put his finger on the trigger. “They're filth. A stain on humanity.”

Merlin tried to prop himself up, struggling to overcome the wave of pain. He couldn't fight anymore anyway. Not without his magic. But if he had to go, if this was his moment to, then he wanted to meet it on his own terms. With a groan, he fought to sit up, rasping, “If it has t-to be t-that way, I w-want you t-to do it,” he told Arthur.

Arthur's eyes caught his. “No!” he said. “No, what. No!”

To try and convince him Merlin moved again, but a visceral stab of pain racked him, shutting everything out.

It remade him from the inside out, travelling like an arrow from organ to organ, from bone to skin. He wasn't anchored in his body anymore. He was oddly aware of his soul unmooring. He slumped. He screamed. Everything darkened.

In the sea of pitch-blackness he was in he still felt Arthur's fingers ruck up his shirt, his hands pummel his chest; he still heard Arthur say, “No, Merlin, no. You’re not dying. Merlin!”

That was the last Merlin conscious of.

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Mail On Line

The Road to Victory:

There's always a drama in The Selection.

There was when King Uther eliminated a Swedish aristocrat for whom the rules had been modified just so she could be part of the competition and there was when King' Uther's grandfather announced the results of his first go at the tradition null and void.

This edition of the Selection is no different.

During the reception for the Canadian ambassador Prince Arthur eliminated the staple and expected ten plus a surprise person.

Cenred King was accused of sabotaging another competitor and taken out of the consort ballot.
But the real surprise came two days later. With barely a breathing pause and with nineteen participants still standing, Geoffrey Monmouth, the competition's Master of the Ceremonies announced a new elimination batch. Ten more people were to go, leaving the numbers of possible future consorts down to nine.

Before we have a look at who's still in, let's consider those who are gone.

The outstanding eliminations are two. One is the Vivian Olaf's, whom most of the nation and he who writes, thought would take the competition by storm.

At first glance there seems to be no reason for this elimination since Olaf had both the pedigree and the beauty to make it. While Prince Arthur didn't seem to have made a connection to the fiery blonde, she was everything people were expecting a royal princess to be.

And yet an interview released by Cenred King suggesting a friendship between the two was enough to cast suspicion on fair Miss Olaf. Even though King never asserted Olaf was his accomplice, the stain must have been enough for the court to deem Miss Olaf's claim to Prince Arthur's hand forfeit.

More stunning was an other elimination: Guinevere Smith's. Apparently, after the accident—or should we say attack—that left her ankle sprained, Miss Smith's nerves were so shaken that she couldn't contemplate continuing. After the Hampton Court reception she released a statement purporting her will to leave The Selection.

A first in the history of the time honoured tradition, Miss Smith was quoted as saying, “I was honoured to have been accepted in the competition and so happy to meet the many outstanding people I was introduced to, chief among them, His Highness Prince Arthur.

Unfortunately, recent events have opened my mind regarding my fitness for this mode of participation.

Some soul searching has led me to believe that the best option for me would be retiring. So that is what I'm doing.

I'll be forever grateful to the King and Prince who generously allowed me to take part into this marvellous roller coaster ride that allowed me to experience a slice of life I would never have otherwise known and for the friends I made during my stay.

I'll also take a second to thank all those people at home who believed in me and saw me as an example. Nothing could be more flattering. I hope you won't be disappointed in my choice and know it's the best for me.”

After this statement we have tears in our eyes. Are your handkerchief ready to watch her official leave-taking this Saturday?

So now who's left? Well, it's nine people but some of them are more likely to end up wearing the crown than others.

Miss Sophia Tirmore is one of those candidates many would be eager to back.

She hasn't made a single faux pas, is quite beautiful, which shallowly enough is an apt quality to possess when your role is representational, and she is from a good family.

Mr Ranulph Waverley and Mr Owain Knightley are strong contenders as well and since
they've made it this far, the viewing public might consider them stronger horses to back than ever before.

If they'd just developed a rapport with the Prince we might speculate they'd make it into the finalists list.

Yet there's still one contestant who might yet surprise us all. With Cenred King known to be guilty and Miss Olaf embroiled in his machinations, Merlin Emrys' name has been cleared.

And there's quite a few items we should consider when Merlin Emrys' name is mentioned.

Despite a rocky start between the royal-commoner duo, Emrys was the one favoured by Prince Arthur to open the dance at Hampton Court.

After the first number was over Mr Emrys, continued on waltzing with the Prince under the eyes of an intrigued crowd. (If you're wondering protocol dictates the Prince change partners after each dance unless he's already chosen his affianced partner.)

While Mr Emrys certainly isn't beloved by the King and while his name was besmirched before the King scandal broke out, Emrys is the only one, aside from retiree Miss Smith, who's built a seemingly personal and somewhat consistent relationship with Prince Arthur.

We'd say he's in a prime position to become Prince Consort if we'd caught a glimpse of him since the Hampton Court reception, but nobody has, making us doubt and rendering Merlin Emrys a man of mystery.

He didn't attend the celebratory post reception breakfast – but then neither did the Prince, giving rise to rumours – and neither has he been seen since.

So what does Mr Emrys' lying low means?

Has he reached an understanding with Prince Arthur meaning he's the winner of the competition even before it is through or has he been vetoed by Buckingham Palace?

Both are distinct possibilities but it's too early too tell which one is true.

There's also a third possibility, which isn't too far-fetched. Mr Emrys may be waiting in the wings to render a public declaration similar to that of his friend and ex-fellow participant, Guinevere Smith.

This edition of the Selection seems to be even more fraught with game changing events than the one that preceded it two decades ago.

Short of some insider knowledge, there's no way of establishing where the wind is blowing.

With palace security tighter than ever before – and rumours of a Princess Morgana sighting in the South – leaks are highly unlikely.

Just like the public at home, we'll have to wait with baited breath for new developments.

The Selection is down to the wire. With only nine contestants left, Kensington Palace
empties itself of the majority of its guests. Those remaining will find it harder to stay on and will be held to the highest etiquette standards.

Join the editor board of the Daily Mail to find out what happens with next week with our Selection Live Recap!

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Merlin had a fever. He became short of breath and suffered from tremors and sweating. His skin wasn't merely hot, but like a small fire to the touch, heat searing off his body in waves, blistering him from under its surface.

Despite that he had the chills and felt cold to the core. His teeth were chattering and even locking his jaw wouldn't stop them.

In despair he tucked his hands under his arms and lay on his side on the cold concrete, forcing the trembling down. Unfortunately, it wouldn't subside. He was aware of nothing but his own throbbing head and quaking chills.

Oh and he remembered the searing pain he'd felt before going under.

Involuntary muscle contractions with paroxysms of violent shivering took him over from time to time, nearly locking all his muscles and preventing his breathing, his body stiffening with them, providing a change from the constant aching that was always everywhere at once, weakening him in slow increments.

He often found himself heaving with the effort to breathe. The pants that came out of him were short and shallow and made so much noise he was scaring himself.

The blood coursing through his veins was like liquid fire. Merlin had never been aware of it pumping through his veins as he now was. It was unnatural and even more terrifying. He was being destroyed from the inside out. He didn't like it.

Not any more than he liked the throbbing in his leg.

The skin around the dart's entry wound was puffy beneath the crust of dried blood. If Merlin strained he could see through the tear in his trousers how swollen the area was, blackening around the puckered edges that had closed around the weapon's head before Arthur had plucked it away.

He wasn't a fan of how it was pulsating.

To take his mind off the big problems, he concentrated on the small stuff next.

The matted hair stuck to his forehead bothered him. Sweat pooled in the hollows of his body, dampening his clothes, and running in slow rivulets down his chest to trickle through the smattering of hair there.

He felt moist with it on his front and damp where his back and legs pressed against the hard floor.

It was a minor annoyance distracting him from how much he hurt, how his insides were burning and how he was losing control of his mind, but it was still there.
Desperately, he reached out to try and take back the reins of his physical being. It was as if he was struggling against the current of a powerful river that had seized him in its course, hurling him towards a rapid and a sure death.

He felt himself being pulled away from his body and launched out into a bottomless void. He thrashed and cried and railed against it. But mostly he dreamed.

His dreams were odd mixtures of reality and the by-products of a fantasy turned morbid by illness.

In his dreams, much like in reality, he was steeped in darkness. Instead of lying down though he was walking down corridors meandering endlessly.

Even though he couldn’t see a thing and shouldn’t have been able to make them out, he knew there were leering figures hiding in the corners, some faceless others not, but rather looking like haunted visages covered with scars. Blood ran down their features, their eyes were hollow and socket-less, their mouths open, mocking him, jeering at him.

He tried to steer clear of the cackling monsters but couldn’t, because no walls surrounded these corridors, only deep chasms and he knew he’d fall if he stepped wrong.

In another dream he was haunted by shrieking chimeras and thin shapless monsters, whipping back and forth in a frenzy, howling at a pale white sky, while they lumbered between jutting, rising stones that seemed to want to pierce the lowering horizon.

After that dream, he startled himself awake, his heart beating so fast and hard in his chest he thought it would pierce his ribcage.

His sense of reality was dimmed when he woke – voices and sounds carrying over from his nightmare – but he thought he could tell the difference.

While his vision was blurry and everything looked distorted, walls listing, floor meeting ceiling, the bars of his prison cell twisting as if they were made of butter, there were no monsters in this reality. Just himself, four (converging) walls, bars limiting any attempt at flight, and pain.

In short he’d ended up in a place he’d always wanted to avoid: prison.

Every now and then he fell asleep again, which was both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because he could finally enjoy some respite from the pain, a curse because then he saw the monstrous faces and heard the cackling laughter.

Plus, the more he dreamed the more he lost his sense of reality. The dream-scape started taking over and he couldn’t tell the differences anymore, residual spill-overs from his nightmare clogging what he thought might be reality.

In his lucid moments he thought he saw people being shoved in the cells opposite his. He squinted, trying to make out who they were while the air shimmered and the space around him tilted and went out of focus.

At one time he thought he distinguished a battered Mordred, sporting a black eye that was swollen shut and a split lip, and Ruadan.

“You're not here,” he told vision Mordred. “I saw you escape. I need you to have made it. Saved you. You need to be safe.”

“I'm so sorry, Merlin,” Mordred said. “We have failed you in more ways than one.”
The man Merlin believed he'd identified as Ruadan, said, “Let's cut on the sentimentality. We need to find a way out before they torture the will to escape out of us.”

“But how?” Mordred asked. “This is Belmarsh's highest security unit.”

Merlin's preservation instincts were telling him that he needed to pay attention, that what was being said was important, but he once again succumbed to the darkness.

At times he thought someone was with him but since he found himself raving more often than not, seeing things that weren't there and hearing more that were certainly hallucinatory, he couldn't be positive about this.

His distracted mind could lend even less credence to someone being there because of the circumstances surrounding their presence.

He was ready to bet he was in a cell and not likely to ever be allowed visitors ever again. Or until he died. Then visitors might be allowed to visit his unmarked grave. Maybe lay a flower on his tomb. Merlin hoped people knew he liked daffodils.

Still, in these moments he believed someone was grabbing his wrists and pinning them to the side. This happened when Merlin's thrashing was at its most violent. When Merlin stopped writhing the person would release him, and start smoothing a wet cloth over his face.

Even though this wasn't real, Merlin liked it. It reminded him of the times he'd been ill when little and his mother had cared for him. For a brief span of time he felt safe even if by all rights he shouldn't.

He was in Belmarsh, magic user nightmare number one.

But the person was with him, at least in his comforting dreams, so Merlin couldn't feel all the panic he might have.

The person leant over him, their breath sweet, bracing one hand by Merlin's shoulder. The voice, a male one, murmured soothing words that made little sense, but that warmed Merlin and made him believe he was safe.

Merlin's phantom carer glided the cloth down Merlin's throat and at the sides of his neck, just under his ears, where the most sweat had pooled.

The figure hesitated moment at the base of Merlin's throat, the cloth wet on his skin.

Merlin swallowed against the pressure. He wanted to say something but found he was enmeshed in a web of dreams he couldn't free himself from. He couldn't. He was a prisoner of silence.

“Hush, Merlin, hush,” a voice he very nearly recognised said. “You need this. You're burning up.”

The person must have wetted the cloth again, because it was cooler and more soggy then before. He opened Merlin's tattered shirt, and slid it down the centred of his chest, over his breastbone, then up again to his shoulder, taking care of cleaning the old bullet wound, which was bothering Merlin again.

Merlin's dream carer lifted his right arm, cooling Merlin's skin there.

Merlin supposed that was so as to bring his fever down for a bit; regardless of whether that got the desired result, Merlin was grateful.
The fever would probably come roaring back again but for now at least his skin wasn't radiating unpleasant heat, or not as much as before.

He could kiss that cloth and have a love affair with it he loved it so much. He just wished it wouldn't dry up against his baking flesh and that it could continue to provide relief. “More,” he said, through cracked lips. “It's so hot. More.”

“It's the fever talking, Merlin,” the voice said. “I can't do much more than this.”

“I'm dying,” Merlin mumbled. “I know that.”

“There's still a chance, Merlin,” the voice told him. “You can make it.”

“It's okay,” Merlin said. “It's okay. Without magic... I--”

“Why would you want it, Merlin? Magic. It's a weapon.”

“It's me,” Merlin said, wanting to clarify but finding he didn't have the strength to. “Who I am.”

Merlin's carer didn't reply to that but smoothed the cloth down his forearm, where his shirt was rolled up, and down to the top of his hands, lingering at the knuckles, then cleaned his fingers.

When he was done with Merlin's hands, he eased the fabric away from his chest and across to his other shoulder, the one that was hale.

Goose flesh rose on Merlin's skin in the wake of the gentle touch. His trembling eased, his muscles no longer straining to reel it in.

Merlin sighed, body relaxing for the first time in what felt like aeons.

Merlin's carer dampened the cloth once more, bathing his chest and his stomach, taking away the sweat and grime of days (probably) spent in a prison cell.

Feeling better, Merlin sank into sleep again and this time it was untroubled. When he woke again there was a tray laden with bread and water waiting for him. Merlin crawled to it. He drank from the pewter cup but didn't touch the stale, crusty bread.

“You ought to eat, Merlin,” Mordred told him from the cell across his. “You need to keep up your strength.”

Merlin's shoulders bowed. “I'd hoped you were a dream and not really here.”

“We ran,” Mordred said. He was sitting cross legged with his elbows on his thighs. He looked bad. His face bearing the signs of a beating. “But they flushed us out in the end.”

“They had dogs,” Ruadan, who was occupying the cell next to Mordred, said. “That's how they found us or we would have cleared the area.”

“There were too many,” Mordred said, lifting his shoulders. “We wouldn't have made it anyway. Not once they knew we were there.”

Merlin took another sip of the metallic tasting water before saying, “Did they slug you?”

“No,” said Mordred. “They considered our magic not strong enough to effect an escape.”

“Not that they won't,” said Ruadan.
“Can't you blow up the cell's bars?” Merlin asked, coughing. He'd needed the water but his throat wasn't apparently used to working anymore.

“Yes,” said Mordred, eyes flashing gold in a way that had Merlin experiencing a pang of jealousy he'd never known he could feel. “But what then? My magic's not strong enough to take on all of Belmarsh's security.”

“And neither is mine,” said Ruadan, eyeing the tiny grate under the ceiling that offered a glimpse of daylight and the outside. “But my daughter's still at large. We need to find a way to communicate with her.”

Merlin coughed and coughed. It rattled him for minutes, racking his belly and hurting his ribs. He hunched, willing the pain deep inside his chest to die down. “Maybe...” he said, slurring his words. “Maybe you could try--”

Mordred sprang to his feet, though of course he couldn't reach out to Merlin. He curled his hands around the prison bars and said, “You're too weak to speak. Try to sleep some more, Merlin.”

“I slept for ages,” Merlin said, but even as he did, he felt himself being dragged under again. The most he could do was crawl a bit backwards so he wouldn't hit the prison bars when he slumped.

When he woke again there was no light but artificial illumination. Merlin blinked and saw Arthur sitting on a stool outside his cell. He had his head in his hands but when Merlin shifted he snapped back to attention so he was sitting upright, his hands locked together. “Hello.”

Merlin didn't say anything. He didn't understand why Arthur was here unless he wanted to make sure Merlin was properly tamed and paying for his crimes. He craned his neck this way and that to check out that no wardens were there to pick him up from his cell for a quick execution, that Arthur wasn't a herald of that, not there to witness Merlin's end. There was no one. So Merlin was left wondering whether that scenario would be gratifying for Arthur once it happened, considering he was angry for having been played.

“You weren't well,” Arthur said, playing cat's cradle with his fingers, his eyes staunchly on what he was doing rather than on Merlin. “You still aren't.”

Merlin laughed under his breath and his body coiled in reaction to the pain his laughter caused. “I'm dying. They took my magic. But thanks for the euphemism.”

“You're not dying.” Arthur said, looking up from under is fringe. “I mean. There's some ex-magic users who've made it. I checked. With the magic excised from them forever but still alive.”

“What good news,” Merlin said.

“Arthur rattled the bars. “So what? You want to give up fighting and die?”

“Didn't know you cared that much about the fate of magic users,” Merlin croaked.

“That's because they killed my mother!” said Arthur voice rising and shaking, fingers white around the bars. “They're criminals. Magic bends people. Look at what my sister became. She was a caring, nurturing person before she found out she had magic. Then she realised she had powers and she changed. Look at you... you played me.”

“To be quite honest,” Mordred interrupted Arthur. “That was me. I signed him up. He was the most powerful of us all. I wanted to protect him.”
“And sending him into the wolf's lair seemed like a good idea to you?” Arthur asked, turning around with an eyebrow viciously lifted. “With my father hating magic as he does?”

“Merlin is a very special person,” Mordred said soulfully. “I was sure you'd like him. And if you married him, he'd have immunity. Like your sister.”

Merlin thought he saw Arthur's eyes glint in the half-light. “But he pushed matters on his own, didn't he?” Arthur said. “I'm fairly sure you didn't tell him to---” Arthur stopped then steamed over, whipping round so he was facing Merlin when the question was asked. “Come to my bed, did you?”

Mordred looked down. “I'm fairly sure he did that of his own volition.”

Arthur focused his eyes on Merlin. “Is that so, Merlin?”

Merlin didn't see why he owed the man who'd sold him to The Crow anything. “What do you want me to say?” he asked. A tremor ran all the way down his body. Cramps seized his insides. “Uh? Why should I answer the man who betrayed me?”

Arthur stood, upending the stool he'd been sitting on. “I didn't,” he shouted. “You said that before and I didn't.”

“You didn't send Aeredian's men?” Merlin rasped, trying to inject sarcasm in his tone without quite being able to with his voice so weak.

“For fuck's sake no!” Arthur said, kicking at the cell's door. “I didn't. I felt you kiss me. You woke me. I followed you. They just turned up. And fuck you for believing I'd do that.”

He stalked off, a heavy metal door slamming shut somewhere at the end of the corridor marking his angry egress.

“Same,” Merlin said, curling back in on himself. “For believing I'd sleep with you to save my skin.”

“Don't pay attention to him,” said Ruadan. “He's a Pendragon. He might play innocent but he's just as guilty as his own father.”

Merlin nodded and sighed to himself. For some reason his heart had taken to racing faster when Arthur was there. He'd thought he had nothing left, that without his magic he was a dried up shell, but evidently that wasn't true.

Arthur still made him angry. Still stirred up emotions in him. Mostly they were ones of regret about how stupid he'd been trusting him. But he felt way more than he was comfortable admitting. He should just not care instead his thoughts were looping round and round, Arthur their subject.

He went from raging at him for saying those things about magic to wishing Arthur had been a different person, nurtured far away from his father, to blaming himself for having given in and having had sex with him. At other times he switched to blaming himself for half believing Arthur's indignant claim of having nothing to do with Aeredian's appearance.

But then he chided himself for being so gullible. There Arthur was, having the run of the place, something he couldn't do if he hadn't an agreement of some sort with The Crow.

He could come and go as he pleased and that was proof enough that he was acting in collusion with Section Seven. Nobody had ever had access to Belmarsh's high security magical containment unit, not even ministers. That Arthur had was highly suspicious.
How stupid Merlin was, still making allowances for Arthur. Sleeping with him, falling for him had changed Merlin. So now here he was having to tamp down a heart that would tell him to defy logic and accept Arthur's excuses.

Sighing, head bent, he crawled forward once again, this time adamant he wouldn't think of Arthur but only himself.

He picked up the stale bread he'd left in the corner of his cell, still lying on its tray, and made himself eat some of it, if only so he could die with his head held high. If just so that when the time came he wouldn't be bowed down by hunger pangs. Before he went he wanted to be able to stand upright and look Arthur in the eye.

He fell asleep clinging to that thought, his comeuppance, crumbs sticking to his lips, bread still clutched in his hand. When he woke again some time later Arthur was there once more, but Mordred wasn't in his cell.

Merlin's stomach dropped. He gathered himself up to his knees and clinging to the bars, said in alarm, “Where have they taken him? Where is he?”

“I don't know,” Arthur told him sombrely. “When I arrived you were asleep and there was no trace of him.”

Merlin leant his head against the bars of his cell and held on to them. At times his breathing would almost stop, as if caged in by a sob, then it would begin again with a great shuddering gasp. “You're lying.”

Arthur's hand touched his. “I'm not. Please, believe that if nothing else.”

“Doesn't matter, does it?” Merlin said, moving his hands so he could shake off Arthur's. “It's what happens to us. They kill us.”

Merlin lifted his head to lock eyes with Arthur. Arthur's were sunken, pale. Was that guilt Merlin was seeing reflected in them? But that didn't matter. Not anymore. Not in these straits and with Mordred probably dead. Who mattered more: a dear friend who'd been nothing but loyal or a man Merlin had loved but had turned out not to be the person Merlin thought he was?

Merlin's message was the only thing he had left at this point and its sinking in mattered. “You kill us.”

Arthur's fingers found his again and curled around them with more strength than before. “No, that's not true. Only the guilty are punished.”

“Do you really think that?” Merlin asked, a little twist of his lips that was supposed to be ironical contorting his mouth. “You really think I committed a crime or that Mordred did?”

“I saw you kill people.”

“Yeah,” Merlin grunted out. “I did. Do you think I'm proud? Do you think I wanted to? I had no choice. I was defending myself. Because the law says... The law says...” Merlin ran out of breath and crashed to his knees. “That we're all--”

Ruadan stepped in. “It's no use, Merlin. He knows how wrong the laws are. He knows they make outlaws of us. He knows we're hunted down and discriminated. Tortured and killed. He's even watched them round us up. You can't think he didn't know.” Merlin looked feebly up at Ruadan. He was lying on his cot, hands locked on his stomach, looking at the grey ceiling. “He knows all right.
He's just acting as though he's justified. As if has reasons.”

“If you're all so innocent then how do you explain Nimueh?” Arthur rounded on Ruadan to say. “How?”

“I knew her,” Ruadan said, calmly, not looking at Arthur. “I can't tell what went down because I'm not privy to it but she used to be a great friend of your father's.”

“You're lying,” said Arthur, eyes spirited, breathing coming fast. “My father hates her. She took my mother's life!”

“Tell yourself that long enough,” Ruadan said dismissively. “And maybe one day you'll believe it.”

“You don't know what you're talking about and don't ever mention my mother ever again. You have no right!” After having released an angry huff, Arthur upped and left.

Merlin and Ruadan had nothing to do but wait and hope for Mordred's return. The chances of that happening were slim but clinging to hope was all they had.

Merlin settled on his back in his cell, staring up at the ceiling. At first he did so sightlessly, not touched by his environment, but then he started noticing things like the water dripping unceasingly from the roof, and the damp walls of his cell.

The water would trickle rhythmically, even dribbling on him from time to time, the rust in it staining the sleeve of his shirt russet.

The more Merlin stared at them, the more the geography of damp spots coalesced and formed into weird shapes, which blurred after a while.

Tiny slits in the wall which were only wide enough for cockroaches to scuttle through allowed the wind to whistle and rush into the cell. The piping that evidently ran behind the wall sounded to a drumbeat of whomps and hollow thuds that seemed to grow louder and louder the more Merlin listened.

And listen he did for hours until at last a door creaked open on its hinges and two wardens walked a broken Mordred back to his cell.

Even though Mordred looked bad – blood staining his clothes, a limp to his step – Merlin was relieved to find he was still alive.

When the wardens shoved Mordred into his cell, Merlin could better take stock of his condition. There was a nasty, jagged scratch down his throat that disappeared under his shirt. The eye that had been swollen shut from before looked even more blackened now and and there was a bump in the middle of his nose Merlin was sure hadn't been there when Merlin was last conscious.

Mordred's left-hand was swollen to twice its size and the fingers were purple, which made Merlin think it was broken. His heart swell with pity for his friend. The friend he'd so royally failed. “Mordred,” he gasped. “Mordred.”

If he only had his magic, he'd have his revenge.

The cell's door slammed shut and the wardens leaving, Mordred said, “I didn't talk.” He smiled eerily. “And this--” He lifted his likely broken hand – “was because my magic air-punched one of the wardens.”
“It's a miracle you weren't slugged then,” said Ruadan.

Merlin's mind was racing ahead. He wasn't worried about Mordred talking, spilling the beans about the Underground.

Forridel knew how to act in case anyone of their group was taken. They'd agreed on a set of safety measures Forridel would follow religiously.

One of them was dropping all the meeting places they'd used in the past. Another keeping all contact between druids, magic users, and any other associates on the down low.

No, Merlin was worried Mordred wouldn't just be beaten some more next time but that he'd be taken out. One more sorcerer to kick the bucket in this senseless war of Uther's.

He had no hopes for himself. He was done for. But Mordred could be saved and Ruadan, too. Merlin clung to the bars and used them to lever himself up. “You need to get out,” Merlin said. “You need to escape.”

“Without your powers,” Mordred said slowly, his usually modulated tones altered as he croaked and spat blood, “it's almost impossible.”

“Then we need help from without,” said Merlin, remembering that Forridel and Sefa were still at large and so were a wide net of their friends. “Your daughter escaped,” he told Ruadan.

“But she isn't magic,” Ruadan told him. “She has no shred of it. She ought to--”

Whatever she ought to do Ruadan didn't say; he merely trailed off, causing Merlin to say, “She can contact the others.”

“But how are we supposed to communicate with her from within these cursed walls?” Ruadan asked.

Merlin had an idea. When he was a kid he'd found a magic book in the attic of the home he had shared with his mum. He hadn't known who it belonged to and had never asked because his mother became nervous each time magic was mentioned. But he'd read it from cover to cover, loving the deep leather smell of its binding, and one of the spells listed in that book could serve him now.

“There's a spell. You can summon any animal you want and make it do your bidding.”

“You want us to enchant the cockroaches?” Ruadan asked. “There are surely plenty.”

“I think Emrys has something else in mind, Ruadan,” Mordred said tiredly but with a little spark of curiosity in his tone. “Maybe he's thinking of a Druidic spell.”

Merlin wasn't certain of its origins. He'd just been a child reading about arcanes he had thought fascinating, but hadn't wondered about such things as the roots and origins of the spell back then. Neither was that of particular concern now. “It's a chant. You summon an animal – I was thinking crow or carrier pigeon – and they'll do what you want without training them first. They did this stuff in the Middle Ages when they had no technology. It should work for us.”

“All right,” Ruadan said. “Share.”

Merlin did, doing his utmost to remember the chant to the last word. “You'll have to incant,” he said once he’d finished quoting it. “I have no magic left.”

“All right.”
Their eyes sparking, Mordred and Ruadan began the chant while Merlin sat back, waiting for the spell to work. As he listened, Merlin imagined what was going on with the bird they were summoning.

He fancied he was seeing things from the animal's perspective. He sensed a pounding heart and viewed a world that wasn't as rich in colour as it always seemed to Merlin as is from up high, floating above the earth.

Everything appeared to move in slow motion compared to what he was used to, to the point it was like watching a film at a higher frame-rate.

His eyes panned over rolling countryside and clusters of trees; his vision spanned the breadth of a river as it meandered its way through hills and farmland and later as it met the higher rise buildings and the cement sprawls of man-made constructions.

The city swelled with people; its lights swarmed and blinded. They weren't pure and ageless as the stars overhead and the noises were foreign and clashing, unnatural.

This vista diminished as the point of view shifted, veered eastwards, back to the open country.

Merlin felt like he was looking into a mirror, existing within a strange form, almost as if he was perceiving the world as the animal did.

He sensed the lay of the land, the air currents, the beat of nature, the swarm intelligence connecting him to similar bird minds, and for a moment he even oddly believed he wasn't in in his own head anymore.

He followed his vision; saw his view shift as if some banking had been done.

Trees were coming in close, as was a square compound made up by a series of buildings. The image flared sharp and bright, and every distance came into focus at once. He was close, so close.

Merlin's brows furrowed, his hands closing into reflexive fists as the bird squeezed in through the grate at the window and landed on Ruadan's fist. “We got the bird. Now for the message.”

Extremely tired, though Merlin didn’t know why, Merlin flopped back on his haunches and then sprawled his length back out on the floor. He was wheezing, his hand on his heart to slow the rising of his chest, but happy to see that Mordred and Ruadan's spell had worked.

“Here take this,” Mordred said, floating a laundry bill over to Ruadan's cell. “You can use your magic to compose an invisible message.”

Ruadan caught the floating slip of paper, incanted a short spell, and writing appeared on its back. As soon as it had, it glowed gold and then vanished. “Refa may not have magic but she's the daughter of two practitioners. She'll know something's up with the message.”

“And if she doesn't get it, Forridel or any of the others will,” Mordred said.

Ruadan wrapped the note around the bird's leg with the thread that had been holding one of his buttons to his shirt.

The last thing Merlin saw before he fainted was the bird hop on the edge of the window slit, look back at him, and then fly away.

He woke again after what felt like, and might have been, ages. Arthur was there once again, his face
pale, his eyes haunted. He was sitting on the stool he'd brought along that other time, but he wasn't propped upright as he'd been before. He was now leaning against the cell door, his head bowed.

There were dark lines under his eyes and he kept blinking. When he wasn't, he was rubbing his hand across his forehead.

“You look like shit,” Merlin said, creeping forwards, his leg hurting under him, the dart entry wound itching and throbbing. “Coming from me that is saying something.”

Arthur looked up at him. “They executed Ruadan this morning.”

Merlin gulped. He looked to Ruadan's cell. It was, in fact, empty. He blinked too, trying to wrap his head around the news. Having only met him a few days prior, it wasn't as if he was friends with Ruadan. He'd disapproved of the man's stance and had almost refused to save him. But that didn't mean he was any the less appalled.

Guilt gnawed at his insides too. If he'd been faster that night... If he'd come up with a better plan... The man had a daughter. He might have lived for her. More, how could Merlin even have considered not helping him?

Haven't Ruadan been proved correct? Weren't all the people at the helm of the government oppressive towards sorcerers? Weren't they as evil as magic users were accused of being?

So, all right, upon reflection maybe Arthur hadn't ratted Merlin and the others to Section Seven but wasn't he complicit in their capture when he was doing nothing to oppose it? Here he was breezing in and out of a high security prison, bars and wardens between them. Didn't that mean he approved of the status quo?

If he felt it was even remotely wrong he could protest it. God knew he had the power to.

Arthur was probably only there to question Merlin so as to satisfy his pride about the betrayal, while he and Mordred were locked in cells they'd never emerge from. At least not Merlin.

Grief, and rage, and loss, and self-disgust at having failed Ruadan raged through him.

He tried to hold the darkness at bay, shut it into a small corner of his mind, and cope, but he felt that surviving was becoming more and more difficult the more he tried to navigate this new situation.

Something inside him cracked and tears of resentment, guilt and anguish slipped out, coursing down his cheeks. “It's my fault,” he said.

“No, it's not,” Arthur said, shaking the bars that kept them apart. “You did your best. The decision came from Aeredian. I've played all my cards. I couldn't stop it.”

“Why would you have even wanted to?” Merlin asked, debilitated, tired, tired of it all, but still questioning Arthur's good faith. “Ruadan was your enemy, you said so yourself.”

Arthur's nostrils flared and his hands opened and closed around the metal rods that went into making the bars caging Merlin in. “Because of you, damn it, Merlin.”

Merlin's eyes widened. He passed a hand over his mouth, scrubbed it down his face. Shook his head. “I don't understand.”

“If you would just listen,” Arthur said, “then maybe you would.”
“All I know is that a man I could have saved is gone,” Merlin said, disgusted with himself and the world, “and all because I started thinking that people would accept sorcerers if we behaved and played by the rules. If we respected the law, lay low. But it's not true is it? You hate us all. You hate magic.”

“Are you really gunning for me to accept magic right now, Merlin?” Arthur said. “Because this isn't the time or the place.”

Merlin pretended to wipe away the drops of sweat that glistened on his nose and gathered in the lines that had formed on his forehead while all he was doing was erasing the tear tracks with the backs of his hands. “What better time to confront you about what you stand for? I may not have much time. I'm dying. Without my magic I'm doomed. Then again Aeredian will have me swing from a length of rope before his Slug can finish me--”

Arthur's eyes seemed sad when he spoke again even though his tone was decisive. “That's exactly what I'm talking about. You, me, magic, there's no time for all of that.”

“No time like the present,” Merlin said, the words intended as a joke, his tone failing to pass the jocularity mark, he was so drained. “I don't think I'm going to have a lots of time to canvass the topic.”

“Idiot,” Arthur said, the shadow of a smile ghosting on his lips. “I tried my best. I really did. But with Aeredian there's only so much I can do. He believes what he says, if you were wondering.”

Merlin's eyes narrowed. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“He didn't warn me,” Arthur hissed. “I didn't know there'd be an execution.”

“Did you doubt there would be one eventually?” Merlin asked. His heart felt hollow. He didn't know why. He was just done feeling. “Do you want a pat on the back for not having ordered Ruadan dead when you knew someone else would do it for you?”

“Merlin is right,” Mordred chipped in. He'd been silent so far but now he was weighing in. “You're sounding as though you don't want us to blame you for the loss of our friend, but directly or indirectly you are.”

Merlin tipped an eyebrow at Arthur.

“Christ,” Arthur shouted, “will you stop side-tracking me? What do you want me to say? That I feel sorry a man’s dead who had a hundred innocents on his conscience? I'm not. Do you want me to say that I feel all right about what I now know is going on? No, I don't. This is illegal. No trials. Unlawful detention. Crippling. Death sentences passed without going through the right legislative hoops--”

“Torture,” Mordred said.

“That's wrong,” Arthur continued, voice exasperated. “That's got to change. When I'm king.”

“Will you make magic legal?” Merlin asked pointedly. “Because this is what we're talking about here. It's not just the method. It's not just how you carry out your sentences or the way you treat prisoners. It's the reasons you're making prisoners such in the first place.”

“Merlin--”

“No,” Merlin stopped Arthur. No time like the present indeed. There was no future for him but if he
managed to at least make Arthur see a glimmer of the truth then the future could change for so many people who deserved a better shot at life than Merlin had had. All those magic users who could potentially thrive with their powers intact, if the anti magic regulations were repealed, deserved a chance. Merlin had to try, for them.

"Before you took it from me, I had magic. I didn't study it. I didn't steal it from some mysterious source. I was born with it. When I was two, I floated a toy over to my play pen. A stuffed dragon. My mum's face went white. She yelled at me. I got my knuckles rapped." Merlin took a breath. "That's when I knew I was made 'wrong'. See, my mum, always kind, always nice to everybody, became another person for a moment. Someone scary. Someone I didn't know. And all of that because she was afraid I'd do that again in company. That people would see and denounce me. That's my first proper memory, Arthur--"

"As sad and touching as all that is," Arthur told him. "We have no time for this."

"You keep saying this but--"

"Merlin!" That was a brisk shout. Arthur's voice got lower again when he continued. "Merlin, as acquisitive as Aeredian is I can't stay his hand much longer. You're next. Your 'sentence' is going to be the next that's carried out."

Merlin smiled palely. He'd guessed right after all.

Arthur glared at him, squeezed his hands through the bars, and wrapped his hands around Merlin's nape, cradling it but squeezing hard. "Don't-- Don't react like that and listen to me, God damn you. You're next. And there's nothing I can do to stop that. Nothing. But one thing, one single thing."

Merlin's eyes went large. He wasn't sure what it was Arthur was blathering about. Probably, he just felt guilty about Merlin's plight and was trying to assuage his conscience by making up scenarios that came with some sort of happy ending but were actually impossible. Tonight Arthur would walk out of Belmarsh, resume his fancy life, and tomorrow, or the day after, Merlin would die. "I don't need to listen to--"

"Shut up, will you!" Arthur barked. "There's something I can do though the idea is not actually mine."

He turned and levelled a look at Mordred Merlin couldn't wholly see because of the way Arthur was angled.

"I talked to two Belmarsh superintendent registrars and to the operational manager. I gave notice. I forged your signature but nobody's going to look into that. Not with enough money to grease palms. I've got everything in place. A certificate, the superintendent registrar and a registrar on my side. It's perfectly legal since you have rights even here. At least officially."

Arthur took in a big lungful of air. "Merlin, there's no other way. And I know that's not what you want to hear. That it was all fake--"

Merlin's ears were ringing painfully. He didn't feel all there. He wasn't sure whether his mind was finally going or Arthur wasn't making sense. "Arthur, what are you talking about?"

"Marriage," Arthur said breathlessly. "I've got everything set up for a marriage. Aeredian doesn't know, of course, but once you're married to me – which is within your rights as a state prisoner and perfectly doable within prison walls – you've got immunity. Like Morgana. Like Mordred wanted."

The air was punched out of Merlin. "What?"
Arthur was bright-eyed and seemed a little manic when he said, “Marry me, Merlin.”

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“You’re joking, right?” Merlin said, not quite sure he’d heard correctly. Arthur had declared loudly and for everyone to hear that he hated magic. He has said he thought Merlin a liar and a manipulator, a bad man corrupted by magic. Arthur had to be touched in the head to be offering marriage when he believed those things of Merlin and his kind.

“No,” Arthur said, his voice badly concealing what seemed to be high levels of exasperation. “I'm not joking at all. I can show you the certificate licensing us. It’s in my pocket.”

Merlin raised and dropped his eyebrows at Arthur. “You think so little of me.”

Arthur spluttered. “Pardon?”

Merlin decided it was time to help Arthur see what his words implied. “Let's say I married you to save my skin. Do you really think I would waltz out of this prison and leave Mordred behind to die?”

Arthur’s mouth opened and closed. “I can't do anything for him.”

“You see how my answer can't be 'yes’?”

For a long time Arthur said nothing, but softly stared at Merlin's eyes. The light of wonder suffused his gaze, coloured by an element of put-upon surprise.

It was partly as if he was recognizing something new in Merlin, something that hadn't been so clear to him before, and partly as if he was expressing the annoyance a parent feels while having to deal with a simple, naïve child. “I understand that you have your loyalties but there's nothing I can do about him. I'm sorry.”

“Then again it's 'no','” Merlin said, dismissing a proposition that entailed Mordred's death as impossible.

Arthur turned briskly around, kicking at the bars of an empty cell. “Why would you want to die? To make a point? To be a martyr so I can change my mind? You don't need to do that!”

Mordred weighed in. “Merlin, think long and hard because yours is a stupid choice.”

Arthur perked up. “Yes, listen to him; at least he's being reasonable about this!”

“I am!” Merlin said, throwing his hands in the air. “He's saying those things because he's my friend and wants me to live no matter what happens to him!”

“He's saying those things because they're logical!”

“While sacrificing himself,” Merlin said, his pitch rising as he tried to correct Arthur as to Mordred's motives. Arthur was always eager to condemn magic users as duplicitous, to think the worst of them, but he found easy to ignore their sacrifices. Merlin wanted him to appreciate them. He wanted him to see the good in warlocks, in the people like him. “That’s what he's proposing.”

“That too,” said Arthur, eyes wide with the fire put in them by their dispute, though his tone was
more conciliatory now, almost regretful.

“Will you stop bickering!” Mordred said, the loudest he'd been ever. “You've got one thing about
being married down pat at the very least.”

Merlin and Arthur exchanged glances only to rip their eyes away from one another at the same time.

Mordred continued with what he'd been saying. “Though, let's be honest here, Merlin. You dying
with me is not going to help me one bit.”

“If I did this, I'd be betraying you,” Merlin said, picturing what would happen if he agreed with
Arthur very, very clearly. “I would be no friend to you.”

“You're confusing friendship with stubbornness, Merlin,” said Mordred, holding on to his calm as
though he wasn't talking about the prospect of dying, and doing so alone at that. “Besides you will
be of more help to me outside this prison's walls than you are in.”

A nerve pulsed in Merlin's jaw. “No, no. That's not true.”

“It is,” Mordred said, fire sparking in his eyes this time. “You can go to Forridel.”

Merlin scowled at Mordred, glanced at Arthur, then scowled back at his primary target.

Arthur's gaze swivelled from Merlin to Mordred and then back again. “You don't think I would
report your friend to the authorities, do you?”

Merlin felt colour heat his cheeks with the fire of guilt. He had thought that. He'd thought exactly
that. That Arthur wasn't one of them and shouldn't be trusted with names.

Then he bit his tongue. Although he couldn't be certain and was far too ill and confused to make
judgement calls, he was beginning to feel as though Arthur hadn't lied about not denouncing them to
Aeredian.

The more Merlin contemplated the issue, the more certain he became of one truth about Arthur's
nature. He may hate magic and what it had done to his mother but he would never act
underhandedly.

If he had to, Arthur would condemn sorcerers to endure the punishments the law envisaged for them,
but he wouldn't be dishonest about his condemnation or his reasons for it.

“I believe you,” Merlin said in a thready voice.

Arthur nodded gravely even while looking oddly grateful, satisfied. His stance even widened as
though Merlin's approval had made him more confident.

Merlin gave him a little acknowledgement by way of a little smile, then went back to addressing
Mordred. “I won't abandon you. Besides with no magic there's nothing much I can do anyway.”

“You can contact the others and stir them into action. You can surely do that better from the outside.”

“But,” Merlin said, not wanting to mention their stab at an escape plan but needing to make this
objection. “What if they're already on the move?” There was a chance Sefa had got the message
Ruadan had sent her before dying. Odds were good that she'd gone to Forridel with it and that even
now the Underground was concocting a plan to bust them out. “What if me warning them is not
needed? I'd just be leaving you in the lurch.”
“What if they're not?” Mordred asked, his face expressive of doubt. “Some things aren't a hundred percent dependable, you know.”

“What good can I do them without my powers?” Merlin said, wiggling his fingers. “I'd be a hindrance to them.”

“And is that why you want to give up the fight?” Mordred asked. Merlin had a suspicion Mordred was using his powers of rhetoric to move him, but couldn't help listening and being persuaded. “Forridel fights for the cause without ever having had any magic. She does that because she believes in what we do. You're great at inspiring people, Emrys. If anyone can help me, that's you.” A cryptic smile played on Mordred's lips. “Besides, you never know. The paths the old religion takes us on are many and some of them lead us to revelation. Our true destiny.”

Merlin had known Mordred long enough to be able to predict what his friend was driving at.

Mordred had deep faith in Druidic lore and traditions, believed in the legends that the ancient priests and priestesses had handed down from generation to generation.

Merlin hadn't been made acquainted with everything there was to know about Mordred, but was aware of the fact that Mordred's tutor and father figure, Aglain, had raised him steeped in that world of word-of-mouth myth.

Mordred had often hinted at parts of that myth, suggesting they involved Merlin somehow and made him special.

Merlin, who'd been raised by a magic-less woman, didn't know about them and had never probed too much. He was aware of enough to mistrust most of those theories though.

Merlin was just a magi-- had been a magic user – and had heard a lot of tales you couldn't lend lots of credence to.

Magic was real but the myths surrounding its practice were mostly just stories.

Being conscious of all this, didn't make Merlin eager to trust Mordred's theories. They were all based on tenets that were just a little bit too airy for Merlin. But he couldn't not be swayed by Mordred's tone of absolute conviction.

He looked to Arthur. “I never thought I'd marry for a loophole.”

An odd light was shining forth from the depths of Arthur's eyes; it was as if he was trying to be forthcoming and open, while he held himself at a distance at the same time.

He was being both guarded and communicative; mysterious and inviting.

It was as if something like a strong bright flame was burning in the sea of his pale blue irises. Like fire inside ice. Like the sun peeking through from behind a cloud, but not coming fully out to play, to warm as it might.

It was like nothing Merlin had ever seen, but it gave him hope he wasn't doing the wrong thing.

It made him believe that, however wrong and crazy, this action wasn't so deplorable as it might have been.

It was a lie, a subversion of the concept of marriage, but crazily enough Merlin wasn't disgusted by
having it as his sole option.

He would have wished for things to be different. To have his magic back for one. To marry only for love for another.

He was convinced love was possible and that he could find it.

After all, he'd harboured it for this same man now standing across from him before the world had come tumbling down on him, revealing that Arthur wasn't as forgiving as Merlin might have hoped he was.

If he thought about Arthur's harsh judgement of him, then he'd have to admit he was loath to tie the so-called knot without love to aspire to.

Truth be told, every time Arthur condemned magic something inside Merlin wilted on its way to a premature death. Maybe it was the part of him that had been so proud of everything he had once been. Maybe it was the innocent part of him that had believed that magic and non-magic people could one day unite and live in peace.

Merlin couldn't say this was in any way the right thing to do. A sea of objections rose up every time he tried to wrap his mind around the idea. But it wasn't so horrible a prospect as he would have believed it a few days ago, when Arthur had spat vitriol at him.

Something crazy told him that he should do it. Maybe that was just Arthur gazing encouragingly at him, maybe it was the little voice inside his head that sounded very much like his id, but he decided to listen to that voice. He'd face the consequences when the time came. When he'd freed Mordred and corrected this mess.

He shifted slightly under Arthur's compelling, intent gaze. “I mean, that's a go-ahead.”

A smile pulling at his mouth, his voice huskier than usual, Arthur said, “I'll go get the registrars and the Governor.”

With Arthur skidding off to do as he'd promised, Merlin slumped in his cell. Alone—or rather with Arthur gone—doubts started eating at him again.

Mordred seemed to have noticed, for he spoke up. “You know, I would never have suggested this if I didn't think it was the only way out for you and for me.”

“You said,” Merlin said, blood rushing to his head and making him feel light-headed. Between the adverse reaction he'd had to the slug and all the confusing things that had been happening to him in the past few days, he wasn't feeling at his best. In a way he longed to lie back, sleep, and only wake up when all his problems were solved. As if by magic. He guessed that was the height of wishful thinking. “I don't need part two of the motivational speech.”

“You know,” Mordred began in the tone of someone who was embarking in the telling of a long tale, “when you were at your worst, he took care of you.”

Merlin's head whipped up fast enough to nearly give him backlash. “What? What are you talking about?”

“When you were at your worst,” Mordred told him. “Arthur turned up. At first I wanted to blast him away from you so he couldn't touch you. But I waited.”

Merlin gave Mordred a little smile. “Always prudent.”
“Indeed.” Mordred looked at him warily as if he wasn't sure what he was going to say next was going to please Merlin. “And I was positively impressed.”

“By Arthur?”

“He had a bucket and cloth,” Mordred said matter of factly, not sounding sentimental at all. “He mopped your brow and had a go at trying to lower your fever by way of an improvised sponge bath, sans the sponge.” Mordred paused as he was often want to when he wanted something he'd said to sink in. “He seemed... caring.”

Merlin's face bloomed with uncalled for heat. “That doesn't mean what you think it means.”

It couldn't. Arthur hated Merlin. The disgust Merlin had read in Arthur's face the night he'd been arrested had been plain for everyone to see. There was no mistaking it.

Most probably Arthur, for all his hatred of magic, had instinctively felt that something was wrong with the way the government dealt with magic users and had done what he could to make amends. Arthur might be living and breathing prejudice, but he was a good man despite all that.

He had a strong sense of justice and what was right and wrong. That sense of justice might be skewed against a set of people – Merlin's – but instinctively he must have caught on on the injustice taking place and tried to help they way he could.

By not letting Merlin die. There was little that was personal in all of that. “That was probably his conscience doing the talking.”

Mordred's eyes became smaller, a feat since his were round and wide by nature. “You two slept together. So forgive me if I think that--”

Merlin tiredly interrupted Mordred. “That was before.”

“He must love you--” Mordred went on.

Merlin picked him up on that. “Mordred, there's lots of reasons why people sleep together. Sex is one of them. I wouldn't go as far as to say the bloody Prince of Wales of all people went and fell for me.”

“He must have liked you.”

“He liked who he thought I was,” Merlin argued, remembering that while Arthur had seemed pleased with him he'd only liked the person Merlin had allowed him to see. The waiter who'd never had a problem in his life, barring a low income perhaps. A man without magic.

Sorrow stiffened Merlin's spine. Well, he was that now, wasn't he? Hollow and without magic. So he was closer to the person Arthur might have wanted than he'd ever been, although Merlin certainly wasn't happy about having lost such an integral part of himself.

He actually even resented the possibility of Arthur being happy about Merlin's loss of his magic. It would be the cruellest thought any man might entertain towards a magic user, thinking that taking their magic was fine. Suspecting Arthur of that was killing him. “Not the person I am,” he said with a nugget of spite. “Or whatever's left of that.”

“Merlin,” Mordred said, pity in his inflection. “You're not lost, you realise.”

Merlin would have tried to explain what he was feeling – how disoriented and weary and scared he
Footsteps ran down the corridor leading up to his cell and Arthur and four other men stalked over to it, the last man in the procession shuffling his feet and looking quite reluctant to be a part of it.

The first man that came with Arthur, a large but rather paunchy man with a hard round stomach pushing against severely pressed work trousers, gave Arthur an envelope. “This is the statement you needed detailing how I have no objections to this prison being named on the notice of marriage.” The man cleared his throat. “Which isn't exactly true now, is it?”

Arthur scowled. “We agreed, Governor.”

“Only if I don't end up losing my job.”

“You won't,” Arthur said curtly, giving the envelope to one of the two other men.

The man in question, this one tall and slim with a shiny bald head, opened the envelope, read the papers that had been tucked and folded inside it, and, taking a pen from his pocket protector, signed at the bottom. “Now, it's all legal, sir,” the man said. “But as Superintendent Registrar I have to ask you whether you're sure. This man is… an abomination only waiting for execution.”

The third man with them, the one who like the other two looked like some administrative official and that Merlin pegged as Registrar two, nodded his head in agreement. “Yes, indeed. Couldn't find better words myself.”

“Open the cell door,” was Arthur's answer.

“We had a deal,” said Arthur, his lips thinning. “Besides, once we're married, he won't need to escape anymore, will he? He'll walk out of that cell and you'll bow low when he does. You know the law.”

“But what if he tries something before he can marry you and escapes with the other convict?” the governor asked, giving Merlin a look that oozed disapproval, even disgust.

“Look at him!” said Arthur, cocking his head at Merlin. “He's trembling on his feet, can barely stand because you've taken his magic from him. What do you think he can do?”

The governor let out a long and belaboured sigh. “Very well.” He unhooked a key ring from his leather belt and took a key out. He inserted it in the lock and, after Merlin had retreated to the back of the cell, waved the other people in.

The official looking types all followed in, albeit clearly reluctantly, while the fourth man, took a step back. “Look, you only told me I had to witness a prison marriage and I said to meself, why not. Better than another day in my dumpy as shit cell. But you didn't tell me that one of the blokes getting hitched was magic. That shit is dangerous, innit?”

The governor hooked a hand around the man's tattooed wrist and pulled him brusquely inside himself. “He was slugged. He's harmless now and not likely to last long.” He winked at the prisoner who was to witness Merlin's marriage. “And if you behave, we'll talk about doubling your wife's visiting times, all right?”

The witness said, “Okay, but if something's happens I'm suing you. I've only got two more months in
this shithole.”

The Registrar that had first spoken cleared his throat, seemingly wanting to take over procedures.

Merlin supposed that he’d know the law and what was required to make this marriage – and the mere thought made Merlin quake, God, this was a marriage – legal. That had to be why he was officiating.

The man massaged his the top of his stomach as if he had an ulcer, and started speaking in a droning voice. “My name is Dominic Morholt, Superintendent Registrar for Greenwich, and we are joined by my colleague, Breunor Whatley, who will be registering this ceremony with me, as well as by Mr. William Hoel, the Governor of this prison.”

Registrar Morholt took a flask out of his jacket's inside pocket and took a sip out of it before continuing, “We are all here today for the marriage of--” Registrar Morholt winged an eyebrow at Merlin.

Merlin felt himself prompted to supply his name, so he did. “Merlin Emrys.”

“Merlin Emrys and--” Registrar Morholt once again resorted to the contents of his pockets to carry him through. This time he unfolded a note that looked as though it had been scribbled in heavy marker, or so Merlin judged, since the paper had absorbed the ink on both sides. “His Highness Prince Arthur James Philip Tristan, Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, Earl of Strathearn, Earl of Carrick, Viscount Severn, Baron Killyleagh, Lord of the Isles--”

“You don't need the full list of my titles and styles,” Arthur said, tapping his foot.

Registrar Morholt gave him a look that was a cross between the put-upon and ticked off, but droned on in the same emotionless voice as before.

“This place in which we are now met has been duly sanctioned according to law for the celebration of marriage. This ceremony will unite Merlin Emrys and--” Morholt gave Arthur a beleaguered look and ploughed on, saying, “Prince Arthur in marriage.”

Merlin chuckled under his breath.

He wasn't sure Morholt's deliberate crossing out of Arthur's titles warranted a display of good humour, but the situation was so odd and surreal, so nerve wracking – he was getting married for all the wrong reasons here – that Merlin couldn't help giving in.

Morholt glared at him the way he didn't seem to feel entitled to do by Arthur. When he thought he'd sufficiently cowed Merlin, he reprised. “We are here to celebrate their union and to honour their commitment to each other. Today this couple will proclaim their love for one another. We celebrate with them.” His voice got feeble. “And for them.”

“Is the whole thing really necessary?” the Governor asked, not seeming pleased with Registrar Morholt's slow recitation.

“There's some things I legally have to say,” Morholt told him, blinking repeatedly. “And I'll only remember them if I go through the whole spiel.”

“Can you just go ahead?” said Arthur, puffing his cheeks out.

Morholt bobbed his head. “Where was I? Ah, yes.” He clapped his hand on his forehead. “If any person present knows of any lawful impediment to this marriage, they should declare it now.”
Arthur looked daggers at everyone from Merlin himself – as though Arthur wasn't sure he could trust him with going through with the ceremony – to the officiating personnel, to the governor. Even Mordred was included.

When no one spoke up, interrupting the wedding, Arthur's body relaxed. His hands unfurled and he rolled his shoulders.

"I suppose you have no reading or poem to recite?" Registrar Morholt asked. "No? No, I thought not."

Mordred cut in with the words, "Alras swá mynet."

"Was that an impediment?" the registrar asked. "Because in that case it ought to be said in English so that we can all understand."

"No," Mordred said, while retaining a slightly mysterious air Merlin thought he'd given his bearing to take the mickey out of the authorities. "It was a blessing."

"Well, then," said Morholt, "I suppose we can go on with the ritual."

"Please do," said Arthur, shifting from foot to foot and licking at his lips.

"Marriage joins two people. It is a commitment to life. It is among the best goals that two people in love can aim for. It offers opportunities for learning and growth, for gaining understanding of oneself and one's partner that few events can equal. It is both a physical and emotional joining that is promised for a lifetime," Morholt said.

Arthur caught Merlin's eyes then, they were focused and wide, intent, and there was a complicit air about his gaze,

Merlin knew what that was about, their night together.

He couldn't say that he didn't remember, that he'd forgotten the weight of Arthur's hand on his hips, or the taste of his mouth, or the heat his body had radiated when he'd spooned Merlin, fucking him slowly till he couldn't anymore and he'd had to ramp their tempo up.

For all that they fell short of a real couple, for all that them marrying was wrong, they'd shared the intimacy of sex.

And with Arthur looking at him as though his mind had gone there, Merlin couldn't act as though he didn't remember.

Regret for that night twinged through him though.

He didn't regret sleeping with Arthur, though it had been a stupid choice. If he had to do it over again, he maybe would. But he missed his world view from before being captured, when he'd thought his and Arthur's world could meet in the middle.

That despite the lies, there'd be this little nugget of truth that was honest and real. That his body would do all the talking and that would be it for honesty.

His cheeks tinted with the recollection of sobs and sighs, the sounds of flesh on flesh, the feel of Arthur nestled inside him.

Luckily, the Registrar didn't notice; he blathered on as though none of that had happened.
“When a couple enters marriage, the commitment they face is deeper than any they agreed to before.”

Merlin tuned most of the rote words out.

"Marriage is a union that entails understanding and forgiveness. For mistakes in life are hard to avoid. When two people pledge their love and care for each other within the marriage institution, they nurture a spirit that ties them closer than any spoken or written words. Marriage is a promise that has nothing to do with the signatures you may here provide but one that is written in the hearts of two people who love each other.”

Merlin started paying attention as soon as the word 'mistakes' was mentioned.

He'd made so many and all in a row they'd brought him here. He hadn't dreamed of marriage much before.

Before the Selection it had been an abstract.

It either would happen to him or not. If it didn't, it would be because his life was far too messy to include it.

But if it did, he'd imagined himself going into it wanting it. In love. And now...

Now he thought he wasn't in love anymore, though when he thought he'd lost him, he had been in love with Arthur. And before that he'd experienced budding feelings without having a name for them.

It was all so strange. But perhaps it didn't matter. With the slug's tocsins coursing through him, he wasn't even sure he'd make it to the end of the week – perhaps he was past the worst but he wasn't positive.

Given that, marrying didn't seem like a huge commitment. He just had one mission to complete before he allowed himself to give up and that mission was getting Mordred out of here.

So he was getting married.

“Please, move forward,” the Registrar told both Arthur and Merlin.

They stepped forward in unison, Arthur sure in his movements, Merlin slowed down by the aches and pains the slug had caused him, his legs still juddering beneath him.

“The purpose of marriage,” said the Registrar, emphasising the last word, “is loving, caring and supporting your partner through both the joys and sorrows of life.”

God, what were they doing? He wasn't supporting anybody. He wasn't caring for anybody. He was just looking for a way out of the strait he was in.

He was only trying to save Mordred's life as he hadn't been able to do with Ruadan.

As for Arthur, he was doing this out of guilt and a misplaced sense of redressing an institutional wrong.

They were both of them lying about loving and caring about each other. They were both doing so solemnly. Crap. What a mess.

“Today you will exchange vows of marriage which will join you as life partners. These vows are a
solemnisation of a lifelong commitment.” The Registrar swallowed.

Merlin guessed he must have run out of spit he’d spoken so much.

“Before you are both joined together in marriage it is my duty to remind you of the solemn and binding character of the promises you are about to subscribe.” The Registrar looked to Arthur first.

“I’m aware,” Arthur said, giving Merlin a little but genuine smile.

That smile floored Merlin by virtue of just being there. They’d both spoken with hatred at each other and yet there Arthur was letting a grin gentle his features.

Merlin didn’t know why he was reacting so kindly towards Merlin, whether he was doing it so as to convince their audience of the veracity of their marriage (fearing annulment, perhaps), or because he’d realised that Merlin was feeling nervous and guilty and wrecked and was trying to comfort him and buoy him up to the finish line.

Merlin was so distracted he didn’t even hear the Registrar’s words, so that the man was obliged to repeat them again in a rising, petulant tone. “I am now going to ask you each in turn to declare that you know of no legal reason why you may not be joined together in marriage.”

“I know of none,” Arthur said business like, then cued Merlin with an elbow jab.

“Free as a bird, no impediment,” Merlin said.

“Stand close to me,” Registrar Morholt said, “and read this out loud.”

He gave Arthur and Merlin each a scrap of paper on which the words, 'I do solemnly declare – that I know not of any lawful impediment why I may not be joined in marriage to...' were written.

Both Merlin and Arthur read the declaration out.

Morholt turned to Arthur. “I ask you now Arthur Pendragon, do you take Merlin Emrys to be your lawfully wedded partner to be loving, faithful and loyal to him for the rest of your life together?”

Arthur bowed his head, his face flushing.

For a moment Merlin thought he might call everything off out of sheer embarrassment, hating, as he probably did, the fact he was marrying a hated warlock and lying about his feelings to his own subjects in the bargain.

Arthur, though, didn't call the proceedings to a halt. He held his head higher in fact, and fixed his eyes on Merlin.

They were clear, no shadow of reluctance or shame in them, even though they were taking part in a farce.

His gaze was steady, warm as embers, encouraging, and even as playful as it had been when they'd first met.

Merlin caught a knowing edge to it, as if he was laughing at their circumstances or maybe at Merlin too, their odd history together. There was nothing mocking to it though. Not even in the curve of his lips or in the sound of his voice when he said, “I do.”

Morholt repeated the words he'd previously addressed to Arthur but this time to Merlin. “Merlin Emrys do you take His Highness Prince Arthur Pendragon to be your lawful wedded partner, to be
loving, faithful and loyal to him for the rest of your life together?”

Merlin's hands were oh so very damp with sweat when he said, “I do.”

The Registrar sighed. “Thank God we're now moving on to the formal vows of marriage.”

Arthur and Merlin both looked at each other. They were doing this. Oh God. They were only a step away from actually being everything to each other. Only it wasn't true.

“Face each other, please,” the second registrar said in a detached and professional tone that evidenced how much he disliked what he was doing, “and read the back of the note Mr Morholt gave you.”

Merlin did first, hardly making out the hurried bit of calligraphy presented to him because he was so shaken and nervous.

“I call upon these persons here present to witness that I Merlin Emrys take you--” Merlin refused to use all the titles listed. He didn't think he had any strength left to go through them – “Arthur Pendragon to be my lawful wedded partner.” Merlin's voice faltered. “--to love and to cherish – from this day forward.”

He passed the note to Arthur, who read out the same words.

The second Registrar made the inmate he'd brought along sign a document. Then he exited the cell and made Mordred sign the same paper, though he looked reluctant to do so, and even squeaked in terror upon handing him a pen.

Documents signed to his specifications, he came back and gave them to Arthur (as though Merlin had the plague or something).

The Superintendent Registrar, Morholt, continued with the ritual. “Usually you'd be exchanging rings now, but since the circumstances are so unusual--” The man flicked Merlin a very chilling and mistrusting glare-- “I suppose we shall skip to--”

“I have rings,” said Arthur, searching his pockets and coming up holding two.

One was a rather plain silver band. It clearly wasn't a wedding ring but something Arthur must have scraped somewhere in a hurry.

Merlin didn't doubt Arthur possessed his fair share of jewellery. He merely wondered at the logistics, at when Arthur could have gone back 'home' to go through his drawers to get this ring.

(Perhaps Merlin had been out of it longer than he thought he had.)

But the second ring was the kind of ornament that, while simple, was surely valuable.

It was slightly more heavily set, slightly thicker, enough so as to allow for a small etching like a symbol on the inside. It was also platinum. Its edges looked sort of mussed, weathered, as if the thing was old.

“My mother's ring.”

Merlin's heart bumped. “Your-- your—”
“My mother's ring, Merlin,” Arthur said, not dismissively but curtly. He handed Merlin the plain silver ring to give back to him and retained his mother's one. “What other ring do you think I should have produced?”

Merlin thought Arthur could have resorted to a wide variety of rings if he wanted to and that using his mum's ring for a sham marriage was all sorts of wrong.

But he kept his gob shut because it wasn't as though Arthur could go jewellery shopping right now. Time mattered. Even though by the end of this he'd be walking out of Belmarsh a free man, that didn't mean that time wasn't trickling down for Mordred. His friend could be executed at any time.

“I dunno, but that one's okay,” Merlin said, toying with the silver band.

“The exchanging of rings is the traditional way of sealing the contract that you have just made,” said Registrar Morholt, raising his voice to be audible over over the clangour that was coming from some other building within the Belmarsh compound. “Its shape is symbolical in that it epitomises an unbroken circle, promising unending and everlasting love. It is also the outward sign of the vow you have just made to each other.”

Arthur cleared his throat and held the ring out to him, eyes cast down but looking a touch bright. “I give you this ring--” Like Merlin's before, Arthur's voice got strained and hoarse as he lied about his vows and his feelings for Merlin, “as a symbol of our love.” He was a good actor though because his tone got steadier and steadier as he went on,

“All that I am I give to you – all that I have I share with you.” Hands shaking, he slipped the ring on Merlin's finger, where it perfectly fitted, as if Arthur had had it resized. “I promise to love you, to be faithful and loyal, in good times and bad.” Arthur gulped, emitted a little sound as though his throat was so dry he couldn't speak anymore and then managed to finish more or less flawlessly with the words, “May this ring remind you always of the promises we have spoken today and what we are to each other.”

Merlin didn't want to repeat Arthur's vows. He didn't want to say them and not mean them. But he knew he had to come up with something, anything, that would get them where they needed to be. Legally married.

“I give you this ring as a token of our marriage.”

Merlin took Arthur's hand in his; it was warm and callused, and strong. Their fingers brushed, Arthur's wiggling against his.

Merlin smiled because that was just so out of place in the situation they were in, an odd jolt of humour injected in proceedings that veered from the sad to the farcical from one moment to the next, and slid the borrowed ring on Arthur's finger.

“In the presence of your--” Registrar Morholt looked around the dank cell, registering the dearth of friends and family members “--witnesses, it's my duty to declare that you are now both partners to one another.”

There was no kiss. There shouldn't be a kiss because this was no real wedding. A kiss had no place in it.

All there was was Merlin shuffling awkwardly from foot to foot, very loud, dissonant thumping noises serving as soundtrack to the solemnisation of their wedding instead of cheers.
But Arthur squeezed his hand, brushing a finger over the smooth surface of his mother's ring, and smiled.

Merlin smiled back in spite of himself, the guilt and fear around his heart beginning to dissipate like fog whorls in the early morning hours.

He felt less like a horrible man for sham marrying and more like he could breathe again. He was still very wired though and felt very tired.

He only wanted to stop trying to stand, lie down and sleep. But he also felt relief.

Maybe now he could really help Mordred and put what he could to rights. Whatever happened to him next, that opportunity had opened up for him. It was more than a man like him could ask for.

“Are we done?” Merlin asked, at the end of his tether. He was about to keel over from all the stress he was going through.

He just wished he could shut down for a few moments before he started making plans towards Mordred's liberation.

“Yes,” the second Registrar said, “just sign here.”

Merlin and Arthur both did. Merlin signed his name in a trembling scrawling script that seemed chocked with the emotion Merlin had been trying to suppress.

Arthur did the same quickly and legibly. When he was done, Arthur pocketed the documents, which he secreted in his wallet, narrowed his eyes at the Governor and said haughtily, “He's a Pendragon now. I want him out of this cell.”

A loud explosion was heard. Mortar and cement fell from the joints of masonry that formed the ceiling to lumber the corridor, and golden sparks ignited the air, stopping the Governor from saying whatever he'd meant to.

There were shouts, loud and terrified; the sounds of gunshots echoed through the building, muffled by the doors.

They wafted around the compound, swooping down the prison corridors down to the cells.

At first they were distant, pitched into a low buzzing murmur, sounding like a frantic beehive, but then they became louder and louder, as though they were nearing the epicentre of whatever activity was going on.

Smoke and dust, hot like volcanic ash, filled the air.

Merlin coughed.

A loud snapping sound rang shrilly in the air and a litter of charred fragments filled the aisle between cells.

Thundering footsteps banged down the corridor.

A woman dressed in layers of black the same colour as her flowing hair, prowled up to them, and said, “Brother dear, I wonder whether I should do my sisterly duty and congratulate you or kill you.”

Merlin didn't need Arthur's exclamation of, “Morgana,” to know that that had been Arthur's sister.
Morgana looked around as more people caught up with her. A blonde with cascading ringlets Merlin didn't know joined her and so did Forridel and Gilli.

Forridel was armed with what looked like an automatic rifle Merlin hoped she knew how to use. The rest of Morgana's people, or what Merlin believed to be her recruits, were likewise armed as well.

Morgana gave the blonde woman a curt nod and then tilted her head at Merlin and Arthur. “Arthur, as lovely as it would be to catch up with you and your intolerance, I'm here to save magic users from the grip of your corrupt laws.”

She waved her palm in the air and Mordred's cell door sprang open, doubling in on itself, curling and melting.

Not at all stunned by the display of magic, Mordred stepped out. He cast furtive glances at both ends of the corridor, but didn't meet Morgana's eyes. Instead he massaged his wrist.

Merlin suspected him of buying time so he could assess the situation.

It wasn't an entirely bad idea.

While Mordred pondered the situation, two prison officers came up running to Morgana, tasers in their hands. Morgana waved her hand and their necks snapped.

Arthur shouted, “Shit.”

The Governor and the two Registrars cowered behind Merlin of all people. Merlin could feel their breaths come fast and hear their teeth chatter. The witness said, “Told yer magic folks were dangerous-like.”

Morgana sneered at them but walked up to Merlin. “I've heard about you,” she said assessingly. “You were supposed to be great.” She ran her knuckles down Merlin's cheek, almost soft, pitying, making Arthur take a step forward. “Look what they’ve done to you.”

The softness of her touch registered with Merlin as did the siren call of her magic, her having understood what had happened to him without being told. They were on the same wave-length. Like calling to like. (Or former like.) Despite the communality their nature though, his gut clenched at the touch and frantic thoughts as to what to do now spilled through his mind. “Slugged,” he said in a low, harsh croak.

“I know,” Morgana said. “So much power. Gone. But perhaps... There's yet something that could be done.” She didn't finish what she had to say, didn't explain the meaning of her vague words, as if she was now bored with the topic. Instead, she whirled on Arthur, circling round him like a shark. She was wearing a smile that was by far too wide. “Now I wonder, what should I do with you?”

“How you changed your mind since you last wanted to kill me?” Arthur asked through gritted teeth.

Merlin's eyes snapped wide. Morgana had tried to kill Arthur? More had been kept from making it to the press than he had thought then.

Morgana laughed. “Don't be naïve.”

“Are you going to snap my neck as you did those other people's then?”

“Oppressors,” she hissed, all traces of manic hilarity dissolving. “All of them.”
“I’m waiting, Morgana,” Arthur taunted her.

Merlin wanted to tell him to shut up, not to tempt fortune, but this looked as if it was a long standing brother-sister feud, so Merlin didn’t think his outsider opinion would be welcomed.

Arthur was goading Morgana with looks when he wasn’t with words anyway and when Arthur was like that, Merlin had learnt, there was no stopping him. Plus, if she hadn’t so far, she wouldn’t really kill him, would she?

“I’d oblige,” Morgana said, “if only to see Uther’s expression when he realises his perfect son, the one to turn out normal, is gone.”

Merlin’s defences stiffened his spine; he didn’t know what he would do if Morgana accessed her magic to kill Arthur.

Without his magic Merlin was perfectly useless and couldn’t stop her. He had no combat training, little muscle mass, and not much body weight to allow him to pitch in victoriously in a fight.

Without magic Merlin couldn’t help anyone. For that reason alone, fear turned his insides to jelly. But it also kept him on his toes, ready to intervene.

“That is a load of bullshit, Morgana,” Arthur snapped at his sister. “And if you’re wondering why Father doesn’t trust magic, try and take a look in the mirror.”

Morgana snapped her fingers together. Manacles glowed like molten fire around Arthur’s wrists, nearly branding him, and making him shout and go to his knees.

Though there was nothing he could truly do if Morgana put her mind to it, Merlin stepped between her and Arthur. “You can’t do that!”

Arthur was hissing, nursing his wrists. While the manacles had become invisible while still clearly there, two circles or reddened skin marked their place.

Morgana cocked her head and clucked her tongue. “How can you say that after what they’ve done to you? How can you protect him?”

“He didn’t take my magic,” said Merlin. “Section Seven did on Aeredian’s orders.”

“And whose laws empowered Section Seven to maim you, Merlin?”

Merlin didn’t want to argue about that. He’d spent a lifetime trying to sort out his ethics regarding the government.

When his capture had happened he’d thought he’d changed his mind about them. He had cherished pretty vengeful thoughts. But he wasn’t sure airing them now would help.

It would certainly play into Morgana’s hand.

Arthur sided with Merlin’s enemies and Morgana with his friends. But he had feelings and he couldn’t allow Morgana to touch her brother, to harm Arthur.

He just couldn’t stand the thought of Arthur being harmed. Pitting himself against Morgana Pendragon was crazy, but he did it. “You’ll have to go through me,” Merlin said, standing before
Arthur so he could shield him, pushing off his toes, palms opening and closely.

Morgana's eyes fired with gold and Merlin squeezed his own, expecting to be on the receiving end of the same treatment as the prison officers.

That didn't happen. Morgana didn't top him.

She unsheathed a knife and pointed it at her brother. “You may turn out useful. I'm keeping you for the time being.”

Morgana turned towards the blonde woman who'd come with her. “Let's get Ruadan out of here.”

“He's not here,” Mordred said in a placid tone he probably thought would defuse the situation.

“Then tell me where he is and we'll--”

“He's dead,” Mordred said with no fuss. “He was executed yesterday night. It's just me and Emrys you're rescuing.”

Morgana's eyes became hard, like flint. Merlin was sure she'd blow this place up in her rage. The walls even shook. But she didn't. “Then let's get you out of here fast.” She inclined her head towards the blonde woman again. “Get my brother, Morgause.”

Morgause pushed Merlin out of the way and hauled Arthur forwards. She hissed a spell and something like an invisible leash shimmered in the air, connecting Arthur's manacles to Morgause, before disappearing from view.

Merlin didn't doubt it was still very much there.


Arthur stayed on his knees, not obeying. “No.”

“I can make you,” Morgause said, managing to make her voice sound like a hiss even though it was normally pitched. “You'll regret resistance, Your Highness.”

“That's still no.”

The difference between Morgause's black pupils and the glowing ring surrounding it heightened.

Arthur doubled over and shouted, a hand on the floor, bracing him, the other around his middle, holding his stomach.

Even though his legs weren't holding him up anymore, Merlin stepped between Morgause and Arthur and shook her roughly to send her concentration to hell.

Hurting people with magic like Morgause was doing required channelling lots of power.

To be even trying Morgause knew she was powerful, mage-like, so all Merlin could do was disrupt her concentration levels. If she had the tiniest of problems holding her focus, then interfering with her, would save Arthur.

Morgause's attention shifted abruptly to Merlin, but her eyes were back to their normal colour. She studied his hand, the one Merlin wore the ring on. “Ygraine du Bois' wedding ring,” she said in a sneering tone. “You know that means nothing when you're one of us, don't you? It doesn't buy acceptance any more than it did for Morgana.”
“I know,” Merlin said, his stomach twisting. “That doesn't mean I approve of your measures.”

“You'll be grateful for them, in time,” Morgause said, then grabbed Arthur by the collar of his shirt, fighting him to get him to move. “As for you, you'll come, willing or no.”

Arthur stuck his jaw out in a taunting way and stayed on his haunched. “Then you'll have to make me.”

Merlin went to his knees, so he was level with the crouched Arthur, and put a hand on his shoulder. “Arthur, sometimes there's nothing you can do and you have to compromise. You told me that.” Merlin spun his ring with his thumb. “Don't provoke them.”

Arthur's eyes were squeezed in pain. “Now you know why I think what I think of magic.”

“Arthur--”

“Are you going to do what they want just because they're like you?”

“Like I was,” Merlin corrected.

“Same,” Arthur said, slowly disentangling his arms from his middle. “Are you going to side with them?”

Merlin didn't know what to say. He wasn't siding with Morgana, had never been. Before Ruadan his group had acted independently from her. But he wasn't adverse to them freeing Mordred either. “Arthur, please. They're so powerful you have no idea.”

“Should that persuade me, make me cower, bend my will and make me do what I think is wrong?”

“Arthur, please, I'm begging you.”

Head still bowed, Arthur nodded. “But I'll never trust them.”

Morgause found that good enough for her purposes and dragged Arthur upright and out of the cell. She waited for Merlin to come with them but the slug tocsins had sapped all the strength out of Merlin. “I can't make it outside,” Merlin said, his trembling legs proof enough of what he was saying.

Morgause tilted her head at Forridel. “You're his friend. Help him out.”

Forridel jogged over to him, a hand holding on to her rifle, her shoulder under Merlin's arm to prop him up.

“Why did you get Morgana?” Merlin whispered in her ear as she pretended to pull her hair back.

“I didn't,” Forridel murmured, taking a tiny step forward. “Sefa did. By the time she'd contacted her, I knew there was no other way to get you guys out. I have no magic. Gilli and Freya aren't these great sorcerers. I had to.”

Merlin nodded and, leaning into Forridel, limped out the door.

Morgause slammed the doors on Registrars, witness, and Governor. “A taste of your own medicine,” she said, before prodding Arthur forward and following Morgana, Mordred, Gilli, and the other members of her group out the door standing at the end of the corridor, one that, Merlin found, had been blown off its hinges.

Forridel and Merlin brought up the rear.
Once he and Forridel had struggled past the blown off door, Merlin saw the broken bodies of the wardens heaped one on top of the other around the doorway.

Even as he was forced forward by Morgause, Arthur locked gazes with him, eyebrows raised.

Merlin pushed his lips together. He, too, didn't approve. He would have tried to communicate his feelings about the nauseating sight more explicitly, if a body of Section Seven men wasn't advancing on them.

Morgana, who was in the lead, swiped her hand at them.

The Section Seven men were blown back and hit the wall behind them before they could even fire.

“Down those stairs,” Gilli said, pointing the way out.

They all stomped down a staircase that led two levels below.

Merlin was the last in tow, his breath coming in rattling heaves, his legs bending under his weight.

He'd had no measure of how badly off he still was until he found he wasn't only lagging behind, but really struggling to merely move.

While in his cell, he'd thought there had been an improvement in his condition. His fever wasn't spiking anymore, just a low, simmering heat. And his mind was as alert as ever. But keeping up with the others was proving so daunting Merlin could no longer believe he was even remotely okay. Asking his body to spring into motion was just too much for it.

“We'll have to cross a section that separates this place from House Block two,” Gilli said, scoping the area immediately before him before allowing them onwards. “And then onto the main courtyard. We can get out where we came from.”

“Very well,” Morgana said. “Let's go.”

They went down a long hallway, zigzagged past two corners, Morgana scattering all warden opposition with a flick of her hand, and scuttled into another one seguing into a large corridor winged by offices.

Once they were past those, they progressed along a narrower corridor lined with barred windows through which they could see the faint flicker of filtered light that came from the adjacent house block.

The corridor ended into an inner courtyard formed like a quadrangle. It was a tiered construction; levels of stairs giving onto walkways dotted by cell doors made up its lay-out.

The courtyard they were in was the base of the well.

All was very quiet here although inmates should have been inhabiting those cells and wardens should have been stopping their advance.

It was all so very strange.

Merlin was limping behind, his weight almost all on Forridel, when he heard the noise of many feet stomping along the concourse erected over his head, and saw a platoon lean over the walkway railing and point their weapons at them.

More men appeared behind and before them, blocking virtually every means of escape they had.
Merlin wasn't a tactician but he knew they were mostly fucked.

The Section Seven and CO19 men had terrain advantage by virtue of being placed above them while having them in their weapons' sights.

The officers guarding the doors leading into the other house block and towards liberty were as much of an obstacle as the S7 men because they were numerous.

Merlin couldn't tell how powerful Morgana was, though he was certain she was more than an ordinary sorceress, but he knew she couldn't beat back half a platoon without armies of her own.

Merlin would have considered such a situation dire enough to deserve critical consideration, but Morgana just laughed.

As Morgana laughed, cracks opened down the walls of the house block they were in, splicing them in places, and chunks of plaster belonging to the ceiling fell on the heads of the Section Seven personnel.

The latter didn't stop training their weapons on their little group of fugitives but they were distracted enough to shrug the detritus off their shoulders.

“You can't advance, Your Highness,” a Section Seven man said, stepping out of the group of men guarding the exit and addressing Morgana. “By law I can't arrest you, but you need to surrender and release Mordred Rhonabwy and Merlin Emrys into our custody.”

“You know very well I won't, Superintendent,” Morgana said, evidently divining the man's rank by way of the insignia attached to his black uniform jumper. “I judge their arrest contrary to the laws of nature.”

The Section Seven officer acknowledged that with a slight dip of his head.

Just when Merlin thought they were at a stalemate, Morgana and Morgause's power joined against Section Seven, Morgause surprised them all.

She grabbed Arthur viciously by the hair, forced him into a strangle-hold from behind, one that bared his throat, and pointed a sharp knife at his jugular. “I guess you all know who this is. If you don't stand down, I'll show no compunction in cutting his throat.”

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As the knife' tip met Arthur's skin, a little well of blood trickled down, with little beads forming along the lines of the cut.

Arthur whipped his head to the side and away from the threat, but a thin rivulet of blood ran down the edge of the blade. At the same time a dark stain on the collar of his shirt glimmered in the artificial light of the inner courtyard.

It made Merlin see red and propelled him into action. Weakly, a little gauchely, he shook free of Forridel's support and, summoning the last shreds of energy his abused body had left, he sprang. He wasn't quick and he wasn't graceful but he had the advantage of surprise.
With Morgause not expecting an attack to come from behind her, Merlin was put in a position to orchestrate a mad dash.

He flew at Morgause, knocking her forward and causing her to let go of Arthur.

He might have had no vigour left, but he weighed more than her. This meant that the impact caused her to stagger and tumble. Having lost her centre, she almost fell, but she summoned magic to aid her. Using her powers to give her some of her equilibrium back, she found her balance, standing on her toes like a cat walking the edge of a roof, or a ballerina en pointe. Eyes glowing, she fully landed on the flat of her feet. But even though she had recovered and was back on track to attack, she'd momentarily lost Arthur and couldn't use him as her pawn.

Good, Merlin thought. Engage me.

At the same time as he thought that, Merlin wriggled free from Morgause, but she slashed at him with her knife.

“Merlin!” Arthur shouted, eyes tracking the fight.

“Busy!” Merlin yipped back as Morgause got close enough to give him a stiff punch below the heart that robbed him of all breath. On the heels of that and before he could recover, she jabbed him in the ribs.

Merlin's knees nearly buckled; he cradled his chest. He couldn't do so for long however, for a heavy boot shot out and caught him in the solar plexus.

Merlin gagged, feeling perfectly defenceless. He couldn't breathe. The next blow turned him over, so he was arching backwards on his knees. He reached a hand behind him to pad the fall, but even that didn't help much.

He was waiting for a final blow that would down him for good when a variety of other things happened.

Morgause realised that, however probably satisfying for her, hitting him wouldn't get her far, not unless she took her time. Since the situation didn't allow for that kind of leisure, not with Aeredian there, she turned her magic on Merlin.

Her eyes shone red and Merlin was hit by a spell that sent him flying backwards through air at impossible speed.

He could feel himself hurtle backwards, fending the air like a cannon ball, hurtling through the empty space separating him from the perimeter partition. Before he could do anything, windmill his arms or grab something, his body connected with the wall. He heard the smacking sound the collision caused as if from outside his own body and felt something splinter inside him.

He was stunned, breathless, as he nervelessly slid to the ground, unable to move, to do anything but watch what was going on unfold.

“Merlin!” Arthur yelled, sounding thoroughly panicky.

Merlin couldn't say there was nothing to be terrified about.

Section Seven were still there.

Morgana was such a powerhouse of indignant magic he would have been at pains to stop her if he'd
had his own magic, let alone slugged as he was.

Morgause looked murderous too and very ready to retaliate.

Though the situation was desperate, Merlin he couldn't stand for Arthur to get hurt. These were heavy-lifter magic users and they would surely attack Arthur too if he so much as moved to help Merlin. With the little breath he had, not caring if he was sealing his death sentence, Merlin said, “Stay away.”

And he was right to tell Arthur to do so, for Morgause lifted her hand as if to finish Merlin with a twist of her fingers and a spell Merlin didn't think Arthur could survive. The blast was sure to hit Merlin hard as it was and he didn't want Arthur to be caught in the fall-out.

He needn't have worried, though, for Morgana shouted authoritatively, “Morgause, we might need him yet.”

Morgana had barely finished relaying her order than Aeredian came barrelling in, taking over from the Superintendent who'd been in charge before. Wasting no time, he extracted his gun from his holster and shot Morgause.

If Morgause hadn't been so busy casting and trying to obliterate Merlin, Morgause would have blocked the shot easily enough by summoning a shield. But she was probably too angry at Merlin to think to do so. So she went down, blood staining her shirt, her eyes registering surprise and pain.

And that was when everything went absolutely topsy turvy. Morgana screamed and her scream did more than echo and bounce around the inner courtyard.

It made the walls shake and the floors heave in small waves; it caused the light fixtures to swing wildly. A booming sound was released.

The building creaked and groaned beneath Merlin and chunks of roof started collapsing, injecting dust into the air.

They hit the Section Seven men gathered on the walkways and neutralised them.

Next Aeredian and his group became the object of Morgana’s focus.

She grabbed Arthur by the arm, her fingers digging into his forearm. “You know I don't even need a knife to snap his neck, don't you?” she told Aeredian, chin out so that her jaw looked larger and more imposing. “You know what I can do to you too, you puny man. Stand back or no one makes it out of here alive.”

Merlin attempted to shake the pain and dazzlement away and to focus on what was going on. He longed for his magic so that he could free Arthur and stop Morgana. But his magic had been taken from him and he was too weak to even move. He was just sitting there limply, his arms at his sides, palms turned up, his head feebly listing to the side.

He tried to will the littlest spark of magic to light up inside him but although a luminous glow seemed to spread over his skin, he knew full well that that was only double vision. He'd hit his head pretty hard, so it wasn't hard to figure out he might experiencing a few concussion symptoms. He was pretty much broken. Delusions were normal, especially considering how much he craved his magic. His brain was playing with him, plying him with what he wanted, suggesting he still had something that was completely lost to him. Something he could never get back. However much he prayed, that wouldn't happen. He had to stay rational and see through the dreams his weakened brain supplied to him.
He still felt the loss of his magic keenly.

What pained him even more was that now he was going to be of no use to Arthur now that Arthur needed him.

A look at Arthur's shocked but brave face though convinced him to try again.

Trying to sit up, he whimpered, but realised he couldn't budge a muscle. The only thing he did was cause blood coming from his ears to drip down the side of his face.

His chest sank with a groan.

While Merlin ineffectually tried to pull himself up, Aeredian assessed the situation he was in.

His eyes got steely and his mouth puckered into angry folds lined by wrinkles. A myriad little furrows traced the length of his brow.

“Someone do something!”

A second shock reverberated through the building.

That seemed to decide Aeredian. He lifted an arm and ordered his men to, “Fall back, let them pass.”

“Are you sure, sir?” the Superintendent guy asked.

Aeredian roared this time. “Do as I say.”

The Section Seven men parted in two equally matched wings, clearly making way for Morgana's party.

Morgana tipped her chin up and ordered a member of her retinue to, “Help Morgause.” Then she murmured something in Arthur's ear and spurred him forward. “Do it or these men die.” Her gaze encompassed all the Section Seven and CO19 men blocking their egress as well as any of the wardens who'd come running at the first signs of disturbance.

“Merlin comes with or I'm not budging,” Arthur said.

From where he was Merlin couldn't read Morgana's face, but judging by the way her body was coiled, he was ready to bet she was more than a little angry. “Pray my plans regarding him come to fruition or I'll spit him slowly for what he did to my cousin.”

“He was trying to help me,” said Arthur, head held high. “While you didn't and you're supposed to be my big sister.”

“Don't give me that,” Morgana snapped, spittle flying from her mouth. “Where were you when Uther unleashed his inquisitors on me to find out what my dreams meant? And where were you when he turned me out?”

“You were magic,” Arthur said, his voice feeble.

“Exactly.” Morgana turned away from Arthur, virtually dismissing him with that gesture, and locked eyes with Forridel. “You're friends with Merlin; help him.”

Only after Morgana had conveyed that order did Arthur start walking in step with Morgana, slowly making for the door leading into the next house block.

Forridel ran to Merlin instead, bending low, a hand on her knee, her rifle slung behind her back.
“Merlin, can you stand?”

“No,” he said, coughing and spitting blood. “I don't think that's happening.”

“Please, Merlin,” said Forridel, “I don't want to leave you behind.”

Merlin didn't want to be left behind either. With Arthur in Morgana's hands Merlin couldn't allow himself to sit back and let destiny do as it willed.

He didn't trust Morgana to do the right thing by her brother. Not after what Merlin had done to her cousin and ally. And Arthur deserved his freedom. Merlin wanted to give it him.

He just needed to make his body work again, somehow. He pushed off his toes with all his might and nothing happened but for a strange warmth blooming in his chest.

It was odd; it wasn't like the pain he'd been expecting. It was almost soothing. But he panicked all the same. He couldn't move. He couldn't fucking move.

With his despair a new sensation arose.

Static zinged along the length of his skin and raised his hairs. His flesh stung.

A tingle ran down his neck and back; something like a small charge teased and spread heat through him. That was when he was able to move and experience all the pain he hadn't felt when he'd first tried to stand.

He screamed, coughed and sobbed, fighting the waves of nausea and pain, attempting to remain desperately conscious. The pain subsided after a while and he decided it was high time to get vertical. He hugged his rib-cage and struggled to start upright.

Forridel pulled him up, grabbing a fistful of shirt and arm. When Merlin had more or less righted himself, Forridel ducked her shoulder under his arm and took most of his weight. “I think I have you,” she said, bracing her legs when they both threatened to overbalance.

“Thank you,” Merlin said, finding her as reliable as ever.

She wrapped an arm solidly around his middle and asked. “Can you make it?”

Voice sounding a little otherworldly to his own ears, Merlin said, “I've got to, haven't I?”

“Ready?” Forridel took a step forwards and he went with her even though all the bones in his body seemed to rattle when he did.

Leaning his weight on her, his hand capping her shoulder for support, he attempted to keep to her pace. All the while he was hugging himself with his other arm, holding himself to assuage the aching sharpness that was tormenting him. He staggered onwards, biting his lips, legs folding with every step, his ribcage on fire.

But he made it past Aeredian, who took one swift glance at Merlin and said, “I don't care what it takes. I'll be your doom.”

Huffing he was so short of breath, Merlin stopped, bit back a sob, and angled his head towards Aeredian. “I'll make you pay too.”

It was probably an empty threat; at the present moment Merlin couldn't hurt a fly and his future looked hazy at best.
His only allotted task now was freeing Arthur from Morgana. After that Merlin was done, end of the journey, nowhere left to go.

Being the man that had ordered him slugged, Aeredian should have known that. He should have been aware of the statistics that said that the great bulk of slugged warlocks didn't survive long.

By all rights Aeredian should have laughed in his face, but he didn't. On the contrary, his face turned ashen and his lips white.

Before recovering enough composure to curse him, Aeredian had looked like a man who'd seen death in the face.

That was enormously satisfying and got Merlin as far as the new block and into the courtyard, where he slumped again.

He did so in time to stumble into the rear of Morgana's group.

“Oh,” said Forridel, pulling him towards her when his knees started giving again. “I think there's more trouble in sight.”

And there was. Three Section Seven units had gathered in the opened courtyard circumscribed by the perimeter railing. Armoured vehicles dotted the area whilst providing the S7 operatives with cover. Multiple weapons were aimed at Morgana's group; among them slug-charged pistols.

With Morgause wounded and only three active sorcerers, they didn't stand a chance. Making it past this road block appeared like the perfect set of impossible odds.

But Morgana didn't let that stop her. “Your boss and I have an agreement,” she declared loudly and for all to hear. “Fall back or the Prince of Wales dies.”

Merlin had started to really hate Morgana but he found himself wishing Section Seven would stand down.

Morgana had immunity; whatever she did would go unpunished. Even if Parliament repealed the laws making her so (a process that would take years) she wouldn't be punished retroactively for whatever she did now. Only for her magic.

Morgana had everything to gain from Arthur's death. With him gone she was next in line to the throne. Uther wasn't that young of a man and that would put the nation in her hands. Is she didn't kill her father first. The only reason Morgana had made a bid for Belmarsh had been a desire to spring Ruadan and Mordred free.

She had probably wanted to because Ruadan had served her well and because Mordred was magic and, as such, part of the group she acted on behalf of.

Although her methods of going about it were really a string of acts of terror, she had made the defence of magic her cause. It was natural to think that helping someone like Mordred escape would be something she'd do.

But what if she thought that, with her only true friend dead in Ruadan, Mordred wasn't worth it? What if she decided to let him rot and die in Belmarsh, while she walked out.

She could decide then that she didn't need Arthur as insurance anymore. She could murder him and walk out of here as if nothing had happened.
A strong tide of terror washed loose inside Merlin and something broke that had kept him going, that had allowed him to stay strong. To battle through everything that had ever happened to him.

It was as if a mass of juggled pieces of the rawest materials was tearing at his heart and turning it to pulp, the gashes spilling his life's blood from the inside out. Some restrained part of him got free of its moorings and a rush of emotion swept over him.

The dam gave way. The vice that held his stupid heart tight broke under the assault of feelings he didn't understand anymore and he nearly succumbed to it. “Please,” he found himself saying, no longer knowing who he should support in this crazy, twisted game. “Please, just please. Don't let him die.”

There was a collective pause and everybody held their breadth.

Section Seven wasn't falling back and letting them go. Their array of weapons was still trained at them.

Morgana wasn't letting go of Arthur either and Arthur...

Arthur stood tall through it all, chest on display, head up, waiting for fate to decide whether he'd live or die.

“Fight for your life,” Merlin murmured, even though he knew how hypocritical he was sounding while he himself had thrown in the towel in that prison cell of his.

Even now he'd given up all hope for the future. It was a little ironical, he supposed, in that he was perfectly aware of how Arthur didn't stand a chance and was applying different standards to them both. But he wanted Arthur to live.

He was already preparing himself for the worst, cold sweat coating his body, when the stalemate broke.

The leader of the Section Seven deployment received a radio message, nodded grimly, then said through his loudspeaker, “Stand back. Unit three, stand back. Let them pass.”

It was the order Morgana had been waiting for. Shoving Arthur forward, she started walking towards the van waiting for her.

Her retinue followed, one of Morgana's men carrying Morgause in the cradle of his arms and securing her to a seat. Gilli and Mordred were in tow.

The latter fell back when he noticed how Forridel and Merlin were struggling to make the distance.

At which point he doubled back, slipped his arm under Merlin's shoulder as Forridel had done, and started working towards getting Merlin into that van.

Grunting with every breath, Merlin hugged them both close to steady himself, and gave his all to walking faster.

But he was more unsteady than he had realised. His muscles weren't obeying; he felt shaky all over. He started to miss every other step, buckling and nearly tumbling forward every time he did, and making them all sway.

It was only when they understood he wasn't making it, that he was faltering with every single move forward, that they decided to hold him up all the time without allowing him to put in any effort or
any weight on his legs.

It mustn't have been easy since he was taller than them both but they managed and pulled off carrying him to the van in less than a minute.

Once they reached the vehicle, an explosion blew the walls of the compound outward, and one of Morgana's people started shouting. “Quick, quick get him in or we're dumping you here.”

Grabbing him by his shirt, Gilli reeled Merlin in, eliciting a few shouts as Merlin's ribs cracked and jingled.

When he was on board Forridel and Mordred eased Merlin into the nearest seat.

Forridel bundled him in a blanket and rubbed his arms up and down as if she thought warmth alone would revive him, while Mordred closed the van door with a decisive click.

The engine rumbled; the van chugged to life and Merlin leant his head against the seat rest.

The vehicle must have begun to nose its way out of the courtyard for Merlin felt it shake and acquire speed.

The van's motion as it sped in whichever direction Morgana had decreed they should go, lulled him into very near sleep, but something nagged at his brain, shaking up his disjointed ideas.

He opened eyes he didn't remember closing and locked them with Arthur's, who was sitting next to Morgana two row of seats closer to the driver.

He looked shaken, a bit the worse for wear, with a thin cut meandering down his throat, but otherwise fine. He mimed some words, which Merlin's newly blurry, darkened vision didn't allow him to read until he strained to.

When he did – he'd mouthed the words 'thank you' – Merlin smiled and, suddenly quieted, let his head loll back and his body go lax.

He fell asleep thinking of those words.

****

He was in a meadow and the sun shone bright all over it. He was surrounded by green grass circumscribed on one side by a bubbling flowing stream. The air was fresh, the vista lush. Birds were chirping in the trees. The air was heavy with a thousand soft and pleasing scents.

The sun was hot up in the sky, a glowing disk seldom hiding between whiffs of clouds.

Some shadow was provided by a thick canopy of branches, and Merlin was enjoying it fully, lying on his back, his hands locked on his belly.

He felt calm and relaxed. Everything was perfect. And time seemed to have come to a standstill.

The air vibrated with the absence of it.

Here there was no pain either. As if he was immersed in a warm bath that had healing properties, the
terrible amount of pain he remembered experiencing was slowly lifting.

The only difference between this place and such a bath was that the atmosphere around him was cool and invigorating, rather than warm and vaporous. He sighed for the pleasure of it.

The noise he'd made caused a little stir in the area around him. Boughs shook; branches soughed. Almond-shaped leaves detached themselves from the branches they originated from and came to coat the ground. Out of the depths of the woods a great lumbering shape emerged.

It was so big it obscured the sun, though Merlin had to squint at its glare to make out the shape. When at last he did, his mouth fell open.

“You're a dragon,” he said, though he didn't need to. The creature was most certainly one, what with the thick scales covering its body like a carapace, its golden eyes, and huge bat-like wings.

“Indeed I am, young warlock,” the creature said, surprising Merlin and making him wonder how the beast could talk. “And I'm here for you.”

Merlin pushed himself backwards on his elbows, a little scared. Everything had been so perfect but that phrase sounded ominous.

“For me. How?” Merlin asked.

The dragon chuckled, revealing that he gloried in Merlin's discomfiture.

“Just how?”

The dragon breathed on him and all pain left his body, the soft breath washing Merlin clean of all ache and pains. His bones re-knit, all his wounds, superficial and deep seated, healed.

Merlin sat bolt upright. He was lying on a bed, three fat pillows stacked behind him, sprawled in the dead centre of big four poster that sat in its turn in the middle of a lofty chamber.

The walls were panelled in limed oak to a height of ten feet. Damask wall-paper reached out to the ceiling.

Above the panelling hung tapestries, all very garish in colour, representing hunting scenes.

The room was busy with furniture; chairs and armchairs that had upholstered feet and elbow rests; tall dressers; dainty side tables and footstools.

The dressers and consoles were covered in knick-knacks – like marble statuettes depicting nymphs and dancers or tiny enamel miniatures that shone in the afternoon sun – and the walls were rarely bare.

A wooden carving etched with mystic symbols and flowers decorated one wall. A painting represented the grail. Mirrors set in china frames adorned another.

The floor was covered with carpets that looked as soft as grass. The fireplace was of stone with a silver grid.

Two tall windows capped by heavy draperies opened in different parts of the room. One was opposite his bed the other on his left-hand side.

From the alcove surrounding it a person pushed off. When Merlin’s eyes adjusted to the light difference, the pale luminescence surrounding the person like a halo vanished, and he understood
that it was Morgana he was facing.

And flinched.

She came to sit on the bed, in the hollow his hips had made. Her mouth formed a severe line. Her eyes sparked with venom. “After what you did to Morgause you're only alive because I need you.”

Morgana's words pulled him back to the here and now. After his odd dream and the even more surreal feeling of displacement he'd experienced upon waking up in this palatial room, Merlin had been a little confused as to everything that had happened. He couldn't even tell what was real and what was not.

Now he knew that his outing in the woods was a dream and that this was reality. He also remembered what had happened in Belmarsh. A question sprang to his lips on the heels of that jolt to his memory. “Where's Arthur?”

“You're not going to ask what I need you for?” Morgana asked sharply.

Merlin didn't want to know. But even if he'd wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to care unless he knew Arthur was fine.

The last time he'd clapped eyes on him Morgana had been manhandling him. Having seen the lady in action Merlin had reason to suspect she might have hurt her brother. And if that were so... His heart squeezed in his chest... “Where is he?”

Morgana narrowed her eyes at him till they were two green slits. “You're not trying to tell me that the marriage I witnessed wasn't a charade to save your life? You’re not really pretending you love him, are you?”

While Merlin could safely affirm that the marriage had taken place because Arthur had wanted to save his life even while hating Merlin and magic in general, Merlin wasn't sure he could now say he didn't feel something deep for Arthur. Not in the wake of that prison showdown and the personal revelation that had followed.

Before it, he'd been so confused. Tossed this way and that by circumstance. Following his heart; falling into bed with Arthur; being called to do his duty by his friends; being accused by Arthur of being an assassin; being hated on for what he was, with him conversely unjustly suspecting Arthur of having sold them to the police had being going through a lot.

He and Arthur had both been reared to stand against what each of them represented. The hunted sorcerer and the son of the man who put sorcerers to death. The warlock and the man who backed his father's politics. They'd been nurtured to hate each other. They both lived in a world of deep prejudice. Two sides, two worlds, a battle field of victims in between.

Renouncing the creed that made of the Pendragons enemies had felt to Merlin like betraying his roots, shutting the door on all those who'd ever come seek his help.

Thinking that Arthur could overcome his own roots and change his spots was madness too. Arthur would never disavow his father and most certainly not for Merlin. Not for someone he automatically suspected of the worst actions. (Assassin, killer, monster.)

But the revelation he'd undergone in the Belmarsh courtyard had been pretty meaningful.

Earth-shattering almost. He wouldn't commit to words, not even in the privacy of him own mind, because they made no sense, not with Arthur disliking the very fibre that had gone into his being, but
he could admit to the feelings.

And they were camping large in his mind in the same way they'd taken residence in his chest, where
they were expanding till they threatened to shatter his rib-cage.

So it was a bit funny. Those feelings were there and were now a part of him. And he liked that new
part of him.

But they would have to be curbed because Arthur would never ever return them. Maybe he would
treat Merlin with more kindness now that he knew more about the abuses magic users underwent.
Maybe he'd learn to be more accepting towards sorcerers in general. But he'd never love Merlin as
more than a cause. Someone to champion, if it came to that.

All that might have seemed a lot to pour over but was only the realisation of a minute. The thought
that struck him next was that whatever he did, he mustn't show Morgana his hand.

He could trust her as little as he did her father, that was to say none at all.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he said, sitting up against the pillow so as to put more
distance between himself and Morgana. “I was asking because Arthur doesn't deserve your venom.”

Morgana flew into a rage. With a slapping motion, she swept a glass off the night-stand. “You think
he doesn't? You think he doesn't? Do you know what he did to me?”

“No,” Merlin said, shaking his head. “How could I?”

“Uther had inquisitors at the palace,” Morgana said, her voice like sandpaper. “They took me aside
for questioning. On random days. Sometimes even at night. They'd wake me up and lead me to an
empty room with only a chair to sit. They threatened, cajoled, studied me like an animal in a cage.

Gave me history books to read, but select ones, the ones that showed how magic was evil and just
kings persecuted its practitioners. I was sixteen. And terrified.”

She turned her head away, a heavy fall of beautiful hair screening her face.

“One day after a night spent like that, swearing my dreams were just dreams, Arthur intercepted me
in the corridor. He took my hand and said, 'It's all right, Morgana. You can't be evil. You can't be
magic.' But see,” Morgana said, manic. “I was. And he was equating magic with evil. He didn't say
it's okay if you're magic. I'll love you all the same.”

Morgana bunched up the material that went into making her skirt. “He just assumed that since he
loved me I couldn't be evil.”

Merlin had been exposed to that kind of reasoning himself and could sympathise. But nothing would
erase Morgana's actions from his memory nor make him think they were right or justifiable. He
understood the thought process very well, better than anyone, but couldn't approve.

“Yeah, I reckon he would have, in time,” Merlin said in as circumspect a tone as he was possible. He
was defenceless and alone with Morgana. He wouldn't deliberately goad her into killing him. Not
until he knew where Arthur was – god, please, tell me he's fine – and had helped him get out of
Morgana's clutches. “If he knew better, he'd be a great King.”

Morgana slapped him, the smack resounding. “I'll make a better queen. A queen giving liberty to
your kind.”
Merlin stood stock still.

“And that’s why I need you.”

Merlin laughed. He felt like a bad villain in a worse film but what Morgana had just said seemed tragically funny to him. “I’m no use to anyone right now. I have no magic.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Merlin rubbed the blanket covering him over the slug entry wound. It itched way less now. “I think I know. I have no magic left. Zilch. I was slugged. You even had to heal me for us to be having this conversation.”

Morgana cranked her eyebrow up. “I didn’t heal you.”

“You didn't he--” Merlin tailed off.

He didn't understand. While he was tired and bewildered he definitely felt better. He did feel as though he had fought a thousand battles, true, but he had no more fever, his leg didn't throb, and his ribs, which had sustained quite a shock, weren't rattling in his ribcage.

Merlin was prone to think Morgana had lied and actually healed him so he could serve her purposes.

But why do it? If she'd admitted to it, Merlin would have owed her. And if she wanted something from him that was the obvious thing to do. Bind Merlin with bonds of gratitude. But she was denying it. This was so baffling. Merlin decided to play the fool. “Must have been the good night's sleep then.”

“You slept for three days,” she said consideringly. She compressed her lips until they were a pale line. “And that's not the point. The point is that your magic may not be lost after all.”

Merlin knotted the sheets in his fist. “That's impossible. You might survive slugging but you're magic's gone once you've been hit. There are statistics to prove it.”

Morgana's lips twitched in derision. “If I get you your magic back, will you support me and my cause?”

Merlin had no intention to, especially after what he'd seen in Belmarsh.

Before Belmarsh all Merlin had known of Princess Morgana was that she'd tried to kill her father and that her methods were like Ruadan's, ruthless and borderline terroristic.

After Belmarsh Merlin knew Morgana felt no compassion and no remorse.

She might have some affection left for her cousin, but that was it. It was sad that a magic user had become that way and if he thought he could persuade her to change he would.

But he wouldn't lend himself to her plans. He couldn't say that now though. He had to find out if Arthur was okay and concoct a way to extricate him first. “What would that entail?”

“I assume you would love to kill the King?” Morgana said in a tone that was more light-hearted than her message warranted. “The man who nearly had you killed, had your magic taken from you, and persecuted you your whole life.

Merlin said, “But what would it solve? If you kill him people will think you're as bad as him. The hatred for magic users will never die!”
“I want him dead because he deserves to die,” said Morgana, pointing a finger at him. “I managed
to get documents stolen from his private office when I still lived in that prison that was Buckingham
palace. You know what I found? Reports on what was done to magic users. Horrible things.
Nightmare-like things. There were notes in the margins written in Uther's hand specifying how his
annihilation methods were to be improved. There were secret operative orders meant specifically for
Section Seven. One bore Arthur's signature. They deserve what they're going to get.” Morgana's
eyes were spirited now. Completely lost in the memories her reading those documents had conjured.
“Anyone who thinks like Uther is going to be punished, like him.”

“That's going to be a lot of people,” Merlin said, a shiver coursing through him as he tried to picture
Morgana's retaliation methods. It would be a blood bath. “Uther's presented us in a perverted light for
years. He's brainwashed lots of people into thinking we're the enemy. You can't turn on them all!”

“Are you with me or against me?” Morgana snapped, her eyes glimmering with the gold of magic.

Merlin's eyes bugged at the surprise sensation of his air being cut off. He clawed at his throat,
coughing and choking.

An invisible hand was almost crushing his windpipe. Dizziness threatened and panic welled inside
him with it.

He had to survive long enough to ensure Arthur was fine and that Mordred and Forridel could walk
out on Morgana without consequences.

His hand at his throat desperately trying to loosen the phantom fingers digging in, he clenched his
teeth. “How—” he rasped. “I won't be able... t-to do much i-if I'm dead.”

Morgana let go of her magic and with it of her choke-hold. “I'm pleased you're seeing reason.”

Merlin wheezed, drinking in big lungfuls of much needed, heady oxygen. “You see how helpless I
am without my magic though.”

Morgana smirked. Of course she could see that. That was her leverage. “I can restore it in exchange
for your service. Do I have your word you're with me?”

Merlin tried to think fast. His pride dictated he told Morgana to fuck off as he had many a bully
before. But he had things to do like saving Arthur. He could swallow his pride for once and bow
down. “Yes.”

“Good,” said Morgana with a smile that didn't look much like one it was so dry. “Your death would
have been painful. I believe in a strict eye for an eye policy.”

Not wanting to hear Morgana rant about what she would have done to him had he refused her,
Merlin asked a pointed question. “How am I supposed to get my magic back?”

“There's a legend.”

Merlin scoffed.

Looking daggers at Merlin, Morgana reprised. “There's a legend about a cave. The Crystal Cave.”

“The what?” Merlin asked. Perhaps having been raised by a non-magic user had limited his
knowledge of peculiar legends.

“A magic cave,” said Morgana with fire in her eyes. “It's said to be the birth place of magic.”
Merlin was highly sceptical. “If a trip to this cave could cure slugged people, then all the people Uther deprived of magic would still have their powers. They don't.”

“Morgause swears by that cave,” said Morgana as if that alone settled the matter. “And there's a man who says he can work it, make the magic inside its walls respond to him.”

“A man?” Merlin still thought that was tripe. “Are you sure that this man is all there?” He tapped his head for show. “Because I think he's bullshitting you.”

“Why would he?” Morgana asked somewhat rhetorically. “He's one of yours. A find of Forridel's. He owns a safe house your group apparently uses.”

Merlin remembered Forridel being cagey about the house in Elmers End, not telling him who the owner was, but he'd thought that was because she was trying to protect the owner's identity.

The fewer people knew, the least likelihood there was of the secret spilling out.

Protecting contacts was part of their objectives as members of the Underground. But he didn't see how this man of all men would know about the Crystal Cave. It seemed very coincidental. Making sense of what was happening was proving difficult. “And he knows how to restore magic?”

“He does,” Morgana said, tossing her head back proudly. “He said so himself.”

It was worth trying, Merlin reckoned. If he got his magic back he could do what he needed to. Make sure Morgana didn't initiate a blood bath, save Arthur, ensure his friends' safety. “Okay, all right. Let's see what he has to say.”

“Only if you promise you'll put your powers at my service.”

Merlin nibbled his lip. He should say 'nothing doing' and leave it at that. But he had to. No matter how shit he was at spy games, no matter how reluctant he was to do it, he had to lie and double cross her. “Yes, yes I will.”

Morgana rose from the bed, holding herself stiffly like only a princess could. “Then you might call yourself my ally.” She walked to the door but she didn't open it. “Remember though, betray me and you'll pay dearly.”

Merlin swallowed. “I didn't need the warning.”

“Good.” Morgana opened the door, ushering in a tall man with shaggy black hair and a rather unkempt beard. “This is Balinor. He swears by his secret knowledge.” Morgana walked up to Balinor and though she was shorter it was clear she was trying to make him cower. “If you've lied...”

“I haven't,” Balinor said. He sounded unmoved and he didn't look impressed by Morgana's scare tactics. “I'll help the boy get his magic back. As I promised.”

“Very well,” said Morgana, bypassing Balinor. “I'll leave you two to it but if in the time it takes Morgause to recover from that bullet wound he isn't back to his old self, you'll pay.”

Morgana turned the handle.


Morgana glared.

“If we're fighting together, you owe me that piece of info.”
Morgana squinted as though Merlin had punched her in the stomach. “The little prince has a room of his own downstairs. Same orientation as this one, same wing, one floor lower.”

So saying, she left, leaving Merlin alone with Balinor.

Merlin studied this Balinor person very attentively. He looked pretty ragged. His hair-cut and beard suggested he hadn't seen a barber in quite a while. His cheeks were sunken and his lips were chapped as if he was either ill or hadn't drunk in days.

His clothes were sturdy but cheap, threadbare in places, frayed in others. They were also very outdated. Merlin was sure he hadn't seen trousers like that in more than a decade.

Overall, there was a general air of penury about him.

The man wore combat boots caked with months old mud, their soles coming off. The laces had snapped and had been retied in a haphazard knot that would only hold for so long before they had to be replaced.

In the main this person looked like a vagrant and an unfriendly one at that because he didn't greet Merlin nor smile at him. He was just wearing this perpetual frown and staring at Merlin as if he was an alien just landed on earth from a far away planet.

“You're Merlin Emrys,” he said.

Oh lord, had Mordred filled this man in on his lore raves? Balinor said his name as if it meant something. “Yeah, yeah I am,” Merlin said. “That's my name.”

Balinor took a step forward, stopped, brushed a hand up his nape, and then said, “You've lost your magic?”

“I was slugged.”

“May I?” Balinor said and gestured at the bed.

Merlin realised he'd left the man standing. He bent his knees and made way for him to sit next to him. “Yeah, of course you can.”

Balinor sat at the edge of the bed, body angled towards the window in the opposite corner. “May I?” he asked again.

Merlin didn't know what he wanted but said 'yes' nonetheless.

Balinor felt Merlin's brow and closed his eyes. When he reopened them they were subtly rimmed with amber. “Your magic is not gone, Merlin.”

“What do you mean not gone?” Merlin reached down inside him to channel. He pointed his hand at the shards of glass Morgana had left in her wake and commanded them to levitate under his breath, but not a single chunk moved. “I call that gone.”

Balinor shook his head. “How old are you, Merlin?”

What had that got to do with anything, Merlin wondered, even while he answered, “Nearly twenty.”

Balinor's eyes set in a long distance stare. It looked as though he was adrift in a world of his own. The subject of their discussion seemed to have been dropped and Balinor's attention to have shifted inwards.
Merlin came to doubt the man even knew what he had been talking about and speculated that Balinor simply was a bit loopy and out of touch with reality.

Morgana had been a fool to think this man had the answers and Merlin had been a fool along with her to be led to believe her mad plans would work.

It hurt a little to think that his sole hope of having his magic back had been proved bogus but at the moment he was more concerned with Balinor than with that.

Balinor's eyes had misted with tears and he was wringing his hands. His expression was filled with pain and his body was coiling in on itself, his muscles both bulging and quaking.

This poor man was undergoing some kind of emotional turmoil and Merlin could do nothing to help him. Not unless he found out about the source of his sorrows. “Hey, are you okay?”

Balinor startled and focused his eyes back on Merlin in a meaningful stare. “You haven't lost your magic because you can't,” Balinor said as if he hadn't dropped that conversation topic more than a minute ago.

Merlin didn't much care about the magic aspect of the situation right then because he felt this man was close to a breakdown. He had to do something to soothe his suffering. “Do you need a glass of water? Maybe I could--”

Balinor's eyes sparked and his voice rose to thundering levels. “Don't deflect. You are magic, Merlin.”

That got to Merlin. “I'm magic?”

“You're magic itself,” Balinor said, still sounding angry, though his voice didn't fill the room anymore. “You're one with it and you're it. You can't lose what you are.”

“But I can't do magic anymore.”

“Stop lying to yourself,” said Balinor, “stop accepting other people's truths as your own and look into yourself.

Merlin did try because the man sounded so knowing and earnest and honest. But not a spark of his old power rose to his fingertips. He opened his palm, wishing for any earthly manifestation of his magic, but nothing happened. No airy creation came into being at his bidding. Not a jolt of magic sparked from his fingers. “I'm not. I have nothing left.”

“You think so because that slug that hit you drained you of some magic,” Balinor told him while grabbing him by the shoulder. “But you are and will always be the very essence of magic.”

Merlin dropped his eyes because he was too shaken with some kind of pent up emotion to be able to meet Balinor's spirited gaze. He shivered a little as you do when something unsettles you and tried with all his might to prove Balinor right by finding he still had some magic in him. “I don't know. It's not there.”

Balinor tilted his head up. “Maybe that's true for now. Maybe the journey to finding yourself will be a long one, but know I'm not lying.”

Merlin nodded thoughtfully, wetting his lip. “How do I find myself then?”

“The Crystal Cave will help you,” Balinor told him, squeezing his shoulder one last time before
releasing him. “I'll be your guide.”

“Thank you,” Merlin said. “I don't know why you're doing this, but thank you.”

Balinor scooted back. “I'm certainly not doing it for Morgana. Be wary of her.”

Merlin frowned deeply. He couldn't be positive Balinor wasn't working for Morgana. He was her guest and his succeeding with Merlin would help further Morgana's plans. He could be fishing to test Merlin's loyalties. But deep down Merlin knew that wasn't true. He couldn't commit to an answer that revealed his plans to Balinor, revealing he was against Morgana, just in case his instincts were waylaying him, but he bobbed his head, and said again, “Thank you and I will.”

“As soon as you feel up to it, we'll go to the cave.”

“Is the place really capable of giving people their magic back?” Merlin asked, thinking back to Morgana's words.

“No, that's an old wives' tale,” Balinor explained. “It amplifies magic though. And it's a great place for meditation. To find yourself. That place brims with magic. You'll see.”

Balinor was pretty economical with words, so, once he'd told Merlin what he needed to know, he left.

Once Merlin was left alone his priority became seeing Arthur. Morgana could have hurt him while Merlin slept and – judging by the way standing and searching the room for a change of clothes came easy – apparently recovered.

Merlin needed to verify that like him Arthur was still in one piece.

Preoccupied with that thought, he opened a cupboard and found that someone had left a pair of jeans and a shirt in his size there. Merlin grabbed the clothes and made a quick dash to the bathroom.

There he relieved himself and showered, then rapidly changed into the clothes that had been provided for him.

Being clean and wearing fresh clothes that weren't soiled with blood and grime made him feel like a human being again.

He didn't bother with combing is hair – was too much in a hurry to – he just thanked God he'd had somewhere to wash and went downstairs.

Morgana's instructions as to where to find her brother having been a little hazy, Merlin had wondered how he would be able to locate the room in which he was kept.

As it turned out it wasn't too difficult.

He caught Sefa hurling a plate at a wide oaken door. “I don't care if you eat or starve yourself, murderer. Want to starve? Do. You're the man that killed my father so I wish you joy of it.”

Dammed her eyes with her fists, Sefa ran off.

Merlin walked to the door Sefa had aimed at, calling after her. Taken with her grief, she didn't stop, and Merlin was too cut up about this new piece of news about Arthur not eating to pursue her and console her just yet. He'd do that after he'd made sure Arthur was still going strong.

If what Balinor had said was true, then there was hope for them all yet. Arthur could go back to his
life and Merlin could protect him while at the same time he dealt with Morgana.

Thinking these bracing thoughts, Merlin threw open the half shut door.

When he passed the threshold a strange sensation washed through him. Merlin's hand went to his head for a second, as if to stave off a headache, but before he could truly press it against his forehead, the feeling had gone. “Charmed,” Merlin realised. “Against escape.”

Despite that he stepped over the imaginary boundary and entered the room.

Arthur was sitting up against the wall, his knees drawn up. Unlike Merlin he was still wearing the clothes he'd had on on the day – three days ago according to Morgana – they had fled Belmarsh. Equally unlike Merlin he looked worse off for wear.

He was pale, drawn, almost gaunt. There were circles of bruised-appearing purple flesh under his eyes, like bags that had bags.

His posture was shot. Instead of sitting up with his shoulders thrown back with that little bit of martial air that Arthur always had about him, he was slumping, his shoulders curling inwards.

His hair was dirty, matted with sweat, his fringe bristling over his perspiring brow.

He was paler too as if he hadn't been outside at all and hadn't breathed any fresh air for days. Which was probably true. Morgana wasn't the type to let a hostage roam about, the more so if he was so vital to her and she'd booby-trapped this room so Arthur couldn't get out of it.

Arthur's generally worn look was enhanced by the burns around his wrists; one had nearly healed, though the other had become more conspicuous and swollen. The fact that the cut on his throat had started to scab didn't make him look any healthier either.

Merlin's heart went out to Arthur and swelled painfully in his chest.

When he saw Merlin, Arthur pulled himself up so he was sitting more squarely, squinting at the sun that had flooded in with Merlin's arrival.

When Merlin walked further into the room and Arthur was able to focus on him, his attitude changed. He held his breath and his eyes drilled through Merlin. “Morgana says you're with her now. That you'll help her kill my father.”

Merlin sighed and walked over to Arthur. He sat down next to him, hoping his heart wouldn't actually shrink to dust in his chest as a result of the words he'd just heard. Words that hurt, that cut deep, so much so he wished he could stop his ears and never hear similar ones again. If Arthur thought that, Merlin had no more hope left. “And do you really believe that?”

“I don't believe a word my sister says,” Arthur said, now staring ahead. “Not anymore.”

Merlin let out a shuddering breath and relaxed his muscles. “Do you think that it's magic that's made her so heartless?”

“Magic takes and takes,” Arthur said, his voice hollow, his face shuttered.

“And gives and gives too,” Merlin told him, his voice dripping with emotion and the passion that magic evoked in him. He twisted his body so he was angled towards Arthur. “Please, believe that.”

“Why should I though?” Arthur asked wearily, absently smoothing the knee of his trousers. “I have
proof of how corrupted she became and I--"

“She told me you signed a document, a secret Section Seven order,” Merlin said, not really wanting
to argue but needing to make a point. “I know what Section Seven does. Should I think you a
monster for that or--”

Arthur started as if he'd been whipped. “Father said I had to take responsibility for my actions when I
was old enough,” he said, distraught, eyes filling with tears. “So when I turned eighteen... I don't
know what I signed exactly. The words ‘containment’ and ‘arrest’ came up a lot.”

Arthur expelled a rush of breath, raked his hand through his fringe. “Deep down I must have known
what that document entailed but I thought Father was right and magic evil. Worse, I wanted to please
him, whatever the consequences.” Arthur's voice was anguished now. “I don't know what I
sanctioned, Merlin, I don't know.”

When Merlin heard Arthur's sob he put his hand on top of Arthur's. “That's the point though. You
didn't know what you were doing and hurt people. Those hurt people lashed back and this was
something that made you consider them monsters. Their actions probably weren't pretty either.”

Merlin thought of Morgana and Ruadan's attack on that military school. Of the war that was going
on and now involved both sides. Would Sefa become thirsty for vengeance now? That was how
these feuds became never-ending.

“That has got nothing to do with magic being evil or with meting out justice. It's people who're either
good or bad. Make the good choice or the wrong one. Arthur, there should be no sides.”

Arthur pressed his lips together. “I don't know how to make that happen. How to reconcile the
sides.”

“If anyone can, that's you,” Merlin said gently, expounding an idea that had slowly taken form in his
brain. He'd always known that Arthur, despite his hatred of magic, wasn't vicious and that if
someone showed him the truth he would understand and make a difference. Now he wanted to be
the one to show Arthur. He wanted to be the help Arthur achieve all he could. If Arthur came to
understand magic... “You've seen what both sides can do, you have the power, and the heart to carry
you through. I know it's you.”

Arthur swallowed. “I know you have no reason to love my father, Merlin, but are you saying that it's
me who can broker a peace deal because you don't want him to rule?”

Merlin didn't frankly know what to say that. He didn't want Uther to rule as he had for the past
twenty years. He didn't want him to enforce more laws persecuting magic. But he didn't want Arthur
to mourn his father. “I--”

Arthur talked over him. “After all that I've seen, I know Father was wrong, has been all these years,
and that his actions were even more so, but he's my father and I can't wish him dead. I'd rather take
the fall myself.”

Arthur's eyes were bright and nearly brimming over with tears. His cheeks were puffed out to
contain a sigh or a pout. His face was red and the veins at his temple stood out. He looked terrified
and desolate, desperate.

With the hand that wasn't touching Arthur's, Merlin rubbed his thumb under his eyes, where dark,
concave lines were forming. He smoothed them. “I promise you I won't hurt him.”

“But Morgana will,” said Arthur, looking into his eyes as if he wanted Merlin to say they both knew
Uther would die if Morgana had her way. “And who's to stop her?”

Merlin had only Balinor's words to go on, but for the first time since this had begun he was willing to look into himself and be brave. Trust that he could make it. Get his magic back and help people.

He knew that there'd be challenges to face. The first would be figuring out a way to do what Balinor had said he could. The second one was sorting out an action plan that would enable him to stop Morgana, make sure magic users weren't perennially hurt, and make Arthur happy.

Ensuring Arthur didn't suffer was important to him. It was the thought that loomed largest in his mind.

He wasn't about to dissect the morality of his choices and what they would entail. He was sure he'd find a way to reconcile the extremes he was facing – magic, Arthur, Uther, Morgana – but for now he wanted to offer Arthur everything it was in his power to. “I will. I'll make sure everything's all right.”

Arthur turned the hand Merlin had placed on top of his, interlocking their fingers. In a husky voice he said, “It's a lovely sentiment, Merlin, but with all that's happened, how can you promise me that?”

“Trust me,” Merlin said in a strangled voice.

Arthur squeezed Merlin's fingers. “The problem is that I do.”

Merlin took a deep breath at the shine in Arthur's eyes. Arthur didn't hate him. He trusted him in spite of the fact they'd been born on opposite side of the fence. His heart kicked against his ribs. “Good, because I promise, Arthur, that I'm going to live up to your expectations.”

“I can't ask you that,” Arthur said, reaching out to touch Merlin's face but aborting the motion. “Because it's not right.”

Merlin blew a breath through his nose. “You didn't ask.”

“Merlin,” Arthur said, drawing in a lungful of his own, “just don't take risks.”

Merlin meant to take quite a few but he'd never get Arthur's blessing if he admitted that. So he dissembled a bit, deflecting completely. “A bird told me you haven't been eating.”

Arthur looked away. His lips moved, stretching over his teeth. “That way she can't use me. If I'm dead, she can't dangle me on a string for my father to react to.”

Merlin got to his knees, cupped Arthur's face and turned it towards him.

This way he was looming over Arthur a bit but he guessed he wanted it to be that way so that Arthur would pay attention to what he had to say. “That's not how you fight,” he said, injecting all the bravado he had in his tone. “You're no coward. Don't take a coward's way out.”

“Like you did in that prison?” Arthur asked. It could have been an angry retort if it had been said in a spiteful tone but there was a smile tugging at Arthur's lips so Merlin didn't take it that way. “Giving up, waiting for execution? That ring a bell, Merlin?”

“I never said I was always brave,” Merlin said, an answering little smile dawning on his lips. “I'm not.”

“No true,” Arthur said, eyes boring into Merlin's this time. “In all honesty I can't say that it's true.”
Merlin's ears flamed. “Why don't I get you something to eat? I see there's still a tray over there?”


Merlin winched himself to his feet and walked to the table where a laden tray had been left. The plate Sefa had hurled at the door was obviously missing from the lay out, having only left a ring of condensation in its wake, but there was a little bowl full of soup there for the taking, and Merlin picked it up. Soup was both comfort food and full of nutrients. It would do.

He slowly slogged back to Arthur and, careful to balance the bowl in his hands, he lowered himself so he was sitting cross legged in front of Arthur. He set the bowl on his knees and took up the spoon still submerged in the soup Arthur hadn't so far touched.

“Come on,” Merlin said, his own stomach growling in hunger, “eat this.” He scooped a thin amount of soup so as to cause no spillage and lifted it towards Arthur's lips.

“No, you can't be meaning to feed me!” Arthur pressed his lips together for show. “I'm perfectly capable of eating on my own.”

“Indulge me,” Merlin said with a careful shrug of his shoulder. “You took care of me.”

Arthur's eyes snapped to him, wide with something Merlin couldn't make out, a flush climbing from his neck upwards. “Who told you I did? You were out of it.”

“Another little bird.”

“Merlin, you don't owe me anything, you know. Not this, not anything.”

Merlin's smiled gently. “I know that. That's not why. That wrist must hurt and I just want to take care of you. I hope that's allowed.”

Arthur relaxed back against the wall he'd been leaning on and gave him a little inclination of the head, eyes crinkling. “That's allowed.”

“Good.” Merlin leant forward and held the spoon out to Arthur.

This time Arthur collaborated and Merlin could ease a spoonful past his lips, watching Arthur's throat work, seeing him swallow, then open his mouth for more.

Feeding someone else was was a strange experience, but he didn't dislike it at all.

It rather made him feel warm and happy. He realised it was that way because this was Arthur and not because he had suddenly developed mother hen tendencie. All in all he'd rather not scrutinise and probe things to the umpteenth degree. He was just glad things were better than he'd thought they were. That Arthur didn't loathe magic, or Merlin, and not even his friends.

It sufficed that he and Arthur were now meeting in the middle and slowly working past their differences. Now Merlin was confident they could.

Despite the fact they were both prisoners, despite the fact he still couldn't command his magic and that the future looked somewhat grim, Merlin felt hope unfurl within him.

He was discovering this this potential for great, wonderful things – for peace, understanding, friendship – and it made his souls soar.
Actually, he was pretty busy picturing a perfect future world for himself and Arthur, a place where they both could be. He was so excited at the idea of this potential that his heart thudded in chest, his skin felt as if it was charged, and his stomach flipped and turned and somersaulted.

He was most probably, no, most definitely, mad for feeling like this. Like the world was his for the taking, like Arthur would be there for the ride, not hating him, not hating him at all but rather gazing warmly at him as he was doing now, only all the time. But he didn't care that he was mad. It was a brand of folly he liked.

That fancy vision of the future brought Merlin joy and he would cling to it with all that he had. His life had been too grim for him not to. And now there was so much to hope for.

He continued feeding Arthur, though Arthur didn't truly need it much, having perfectly functional limbs and only a swollen wrist to complain about.

But he held the spoon all the same, waiting, until Arthur leaned closer and latched onto it. He watched as the stupid utensil touched Arthur's lips and Arthur closed his eyes.

He listened to Arthur moan appreciatively each time he opened his mouth, as if he was letting the taste enfold his tongue, and watched as Arthur's eyes rolled back with the pleasure food brought him.

Merlin dipped the spoon in the soup again, wanting to prompt a similar reaction. But Arthur shook his head this time.

Merlin tipped the spoon against Arthur's closed lips, but Arthur signed no with his head, smiling dopily all the while.

Merlin smiled a similar smile.

And then Arthur was sniggering and chasing after the spoon.

It was Merlin's turn to go, “uh, uh,” and withhold the precious soup.

But Arthur didn't seem to like that, for he went on all fours to go after the food.

Laughing, Merlin leant away and held the spoon as far as possible from Arthur's mouth.

Like someone doing a silly impersonation of a predator, Arthur prowled forward, one hand braced on the outside of Merlin's hip, the other grazing his thigh.

His face was close to Merlin's, tilted sideways with his nose angled in the direction opposite Merlin's that Merlin could make out each one of his features. Arthur's eyes seemed to have lit up, his smile to have gone more goofy, and his breath to have quickened.

Just like Merlin's.

To be quite, quite honest Merlin's grip on the spoon's handle had become weary weak.

“I want my soup,” Arthur said mock petulantly.

Merlin breathed shakily. “You really want your soup?”

Arthur motioned his head up and down, like an endearing spoilt child who knew he was going to have his way.

And he did have his way. Merlin huffed a little but fed him another mouthful of soup. Only his hand
wasn't steady as it might have been and he smeared some remains of mushroom goo across Arthur's lips. At the sight Merlin's eyes widened and dropped to Arthur's lips. Arthur's were equally focused on his.

Merlin's heart flared with a rush of blood.

He put the spoon back into the bowl and pushed the latter away. His tongue darted out because his lips felt inordinately dry.

Arthur took in a loud breath.

Merlin dampened his lower lip before slowly scooting forwards. Wanting to take the plunge, Merlin leant towards Arthur, angling his head, brushing their noses together on the way to slanting his.

The sound of crockery breaking under feet startled Merlin into looking towards the door.

Forridel was standing there, looking at the pulverised ceramic particles under her soles. “Sorry,” Forridel said. “Sefa reported back and I was told to check that Prince Arthur had eaten but, definitely wrong moment, eh? So, I'll, um, leave you to it.”

She retreated quickly, walking backwards like a lobster, only turning around when she'd reached the doorway. Then she sprinted out, shoes skidding with a loud rubbery noise.

It didn't matter, the moment had come and gone.

Arthur had sunk back on his haunches and was looking more composed than before. The fire in his eyes had dimmed; they were no longer dancing with humour and warmth. “You haven't eaten anything yet either,” he said gently. “You could do with putting something in your belly.”

Merlin dipped his head and nodded.

Arthur was right. They had to get to know each other first with no lies in the way.

They couldn't risk their fragile rapport now of all times. With everything that hung in the balance it would be madness. Arthur was too dear to him to risk his future happiness or his chance of escaping from Morgana's imprisonment.

If Morgana thought Merlin had taken sides and was favouring Arthur, she'd eliminate him when Merlin was still weak and deal with Arthur as she wanted, using him as leverage against Uther, only to kill him when she had no more use for him.

It was important they get out of this mess first. Merlin had to dupe Morgana. And he couldn't if he acted just the way he wanted. Merlin was sure he could trust Forridel. But what if people gossiped?

What if they told Morgana Merlin was wholly and truly on Arthur's side. Word of mouth could be harmful in the situation they were in.

He could explore his future, get to know Arthur – if Arthur still wanted – and make peace with the people he'd disappointed, when this storm had died down.

His heart clenched in a tiny fist all the same. But then he thought of the things he had still to do and how elated he'd been before by simply thinking he and Arthur would one day understand each other.

He'd been content to be just a little bit closer to Arthur then. And he'd also been hopeful about his plan. A plan was a great motivator.
Putting things to right -- for Arthur, for those like him, and even for himself -- was now possible and he had to focus on that and that alone. For now.

He knew he could do it. He could do it; he only had to get his magic back, fool Morgana into believing he was on her side, even if he was anything but and only buying time, and convince Arthur he was true to him. Harder things had been done, by the saints most probably, almost daily.

But nobody had said he couldn't try.

He would. He would try so hard.

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Daily Mail on Line

The Penultimate Crop:

It's nearly the end of this year's – likely this generation's – Selection. And we all wish the winner well, don't we? Apparently His Highness the Prince of Wales has narrowed the field to five contestants by eliminating a few known faces, among whom we find Angharad Barks, a steady but opinionated girl whom lots of the British public had grown to like, and Eddie Sagramore, who'd reaped less support from his gossip-hungry compatriots. (Some say it's because he was much of a non-entity, unremarkable, and not particularly endearing.)

Except Prince Arthur didn't announce those eliminations himself, as he'd done when the competition kicked to a start, preferring to take the kid-glove way out and letting Master of the Ceremonies Geoffrey Monmouth do the officiating in his stead. (Not a peek of dashing Prince Arthur was seen throughout, making the live broadcast yawn-worthy for many.)

This week the contestants weren't simply eliminated on the basis of such volatile factors as the personal like or dislike Prince Arthur might be harbouring for them, but were tasked with passing an etiquette test that was televised live.

In order to suss out every last drop of consort potential out of them, the contestants were put in a situation in which they'd have to exercise their sang froid and diplomatic skills in contexts they might come to encounter, were they to actually marry the heir to the throne.

Such daunting tasks as official live statements (obviously fake) to be released to journalists hunkering after a faux pas, staged diplomatic meetings, and talks with heads of charities were assigned to the contestants.

With Ranulph Waverley succeeding in taming a horde of lively demonstrators, it was obvious he would win this week's round. As it was obvious that the less politic and tactful Angharad Barks and Eddie Sagramore were set to fail. Sophia Tirmore and Owain Knightly, on the contrary, also excelled.

The BBC stretched this key penultimate assignment into two episodes – next week's
being a "live" finale with all the contestants back to reflect on the events that led them close to exacting the crown – but failed to air Merlin Emrys' test. Technical problems were claimed. The tape was apparently either faulty or lost. None could be sure as to which of the two.

If Emrys had been a lady, gossips would have insinuated a pregnancy was the reason for the sudden disappearance of this contestant from the nation's screens. Baby bumps tend to be difficult to hide after a while, you will all agree.

As things stand, gossips have been left to intimate that he and Prince Arthur may be locked in each other's arms – tropical locations have been bandied about – and unable to come up for air for long enough to attend to the Selection's main live broadcasts.

On another front entirely, we've learned that Guinevere Smith, a former and beloved contestant, has embarked on a new adventure.

She has closed an editorial deal with du Lac and Co. and will soon be penning a book detailing her experience as a participant. Will it be a tell-all kind of narrative – that would make for a best seller, we think – or one toeing the line dictated by the Royal House? Again Miss Smith might turn out to be a new and stimulating voice in the world of non-fiction.

Since her book won't come out until next autumn, let's concentrate on the Selection. The herd is being culled; the numbers are dwindling. Join us next week to find out who's king or queen of the pack. Literally.

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"Are we there yet?" Merlin asked as they crested the latest knoll. The ground was rising and the vegetation thickening, making it hard to trudge on.

With all the exposed roots, bumps, and hidden holes scattered around and concealed by the undergrowth, picking your way was – pun definitely intended – an uphill battle.

Dead branches often lay underfoot, making the trek challenging and treacherous, especially if you weren't used to the great outdoors.

Aside from that, the trail was so uniform, with trees whose trunks were nearly black equally spaced out and lush foliage almost everywhere, that Merlin had no sense of the distance covered.

It could have been a mile or six. They could have crossed just a tiny section of the woods or a large expanse. Nothing seemed ever to change except for the fact that the more they paced off the wilder the flora grew.

The ground changed around him too. Merlin could feel the incline they were approaching beneath his boots. It had started a few hundred yards back and it didn't look as though the surface he was treading across was levelling at all. If anything the slope was growing steeper.

Most of the trees around them were ancient: oaks and elms for the most part, a few younger rowan trees towered above them too, but they didn't help Merlin orient himself. They were fewer and farther between than the other trees but their distribution was pretty regular. Nothing stood out. All stretches of landscape were alike
“Because it looks like we've been walking all day.”

Even Morgana's goon – a man called Sadok, who was in the service of Morgana's henchman Helios – ranted and jabbered sottovoce about how tiring 'this fucking expedition' was. Well, when he wasn't chewing tobacco, or spitting out gobs of phlegm.

Personally, Merlin didn't want to be the kind of person who found common ground with a ruthless mercenary but he, too, wondered whether Balinor was leading them on on a wild goose chase.

When he'd first talked to Balinor two days ago, Merlin had instinctively believed him, something inside him telling him that the man had been sincere when he'd mentioned the cave and sworn Merlin's magic wasn't gone.

Now Merlin questioned whether Balinor had been in his right mind when he'd said that.

This corner of the forest looked like any other stretch of forest Merlin had ever seen. He hadn't seen many per se but this one had plenty in common with those he had. Was there really a cave hiding in its depths? And if there wasn't, could Balinor be trusted about the rest?

About Merlin's magic not being gone?

Sure, Balinor had said that Merlin didn't need the cave to recover his powers, but if the cave didn't exist at all, then Balinor's point was moot because he wasn't reliable.

Just as Merlin was thinking this, Balinor reached the top of the rise and came to a sudden stop.

“There,” he said and pointed.

Balinor grabbing him by the arm to facilitate the ascent, Merlin clambered up the top of the slope and scanned the area. The ground dropped away sharply, ending in a plateau that seemed to give way to some sort of avenue of trees, bordered on each side by clay walls. “I see nothing.”

“This is not a good vantage point,” Balinor said, “but once we're down there you'll see it.”

Merlin hoped so. “Okay let's move on.”

“He stays here,” Balinor said, eyeing Sadok somewhat malevolently. “He's not of the old religion and that's hallowed ground.”

Sadok shouldered his rifle and pointed it at them. “No, I was told not to lose sight of Emrys.”

Balinor was about to act. His hands had become fists and he'd propelled himself forward. But Merlin stepped between them. He couldn't tell Sadok that he'd always go back to Morgana's lair because he would never abandon Arthur. That would get reported to Morgana and she would guess Merlin was secretly supporting Arthur.

But he could freely say, “That's not in my best interest, is it?” Merlin told him. “I told Morgana I was with her because I'm against the king.” That much was true. He just didn't specify which form his opposition took. “Plus, my friends Mordred and Forridel are with her now.” They were there of their own free will for now, though Merlin wasn't sure they'd be allowed that luxury for long. They knew too much of Morgana's plans to back off unmolested. “Why would I ditch them?”

While he tried to assess Merlin's sincerity, Sadok's forehead developed a confused crinkle. At last he said, “You have an hour.”

“Two,” Balinor barked in his face, completely unfazed by the heavy duty rifle Sadok was holding on
to and pointing at his chest. “He won't be able to concentrate properly otherwise.”

“Two hours is long enough for you to put miles behind us if you want to do a bunk.”

Merlin played his ace. “Morgana wants me to recover my magic more than she cares about the risks of me escaping or for your fate.” It was underhanded, but, really, he had little pity for a merc. “Draw your own conclusions, mate.”

“Two hours,” said Sadok, still toying with his rifle. “If you're not back by then, I'll come looking for you and it won't be nice.”

Balinor and Merlin took that as the threat it was. “We'll be back in time,” Merlin said while Balinor started ahead with a grunt.

Keeping his eyes on every step he took, Merlin went after him. He edged his way down cautiously, watching as Balinor bounced quickly down the slope, leaping over shrubs and rocks easily, as if he knew the path very well and could tread it blind.

When the terrain got more even, Merlin started jogging downwards, kicking up a storm of needles with every step.

The foliage underfoot was wet with dew and dampened the hem of his jeans, but at least now there were no more uneven patches of ground that could cause him to sprain an ankle or break a bone if he mis-stepped.

Acorns were scattered around ground like pebbles and crushed under his weight while evergreen needles stuck to his soles. But that was the biggest inconvenience about not being as picky as before in his hopping around.

Acquiring more speed, he started leaping from little mossy outcrop to little mossy outcrop till at last he joined Balinor at the bottom of the gully.

Slabs of red rock rose at the sides of a winding path Merlin couldn't see the end of. Curtains of greenery draped the rocky walls and released a balmy, resiny scent.

The different shades of green sometimes gave Merlin the illusion of being underwater. Or brushing along the surface of an oil painting with his physical being.

Daylight couldn't penetrate this natural rocky corridor but it wasn't so dark that he couldn't see ahead. Rather he was enveloped in a cloud of dark greens and sombre greys overlapping one another, fudged contours and mysterious shapes.

Since the path was narrowing, Balinor and he took to walking in single file.

A squirrel lifted his head to watch them; insects slithered this way and that, making the leaves they slid under rustle.

Otherwise it was all very quiet, as though nature was holding its breath.

“Are you sure this is the place?” he asked Balinor, his hand trailing along the rocky wall at his side, displacing masses of leaves and brushing his knuckles against the downy moss coating its length.

“Do you need to ask?”

Merlin didn't really. He could sense this place was different from any other place he'd ever been in.
This spot was sacred, holy. Nature itself had hidden it away as if to preserve it from mortal eyes.

The creatures that lived around it, from the biggest to the smallest, seemed respectful of the boundary its aura was superimposing upon the place.

The normal sounds of a forest were hushed here, quietened. Seconds trickled by at a rate Merlin would have called slower than normal, if at all possible. Even the air was pregnant with that special mystical quality.

If Merlin hadn’t known that magic wasn’t tangible, he’d have said that the air around here was heavy with it.

At last they reached the end of the scree.

The entrance to the cave was an irregular arch about fifteen feet high, with a thick film of vegetation spreading from side to side over the jagged rock face.

“This is the Crystal Cave,” Balinor announced, inspiring awe in the way he’d said that. “They say magic was born here before man ever was.”

Merlin joined Balinor and tipped his head up to gaze at the opening. He felt small, unimportant, not worthy to violate the bounds of this place. “Wow.”

“Can’t you hear it?” Balinor said, craning his head to look at Merlin. “It’s calling your name.”

Merlin couldn’t but he could feel the draw of the cave’s innards. “I– I don’t know if I should.”

“No other man has so much claim to this place as you,” Balinor said, his voice gruff with a passion for his subject that made Merlin wonder what secrets he knew. “Legend has it so.”

“Druidic legend?” Merlin asked, not so much because he wanted to hear those fancy stories again but because he wasn’t ready to stake a claim on the cave yet.

“Partly, yes.” Balinor continued speaking, though this time he was gazing ahead so that he sounded removed from Merlin, as though he was an oracle speaking on behalf of magic. “But the stories go farther back to a time when magic flourished and priests and priestesses were free to honour their gods as well as the manifestation of their powers.”

“What did those stories say?”

“That one day, at magic’s darkest hour, when the voices of the children of the earth are silenced by an agony of tyrants, a man would come who’d restore freedom to the shackled.”

Merlin gulped. He wasn’t the man the prophecies talked about. It made no sense. How could they even name him? How could they have known he’d be born? How could they have foretold what Uther would do so many centuries later? And what about Arthur? What part was he supposed to play in this scenario? “And, according to these stories of yours,” Merlin asked, “am I supposed to do all that on my lonesome?”

“No,” Balinor said, scrunching his nose. “They say that Emrys would come and tame the dragon and then the dragon would rise and fight for him.”

The dragon? As in Pendragon? Could that be Arthur? Did that mean that Arthur would come to change his mind completely and absolutely, freeing magic and repairing all Uther’s mistakes?
Merlin hoped his future would entail that. There was nothing more he wanted than for that to come true. He still cautioned himself though. He'd never believed in prophecies and old tales.

He always laughed when Mordred started filling him on the lore of the druids he'd lived among. Now was no time to start giving credence to such myths just because he liked the idea of Arthur being involved in his future.

His being there would entirely depend on Arthur wanting to, his wishing to stay by Merlin's side. He'd never even want him to know about the legends because Merlin feared he'd be influenced by them. And he wanted Arthur to like him on his own.

All the same, though, the thought injected some hope in him. Maybe they would find a way to match the legends' decree without bypassing their free-will.

Maybe Arthur would willingly come to want to stand by Merlin's side.

Hope and trepidation filling him, Merlin moved forward, moving aside the strata of foliage that barred access to the cave.

He was about to step through when a sudden burst of motion stopped him.

His heart in his mouth, Merlin stumbled back in time to watch a bat weave between the intersecting stems, tearing through the curtains of leaves. It collided briefly with the branches in its way, but managed to fly free.

“Hell, that bloody bat scared me,” Merlin said, shaking his head at how tense he'd grown. He'd never have called himself very brave in an action film kind of sense, but there was a time when he wouldn't have jumped at a bird. “I need to go on a long holiday and unwind.”

Balinor put a hand on his arm and put some pressure behind his touch. “No one would blame you for being jumpy. You're carrying a big burden.”

Merlin winced a smile, then took a big breath and finally walked into the cave.

The air that emanated from the entrance was cold and damp, a little musty. Merlin tramped deeper inside the cave and looked around.

He noticed a low passage branching out in front of him. It looked quite deep and as though there wasn't enough space to walk upright. And while he could see the beginning of the passage he couldn't make out what was at its end. “It's too dark,” Merlin said. “I should have brought a torch.”

Really, how stupid of him not to think of it. Caves weren't famed for being well-lit places.

“There's no need,” Balinor told him, opening his palm. A little flame hovered over it, bright red and lively. “I think we can make do with this.”

Merlin smiled from ear to ear. “So you're magic too and not just an Underground benefactor who knows about legends and lore.”

Balinor huffed a grunt. “I am a sorcerer, yes, though that is not primarily what I am. And I certainly never was as powerful as you.”

“Even at my best I don't think I'm all that Forridel and Mordred swear I am.” Merlin's cheeks lit up like Christmas lights. “And now I'm not anyth--”
Balinor didn't let him complete his sentence. “I know what you are. You're all of what they say and more.”

Merlin wanted to question Balinor about that. How could Balinor know? Maybe Mordred and Forridel had filled his head with their chatter about Merlin's powers while Merlin had been busy recuperating from being sluged as well as Morgause's attack? But he decided not to test him. He'd debunk those theories later, pointing out that, while touching, Mordred and Forridel's faith in him was exaggerated. For now they had a mission though. “So where to now?” he hedged.

“This way,” said Balinor, acting as guide.

Crawling in after him, Merlin found a rising tunnel fringed with stalactites. At first he had to crouch to be able to advance at all, but after a while the cave started developing some vertical elevation, which allowed him to stand.

At first Merlin couldn't see what made this cave any different from any other cave in the world, but when he was deep enough in its bowels he understood what Balinor was talking about. This place thrummed with magic.

It was an ever increasing din of power that crackled around the walls and floors and permeated the air around him. This was no mere prickling sensation generated by a random spell.

The cave was bursting with the full force of nature's essence. It was the kind of magic that came deep from the bowels of the earth, the kind of magic that wove through the universe and made it what it was, spinning a web that made up time and space, the different universes that went with it. Merlin could even spy its composition and guess at those worlds that existed just out of the corner of his eyes. It was marvellous and breath-taking.

Merlin's entire being pulsed with the magic brimming over from the cave's interior. “It is really the birth place of magic.”

Balinor stopped in his tracks. “You can sense that?” he asked without turning.

“Yes, it's...” Merlin didn't quite have the words for it, so he expressed his thoughts in the easiest way possible. “It's everywhere.”

“Then you are indeed special,” Balinor said, proceeding, step never faltering. “Not everybody can sense the magic of this place. Though the cave reeks of power, some people can only catch the echoes of it.”

“I think,” Merlin said without thinking, “I can see the magic that goes into making the world.”

Balinor stopped again. “I never could, though I'm aware of this place's magical charge.”

“So how powerful are you really?” Merlin asked.

Balinor didn't answer. He started forward again, leading Merlin into an approximately square chamber that took Merlin's breath away.

Fairy lights brightened the roof of the cave, casting a pale glow all around it. Crystals sprouted from floor and walls alike, reflecting both the fairy lights and emanating a pure pale blue light of their own.

Clusters of crystals rose all around him behaving like tufts of grass and taking root everywhere.
Somewhere ahead of him the chamber got larger, almost making of the room a semi circle.

A shimmering mirror of light stood in place of the rocky surface and Merlin couldn't tell what was behind it. It could have been an exit, a wall of granite, or another ill-lit passage leading elsewhere.

Tears stinging his eyes at the perfection he was beholding, Merlin gasped. “This place is wonderful.”

Balinor looked at the glimmering wall of magic and nodded, then he cleared his throat and said, “But as true as that is, you should concentrate on getting your magic back.”

Merlin felt as if he'd been told off. He bowed his head and gnawed on his lip. “Right, where do I start?”

Since there was no more need of it, Balinor snuffed the flame he'd been carrying in his palm. “Start by sitting there and concentrating on the magic around you.”

Merlin sat down cross legged. He closed his eyes but nothing changed around him.

He'd never been one for sitting down and relaxing, doing absolutely nothing. He was used to activity of some kind.

Both his mum and Alice had said that Merlin was a whirlwind and a messy one at that.

Yes, he did like to laze about on occasion, but it had never been the kind of purposeful lazing about that led to clarity of thought. Meditation was somewhat foreign to him.

Merlin peeked through a half-closed eye. “What do I do now?”

“Look into yourself Merlin.”

Merlin wondered where he ought to begin. There wasn't much that he knew how to do. Nevertheless he closed his eyes and concentrated.

At first he neither sensed nor experienced anything at all. He could feel his breathing slow down and his mind empty of thought. But nothing else.

His heartbeat slowed down and magic came to play with him, zinging across his skin and working its way through him. Merlin let out a breath and a smile came on his lips.

A flurry of jumbled images surfaced and faded in his mind. Initially, their alternation was too rapid to make anything out of them, but at length Merlin started sorting out some of the puzzle pieces.

He visualised himself, a baby crying in his cot. Clearly this couldn't be a memory of his because he was watching himself from the outside, a witness to proceedings. But him it was. He recognised himself from the baby pictures his mum kept on the mantelpiece.

Grown up Merlin saw Baby Merlin cry, the walls shook, pictures moved so they sat awry in the wall; knick-knacks fell from off the dresser. Then Baby Merlin clapped pudgy hands together and objects started levitating, lights dancing, bright dust whirling around.

Baby Merlin stopped crying, reached a hand out and tried to grab his own personal constellation of stars. When they stopped whirling around so much, one landed on his finger. Baby Merlin smiled a gummy smile.

Oh, so that was tiny him playing with his magic. Merlin understood what the cave was doing now.
What he saw next was a bit more confusing.

It was darkness and shadows. The dragon from his dream breathing fire. A heart beating, pumping blood. The road that led to the house he'd lived in as a child. The span of great wings whose surface was webbed with veins and bones and skin as thick as vellum. Merlin's first view of London. His room at Alice's.

His first meeting with the Underground. His own flat, looking the way he'd left it. His magic sparking free with a kiss. The sky thundering; a tower in the wild, protecting secrets. Nature calling; the power of a name.

The images imploded in a blot of darkness that again melted into scenes from Merlin's life.

Being shot. The weight and burden of the flesh. Veins and arteries, bone and sinew. Tiny particles, globule-like, slogging their way through tissue. Waking up.


The crow Ruadan had summoned; its beady eye piercing Merlin. 'We're one.' The sound of a door clanging shut.

A ring. A crest etched in platinum. A crown of gold surmounting a stag rampant.

Darkness and pain; body breaking. The white breath of magic on him. Balinor's dark eyes and Morgana's green ones.

A hand on his shoulder.

Merlin snapped awake, blinking fast.

"It's been nearly two hours," Balinor told him, kneeling by his side. "It's time for us to get back."

"It's impossible." Merlin let his jaw drop open. "I just concentrated for a minute."

"It's been two hours."

"Oh," Merlin said, feeling disorientated. He was sure only two or three minutes had passed.

"Ready to see if your magic's back?" Balinor asked gently.

Trying not to plunge back into that vortex of images that had kept him in a two-hour trance, Merlin reached inside himself for his magic.

It was like a bud opening. Big doors coming unlocked. A bird flying free. He grabbed his power with both hands and directed it outside. He opened his palm and thought of a flower, picturing it in all its components, from texture to colour.
A single petal did appear in his palm, velvety and red, but it wasn't exactly what Merlin had envisioned.

He stroked the petal with his fingertip, turned it around, then pocketed it as a reminder that he still had some way to go, and as a source of hope that he had achieved something, however little.

The fact that he'd only pulled off a tiny part of what he'd banked on made Merlin's face fall all the same. He had to ask. He had to. “It didn't work, did it?”

“It will take a little more work,” Balinor said, helping Merlin up. “You have to be fully true to yourself to be able to tap into your magic.”

“I'm not not true to myself,” Merlin blathered then rolled his eyes at how stupid he'd just sounded. His shoulders sagged and a big breath whooshed out of him. “I used to be able to do as much magic as I wanted, no introspection needed. What's changed?”

“Nothing has, Merlin,” Balinor said, “but the slug drained you of all that easily accessible excess magic you carried around.” Balinor pressed his hand against Merlin's heart. “What you're looking for now is the magic that's in there.”

“In my heart?”

Balinor rose off his haunches and laughed. It was harsh but not totally unkind. It was as though the man meant well but was incapable of any kind of polite interaction. “No, let's leave the poetry for the bards. I meant deep inside you.”

He offered Merlin a hand up.

“Let's hope so,” Merlin said, thinking of his grand plans. He needed to fix all that had gone wrong.

“That's the point,” Balinor said, summoning back a light of his own to conduct them back out into the woods. “You mustn't give up hope. Now come. We should head back or that arsehole of a merc will get us in trouble.”

Merlin followed Balinor out of the cave and up the road that led to the place they'd left Sadok.

They met the man there. He was pacing to and fro, mumbling to himself about these 'arseholes who fucked with magic'. He swallowed his words back when Balinor let his eyes glow amber.

Three hours later they were back at Morgana's mansion.

Head bent, Merlin was climbing the steps to the grand, column-spattered entrance, when Balinor, who'd been moving in the opposite direction in order to go home, stopped and called out to him. “We'll try this again.”

Merlin bobbed his head up and down somewhat disconsolately. “Yeah, sure.”

“Merlin,” Balinor said, raking his eyes up and down Merlin's slumping form, as though disapproving of his stance, “chin up. You're brave enough to face what's coming and you'll make it.”

A smile washed over Merlin's lips, erasing his previous weariness. “Yeah,” he said, hope budding inside him again. “Yeah, you're right. I'm gonna do it next time.”

Balinor gave him a mock salute Merlin read as approval and cut across the gravel path to get to his bike. Once he'd ridden off, Merlin turned away and ducked inside.
He found Mordred, Forridel, Gilli and, unfortunately, Morgana in the drawing room overlooking the ample Italian gardens that covered the south facing part of the property.

They were all sitting in corners of their own, as if each was wary of the other. But they were all doing the same thing: watching the programme the Beebs was airing.

It took Merlin one sentence to guess what kind of show it was. He heard the voice of the commentator and didn't need to be told that the flurry of fake enthusiasm the man was summoning was about the Selection.

“So, Ryalan, four contestants have been eliminated,” a voice out of shot summarised, “what do you think this means in terms of the final race to the crown?”

“Well, this is a very strange edition of the Selection with little input from some candidates and the Prince himself. So it's hard to tell.”

Merlin's jaw dropped. With all that had happened, Merlin had been cut off from all news sources. He'd been too busy dealing with Morgana and ensuring Arthur wasn't harmed to check out what was on TV. And since he was practically a prisoner, he certainly hadn't had gone out for a stroll and bought newspapers. “What, what the hell?”

Morgana pointed the remote at the TV and switched it off. “That's a trap.”

“I don't understand.” Merlin's mouth was popping like that of a stranded fish.

Mordred tipped his fingers together and frowned. “That's because it makes no sense. Apparently they're going on with the Selection as though nothing had happened. As though Arthur was still there and you hadn't--” Mordred's eyes dropped to the ring that Merlin was still, unwisely, wearing.

“That's their way of messing with the truth,” Morgana said, dropping the remote and frowning angrily. “They must know I have Arthur. The Belmarsh officials will have made sure to report.”

Merlin agreed. “But if that's true then...”

Morgana rose from her elegant sprawl on the settee and started pacing, hair whirling around each time she about turned. “They're planning something big against us. That's why they're keeping the news of Arthur's disappearance close to their chest. This has got Section Seven written all over it.”

Mordred's eyes narrowed. “But how?”

“They'll find a way to quash us, be sure.” Morgana stalked up to Mordred, chin tilted upwards in defiance. “So does this convince you to cast your lot with mine?”

Mordred's eyes went to Merlin and Merlin tried to convey his silent advice with all his might. He couldn't do much but stand there, eyes wide and fists clenched, every muscle in his face tightening, though.

At last Mordred said, “I don't approve of the current government; that goes without saying, but I'll only agree if you promise me there'll be no civilian deaths.”

Merlin wanted to shake his head, wave his hands and plead with Mordred to say no, but of course he couldn't. Morgana was there.

“There's never been a revolution without bloodshed,” Morgana said.
Mordred dipped his head, eyes hidden. “I don't--”

“But I can promise you won't have to do any of it.”

Mordred bent his head low, sneaking Merlin an unreadable glance before saying, “Then we're agreed.”

Now that she had Mordred's apparent allegiance, Morgana turned on Merlin. “We already have a deal,” she told him, stalking up to him. “What I want to know is whether you're upholding your side of the bargain.”

“It's still not back,” Merlin said, knowing what she meant. He couldn't lie about the extent of his powers because she could ask for a demonstration. Instinctively, however, he held something back about the little spark that had come to him in the cave. His and Arthur's continued survival did depend on Morgana thinking Merlin was as powerful as before and backing her team. But also on timing, on not forcing Morgana to act right now, before Merlin could come up with a plan to counter hers. In short, it paid not to let your enemy know everything about you. “It's a slow process. It will come.”

“Mind it's not too long a one,” said Morgana, her face so close he could smell her breath, the proximity threatening. Her eyes were stormy and her face was lined with anger. “You've only got as long as it takes Morgause to recover.”

Merlin's stomach roiled with disgust at Morgana's thirst for action and blood, but he kept his features in check when he said, “I promised already. I'm with you.”

Forridel, whom Merlin had forgotten about in his bid to play Morgana, shot up from her seat and said in a tortured voice, “I can't believe you!” Her gaze fell on both Merlin and Mordred, cold and cutting as it had never been. “Those aren't our ideals. We don't kill non-sorcerers. We always wanted reform! That's why I helped you. I'm not standing for this.”

Her eyes wet, she stalked off and out of the room.

Mordred hooded his eyes to slits and sighed.

Morgana tapped her fingers on her arms. “She knows about our plans. I won't let her walk and stop us.”

A sense of foreboding shook Merlin, making him feel quite sick. “I'll talk her round. There's no need for you to concern yourself with her.”

“I hope you can manage,” said Morgana. “I haven't touched her yet because I heard that despite being non magical she ran the Underground that helped many of us. But be sure that I will if she so much as steps outside this house and opens her mouth to blab about my plans.”

“I'll just talk to her,” Merlin pleaded. “I can convince her.” With his magic still diminished to less than a quarter of what it had been, he wasn't about to ostracise Morgana. Protecting Forridel meant he had to bow down to her. “She's a hero. A good girl. She doesn't deserve any of that.”

“Go on,” Morgana told him. “But be sure I'll have no pity if you don't succeed.”

“I will,” Merlin said, backing out of the room to go and find Forridel. “I swear I will.”

Merlin started running down the hallway that led to the big staircase and caught up with Forridel. “Forridel,” he called out. “Please, Forridel, stop.”
Wiping at her eyes, Forridel kept jogging up, reaching the landing.

“Fo, please.” Merlin's voice was so anguished that it stopped Forridel. “Trust me.”

Forridel stopped, spinning slowly on her heels. “How can I, Merlin?”

Merlin jogged up the stairs, taking them two at a time. “You know me, don't you?”

She nodded, her tooth worrying her lip, her eyes liquid. “I do. I've always thought you were the best out of all the Underground members, but, Merlin, can't you see that what Morgana's preaching is wrong? I get that you're upset after Belmarsh, but, please consider--”

Merlin took her hands in his and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Forridel, you have to believe that I'm not really siding with Morgana.”

“But you said you were. I heard you.”

Merlin shook his head and released Forridel's hands. “I know. But what can I do? I'm only slowly working on my magic. She has you and Arthur. Then there's the others to think about. What was I supposed to do?”

Forridel tipped her head up and down. “Okay, okay I can see that. But how do we stop her?”

Merlin squeezed her shoulder. “You do nothing. Pretend you're still with us. I'll be working on my magic, agreed?”

“Merlin, you know I've always fought for justice.”

“This is a subtler way of doing the same,” said Merlin, his tone purposefully low so only Forridel could hear him. “Even as Underground members, we have never walked up to Uther Pendragon and fought openly against him.”

Forridel wetted her lips. “That's different. That would amount to defying whole armies. This feels more like lying.”

Merlin thought the same and hated the situation he was in as much as Forridel. Instinctively, he wanted to speak out. Tell Morgana to sod off and stop her before she could hurt hordes of civilians. He wanted to be honest in his dealings, but at this point in time concealing his plans from Morgana was as vital as hiding his magic from Uther Pendragon. “I know. But is there a choice?”

“No.”

“Good. Do I have your word you'll make fake peace with Morgana?”

Forridel deflated, her breath rushing out of her. She didn't look happy with the proposition, but said, “Yes.”

Merlin kissed her temple. “Good. And thank you.”

“No, thank you.” Having said that, Forridel skipped upstairs and Merlin was relieved to find he had at least managed to contain this explosive situation.

This meant he could probably keep on top of things. With a view to calming down Morgana, Merlin texted her to tell her that everything was under control and that Forridel was with them.

The return text was: “make sure it lasts, or else.”
Now that he had solved the Forridel situation, Merlin felt no inclination to go back to the drawing room. He had to try and suss Mordred out, see where Gilli was standing, and keep an eye on Morgana so he could understand the details of her plan.

Apart from an assault on the palace, those seemed pretty hazy and depended on Morgause's recovery as well as Merlin getting his powers back.

But he didn't want to do that now. Lying, dissembling, counter-planning to debunk Morgana's plans was so tiring he couldn't face more of that. And there was something else he wanted to do.

He wanted to see Arthur. His rational brain told him it was a stupid idea. This place was crawling with Helios' mercenaries and it would take nothing for one of them to report his visit to Morgana. Merlin could bullshit his way out of such a report, saying he was just there to check on the prisoner, but going to Arthur amounted to playing with fire.

Still, he couldn't bear to keep Arthur in the dark.

It had been three days since he'd last seen him. That meant Arthur didn't know what was going on outside the room he was confined in.

It also meant that Arthur had been left to cope alone, not a friendly face in sight, no one to tell him not to worry or to soothe him about this being over soon.

Merlin didn't want that to stay true and longed to see Arthur as well. The decision came easily.

Willing himself to be as stealthy as possible, he slipped upstairs, and, stomach trembling with anticipation, reached Arthur's door.

He couldn't make noise and knock. Even though he couldn't see them, there were guards at the end of this hallway. If he did knock, he'd alert them to his being there.

So hoping Arthur would understand he didn't mean to violate his privacy, he just opened the door.

Once he was in, he closed the door softly behind him. What he saw made his shoulders slump in disappointment.

Arthur was very much there but he was sleeping on the trundle bed Morgana had provided him with. So there'd be no talking today.

Sleeping, Arthur looked peaceful and innocent, sporting an ephemeral child-like quality about him that was missing when he was awake.

Maybe it was because he was pouting his way through his slumbers that Merlin felt so. Or maybe Arthur's face resting on his hand made him look younger, like someone who still ritually positioned his body a certain relaxing way before dozing off, like children sometimes did.

It was stupid of him to think of Arthur that way and perhaps this was just a coincidence, Arthur cutting a less emphatically sweet picture in other moments, but the impression stayed with Merlin.

It sort of dug a notch in his heart.

A little short of breath, Merlin stared and took in Arthur's face, wondering how someone could be so perfect while retaining granules of endearing imperfections that made the heart only grow fonder.

Arthur was, perhaps, the handsomest man Merlin had ever clapped eyes on. His body was fine. His
Merlin loved the shape of his jaw and the slight, imperious curve of his nose. He adored the way Arthur's hair fell on his forehead, soft and bright like a cloud of spun gold.

His skin, less smooth than usual due to lack of shaving, still gleamed in the low light they'd allowed him.

Otherwise, he looked as though he hadn't encountered many privations.

He didn't appear to have gone without food and gave off all manner of calming vibes.

The sight triggered a complicated emotion, a mixture of joy at being able to witness this, longing and protectiveness that left Merlin shaken.

Deep down, Merlin knew how to call those feelings and knew how much they'd hurt the moment he voiced them for them not to be returned quite in kind.

All the same he couldn't quite stop his heart from making a nose dive for his stomach. Or perhaps that was his stomach trying to climb upwards and jostling with his heart for space? However it was, Merlin held his feelings close, meaning to never air them.

He allowed himself one more moment in which to behold Arthur in all his stupid dear glory and then started tiptoeing back towards the door. He was midway to it when he stepped over something that cracked under his soles.

Arthur shot up in bed, arm braced under him, veins popping both there and on his neck. When his sleepy eyes closed in on Merlin though, he relaxed and laid himself back down, tugging on his earlobe like sleepy people sometimes do, and smacking his lips together. “Merlin, what are you doing here?”

Merlin knew very well what he was doing there but he couldn't bring himself to say it. “I was just... passing by.”

Arthur's eyes gleamed with amusement. “Pull the other one, Emrys.”

Merlin rolled his eyes. He'd been a little transparent. “There was something I wanted to say to you.”

Arthur patted his bed. “Come here then.”

Merlin hesitated an instant, then loped over and plonked down, settling himself between the pillow and the edge of the bed. “There was something I needed to talk to you about.”

Arthur’s lips curved gently upwards. “You said that already.”

Merlin's cheeks blushed hotly. “I went to the Crystal Cave with Balinor today.”

“That accounts for why I haven't seen you at all these past few days,” Arthur said a little bit more stiffly than before. His mouth firmed and he leant away and against the wall. “You went spelunking with some bloke.”

Merlin waved his hands about. “What, no! Don't be an idiot. The Crystal Cave is a magical place. And Balinor said I can get my magic back.”

Arthur's eyes flared and he smiled. Then he stuck his lower lip out. It was as though he was undecided on whether to be happy for Merlin or be cross about it. “And who's this Balinor that he
should promise things like that?"

Merlin wanted to keep part of that to himself. The Morgana connection was sure to rub Arthur the wrong way and Merlin didn't want to cast suspicion on Balinor, so he didn't mention it. "Someone Forridel knows. He lent our group a safe-house. But that's beside the point."

Arthur's gaze narrowed on him. "No, it's not. You're trusting someone implicitly just because--"

"Because he's right," said Merlin, producing the petal his magic had fashioned. "Look."

"What's that?" Arthur asked, looking up at Merlin and then at the petal.

"It was meant to be a flower," Merlin said, holding the fragile petal up as he skimmed a finger around its edges. "But my magic's still weak so I botched it and created this."

"Out of nothing?" Arthur asked, eyes very, very round and sounding short of breath.

Merlin smiled brightly. "Oh, Arthur, magic can do much more than that."

Arthur poked at the petal with his fingertip. "It feels real."

"It is real."

Arthur's fingers slipped lower and traced Merlin's hand until he was thumbing his wrist, describing small circles with the rough pad of it. "I... wow."

Merlin had to draw a breath to calm his racing heart. The fact that he could feel the gentle caress of Arthur's thumb against his rapidly beating pulse, or that he could make out the soft light in Arthur's eyes wasn't helping Merlin achieve the calm state he was aiming for.

Somehow though he managed to say, "Do you know what this means?"

Arthur's eyes softened to a look of wonder. "That you're a fairy creature haunting this world? A sprite or a mage or... a--"

"It means," Merlin said, his cheeks hot, "that I'm slowly getting my magic back." He extended the petal to Arthur, who studied it more keenly though with a confused air. "It's for you."

"The petal?" Confusion rang clear in Arthur's voice.

"Well, I did want to bring you flowers, but no, idiot, that's not it. My magic is for you. That's what I meant."

"I don't--" Arthur turned the petal in his hand, then his eyes focused on Merlin again, glimmering with curiosity. "I don't understand."

"I know you think magic's only betrayed you," Merlin explained. "And that's why I want you to see the other side of it. It's also why I want you to know that I'll use my magic only for you. It's yours."

Arthur's breath caught audibly and he just lay there sort of gaping.

Merlin feared he'd sounded ridiculous or that he'd talked up magic too much, making Arthur, who wasn't used to it, uncomfortable. But then Arthur traced a path on his face with his thumb, caressing the curve of Merlin's eyebrow, up the harsh slash of Merlin's horribly high cheekbone, down to his jawline. "You are... You just are..."
“What?” Merlin feared this was the moment his heart broke. Arthur had sounded awestruck and as if he had understood Merlin. As if he liked him and everything that was a part of him. But that was just too much to wish for.

Accepting that Arthur could get over his bias was too much for a man like him, who'd lived in fear of how people would react if they knew about him and saw him for what he was.

So he fumbled on for words, sure that he had been just reaching when he'd thought Arthur liked what he saw in a way that wasn't just superficial. A surface friendship. A kiss, a tumble, a spark of sexual attraction. Reproaching himself for thinking Arthur could love magic and therefore him just came natural to him. “I--”

Arthur leant up and kissed Merlin’s temple. “I apologise,” he said seriously, “in both mine and my father’s name for what we put you through.”

Merlin's shoulders drooped. Of course Arthur had been talking about justice and honour. Not love. Merlin had been foolish to think otherwise.

Arthur was going on, “I'm sorry I ever doubted your loyalty. I doubt there's anybody quite as loyal to those he's close to as you.”

“Arthur, don’t,” Merlin said, ready to break apart, not knowing himself whether he was glad Arthur had made giant steps towards accepting magic or sad because he'd subconsciously wished for more. “Just make sure that when your time as king comes, you'll treat us differently.”

“I promise you that, Merlin,” Arthur said, pushing him back to better look into his eyes. “I promise you that I'll be making amends.”

This time Merlin couldn't linger over his own selfish feelings anymore.

Yeah, maybe he wasn't getting everything that he'd slowly come to accept he wanted, but he was getting the most important thing in the world: justice for magic users, acceptance, the promise of a future in which he could be free. He smiled through a veil of tears that had no business being there. “Thank you.”

Arthur dried his tears with his fingertips. “Hey.”

Merlin tipped his head back and wiped his face with the back of his hands, sniffing. “Christ, this is so stupid. I'm happy. I really am. This was all I ever wanted.”

True, but a lie as of now. He wanted Arthur too. But though Arthur had come round, he still probably thought of Merlin as someone from another species entirely, and his acceptance only covered justice and legality.

Certainly it would never encompass his private life. A big chunk of ice came to lodge in Merlin's heart. But he couldn't open up about that and tell Arthur not having him was saddening him. He wouldn't be so selfish. Not when Arthur had overcome so much.

Plus, he wasn't about to sound like one pathetic sap. He only said, “This is fantastic. I just need to let myself be happy. It takes time to take happiness at face value.”

“I'm sorry you've lived so long in fear, feeling rejected.”

“I'm sorry too,” Merlin said. “I think it messed with me.” He affected a laugh. Arthur reached out for him, probably wanting to hook a hand around his neck to whisper some new apology in his ear, but
Merlin shot up. “I'd better go now. I've got to do lots of meditation if I want to get my magic back and make my promises come true.”

Arthur nodded thoughtfully and sat up, picking up the stray petal that had fluttered down the bedding and that Merlin backed towards the door. “I'll come again when I can but it's not going to be tomorrow. We have to pretend we dislike each other for Morgana's benefit.”

“Yeah,” Arthur said, zeroing in on the ring Merlin was still wearing. “I know.”

Merlin's hand closed around the door handle. But he couldn't go before reassuring Arthur of one thing. “That's only a part I'm playing though and I want you to remember that I'm your man.”

He didn't wait for Arthur's reaction to his vow. He just skidded out and ran up a flight of stairs to his room.

Once he was there, he told himself to concentrate on getting into the right kind of meditative zone needed to get him magic back.

But thoughts of Arthur sneaked in from time to time.

On balance he didn't get much done. He wasn't able to truly tap into his magic – though he finally acknowledged that it was still in him. He also didn't pull off any other easy spells.

Knowing he wouldn't get much done in this environment – Morgana's mansion was creepy and Arthur's vicinity distracting – he hied himself to bed, promising himself he'd get down to this meditating business when he was back in the cave. Which was, if nothing else, a much quieter place.

He had to wait three days before Balinor turned up to take him there again but on that third day Balinor did accompany him.

Once again Sadok was with them. Once again they penetrated deep into the forest before they even neared the cave. And once again they left Sadok behind, lounging in the periphery. Only this time Sadok trusted them enough not to remonstrate about being told to hang back and stay there. (By now he probably also feared Balinor's magic.)

Nothing had changed after their first visit. The place looked as untouched, deserted and mystical as usual.

A few bats that hadn't been there before – Merlin suspected they'd slinked through the swath Merlin had cut through the foliage to pass – flitted here and there in the antechamber. But nothing else had otherwise changed.

As before, Balinor summoned a light and led him into the bowels of the cave, the area with the crystals and the shimmering, twelve foot tall mirror that looked like a pool of molten mercury.

As before Merlin sat in the big chamber and tried to go into a trance. It wasn't difficult. Time was nothing to him.

His eyes were open but he didn't react to the world around him. His senses were all focused inward so that all he was seeing and sensing actually came from the inside of him.

He paced his breathing with the rhythm of the cave, feeling the sound of faraway waves throughout his body.
Sparkles of light danced in front of him like a cascade of dazzling diamonds. Shadows flickered about without material objects to cast them, and strange, dissolving shapes appeared in mid-air.

They beckoned and Merlin followed them. He tracked them into a dreamscape, a whole universe inside it. He entered that universe.

What he found should have been odd and perplexing but Merlin didn't think of it that way. Nothing could touch him here, least of all feelings like that.

Merlin saw himself sitting in a garden fledged with green, a rainbow of roses of all species surrounding him, canopy-like trees arching over him, a nature made bower.

In front of him six doors opened, all white and lacquered. Merlin stood and walked to the first door.

He opened it and saw images from his childhood coming back to him. Despite him having always had it, this wasn't where his magic was hiding.

He closed the door and moved onto the other one. The second door concealed a flame that burned bright. Merlin didn't know what that flame stood for but it certainly wasn't his magic.

The third and fourth doors hid memories of his life as an adult so he backed out too.

The fifth door he couldn't open. He tried the handle, jiggled it, but the door remained shut fast. He pulled and tugged, shook the frame. Nothing happened. His instincts told him that this was where he needed to go, that this was the place he'd been looking for.

He kicked and scratched at the door but it was jammed. He grasped the knob again but the door stood locked, defying him even when he pounded at it with his fist.

Breathless, he sank back on his haunches. He gazed up at the door shutting him out. “Why? Why are you like that?”

His eyes snapped open and he was back in the cave, panting, eyes wet. Balinor was hunkering down in front of him. “I know where it is,” Merlin told him. “My magic. But I can't get at it.”

“You can,” Balinor said forcefully. “You just need to try again.”

“How can you know?” Merlin asked, licking at a tear that was tickling his lips. “How can you know that if I try again that's going to happen?”

“Because I know who and what your are,” Balinor said, his hand on Merlin's heart. “And I know you can overcome this.”

“How?” Merlin said, shaking his head. “Because you felt my magic was still in me? Maybe it is but I can never get to it? Maybe that's why slugged people can never use it again. Maybe--”

“I know because I know how special and different you are. I know that magic is what makes you.”

Listening to this was so very painful Merlin wanted to retreat into a shell and never emerge. “Because of the legends?” He snorted, still tasting salt on his lips. “Because they say there's someone somewhere who--”

Balinor jostled him. “Because I'm your father.”

Merlin thought his brain had shut down. It was like a blank screen had come up on a monitor and a question mark was blinking repeatedly, signalling how there was an irreparable error corrupting the
He couldn't muster the brain power to say or do anything. He couldn't even breathe. It was as if his lungs had shrunk to pea dimensions and he was trying to will them to do their job despite their reduced size. “You can't be. I've never had a dad.”

Balinor cupped his cheek. “Every one has.”

“B-but how?” Merlin was reduced to a stammering mess, but he wasn't ashamed anymore.

This kind of news was earth-shattering enough to justify any kind of minor breakdown.

If Balinor was lying then this was just cruel. Merlin had always fantasised about something like this.

In his awake dreams his father would turn up and take him back under his wing. He would apologise for abandoning him and tell him that he loved Merlin and that Merlin was the best son anyone could want.

Of course, he'd buried those daydreams long ago, made sure he never – almost – thought about them. Giving him this only to snatch it away would be horrible. Bit if it was true... If it was true Merlin had no words. “How?”

Balinor didn't address the how. “Your eyes are nothing like mine. You take after your mother in that. She had the kindest eyes I've ever seen.”

Merlin's heart skipped a few beats. He did have his mother's eyes. This could be no coincidence.

“Then why did you leave?”

Balinor sighed expansively. “Things got complicated. I had a friend who was called Nimueh. She was playing with the Pendragons, playing with fire, and I had to help her. Then Ygraine gave birth. Her son survived but she died. Uther started persecuting us. I turned rebel. That's when Hunith told me she was pregnant. I couldn't lead them to you.”

“But they're not looking for you now,” Merlin said. “Why haven't you come looking since?”

“I lost track of you,” said Balinor, “and coming out of the woodwork to ask questions would bring attention to you. I continued with the resistance. Until one day I found out that there was a group whose leader was thought to be the man from the Druid legends.”

Merlin's brow puckered. “But it's Forridel leading the Underground.”

“People talked about you,” Balinor said, avoiding the line of thought presented by Merlin. “And that's how I knew. I meant to help while standing on the sidelines.” Balinor rasped a breath. “I thought it was too late to ever get to know you until Forridel said you were taken by S7 and I could no longer stand by.”

Merlin gnawed his lip and blinked back tears, the words he wanted to say dammed up behind their shield.

He wanted to hug Balinor. He wanted to do that because that would make this true. It would make him his father. He knew he couldn't. He wasn't stupid and he realised you didn't build relationships out of nothing. But he smiled wetly all the same.

He had a father! Merlin had a father and one that was trying to protect him the only way he knew how. He felt the dimples in his cheeks and a new wash of hope well inside him.
If Balinor – if his dad said he could, then Merlin would call himself able to reshape his world and get his magic back.

An injection of enthusiasm overtook him. “So if I try this again...”

“You'll find it, Merlin. Maybe not the whole of it right today. But you'll get it all back.”

Merlin squared his jaw. “Then I'll try again and again. Till I do it!”

“Good boy.”

Wanting to make his father proud, Merlin sank into his trance again. He found himself where he'd been on his first try, in the green bower facing the doors. This time he didn't bother with the wrong ones, but hastened to the fifth.

Before trying it, he took a deep, cleansing breath and plumbed the depths of his soul. He knew who he was now. And what he had to do.

He had a destiny and it was that of legend. His destiny was magic and using it for Arthur and the good of as many people as possible.

He opened the door. It was so bright in there he almost couldn't see. But once he'd shielded his eyes he picked out the shape of a great beast looming over him. It was the dragon from his dream.

When he saw Merlin, the dragon spread its wings, threw its massive head back and breathed a ball of fire.

Though it probably should have, it didn't scare Merlin. “Hello.”

The dragon looked down. “Hello, young warlock. And welcome back.”

“I never was here before,” Merlin told the dragon. For all that it was familiar this place was definitely new.

“Oh, no, young warlock,” said the dragon. “I'll go as far as to say that you've never been anywhere else.”

Merlin's forehead creased, then he decided not to pursue that line of thinking. He wasn't here to make conversation; he needed answers about the retrieval of his magic. He knew it was in this room; it called to him. “How do I get my magic back?”

“You don't, young warlock,” the dragon said sententiously.

“Then how--”

“You are magic and magic is your destiny.”

Merlin had got that much now and only wanted to be told what to actively do to get his magic back. He flapped his mouth to say as much but the dragon breathed on him as he had in the dream, effectively shutting him up.

Merlin's eyes snapped into focus. He was back in the cave, Balinor watching him attentively.

“Your eyes glowed, son.”

Merlin beamed. “They did?”
A curt nod. “They did. Why don’t you try a spell?”

Merlin decided to go for something simple. So he said, “Blóstm.” A fully form flower appeared in his hand. It had petals of every colour in creation and a long, velvety stem. Merlin laughed. “It is back.” He wasn’t positive it was back at its usual levels because he’d broken a sweat to summon the flower, but it was undeniably back. “It is.”

Balinor clapped him on the shoulder. “Well done, boy.”

Merlin thought the smile he was wearing would stay stuck forever. “I-- thank you. I'm so-- I'm so happy. I've got to tell Arthur.”


Merlin felt that he could tell Balinor now that he'd established he was his dad. “Yeah, he's my friend. I swear. He's coming round about magic. He apologised. He's--”

Balinor held his wrist in a grip. “Are you sure, Merlin? Are you sure you can trust him?”

Merlin couldn't act as though he didn't know what Balinor was concerned about. He'd been suspicious of Arthur before getting to know him. But with Arthur opening up about magic, things had changed. So Merlin was sure of him. “Yes, yes I am. He saved my life – sort of – when he stood to gain nothing from it. And I just-- he's my friend and I want to tell him. I just want him to be a part of this.”

“All right, we'll drive back, but remember, Pendragons aren't our friends.”

Merlin wanted to say 'Uther perhaps' but he didn't wish to argue and with his dad most especially.

He longed to see Arthur and to tell him about the magic. He was also planning on reconnecting with his dad after this Morgana mess was over. “I just think sharing with Arthur would be nice. Please, trust me on this.”

Balinor apparently did because he escorted Merlin out of the cave without uttering one more word.

During the drive back to Morgana's mansion he kept giving Merlin looks but he didn't breathe a word.

They parted ways with assurances of seeing each other again for a last visit to the cave.

Once Balinor had gone, Merlin avoided any place he could bump into Morgana and made directly for Arthur's room.

As once before, he didn't want to attract the attention of Morgana's goons so he sneaked into Arthur's warded quarters, hoping Arthur wasn't doing anything that was too private.

As luck would have it, Arthur wasn't. He was just looking out the window of his room, holding the curtain back.

“Arthur,” Merlin said, hoping he wouldn't startle him but too impatient to wait, “Arthur I have news.”

Arthur whirled around. A good look at Merlin and the look of annoyance whatever he'd seen in the courtyard had inspired vanished. He lightened up and said, “Yeah? What good news?”

Feeling a bit paranoid about people spying into Arthur's room, Merlin pulled Arthur back towards
the middle of it, then said, “My magic. My magic's back, Arthur. It's still not at its strongest but it's back!”

Bursting out laughing, Arthur lifted him off his feet, his hands around Merlin's waist. “God, that's, God. I'm so happy for you.”

Merlin beamed too. “And there's more,” he said, remembering the other major thing that had happened today. “Arthur – Arthur, Balinor is my dad.” He became aware that tears were tracking down his cheeks even though his lips were stretched in the widest possible smile. “I have a father, Arthur.”

Arthur's eyes flared so wide Merlin could see every fleck of colour that went into the pupil. As if awakening from the shock of surprise, Arthur lowered Merlin, their torsos sliding one against the other in a rustle of fabric.

When Merlin was back on his feet, Arthur wiped Merlin's tears with both his thumbs, then cupped his hand around the back of his neck, threading his fingers through his unruly hair. “You're crying,” he said as though that wasn't obvious to Merlin too, and somewhat embarrassing. “Don't-- it's.”

Arthur didn't say what it was. He kissed Merlin's cheek softly instead, eyes even wider than before. He traced his mouth lower still so his lips ran the length of Merlin's jaw, then the edge of his mouth. Arthur's warm breath against his skin banished the last fleeting hope of Merlin staying rational about this. His breathing quickened; his heart twisted in knots.

Merlin turned just a little.

Arthur caught his face between his hands before capturing his lips.

They were so sweet, Merlin couldn’t resist kissing back. He didn't know what this meant for Arthur yet, but he wanted to go on kissing him and possibly never stop.

At least now they were both aware of where they stood in relation to each other, who they were.

All in all he felt okay with going with this.

Well, more than. He was ethically okay with the proceedings and otherwise completely devastated by Arthur on an emotional level.

And all the while Arthur's lips moved under his so sweetly, Merlin thought his insides would melt. And then when Arthur caught his bottom lip and sucked it into his mouth Merlin thought that nothing could ever be more perfect. Sappy, yeah, he was allowed.

Arthur's mouth was tender but thorough, hot and dry. A bit like heaven, really.

Smoothing the tip of his tongue along the kiss-puffy surface of Merlin's lips, Arthur pushed his tongue inside Merlin's mouth. He gently stroked Merlin's tongue with his, and that got Merlin somewhat hot and bothered. Lots, to be honest.

Needing to take the kiss over, Merlin thrust his tongue over Arthur's.

At the same time, Merlin's hand went to twist free the top button of Arthur's shirt.

Arthur's slipped down from Merlin's neck to his back to go and sneak under his tee.

Arthur's fingers slid up Merlin's spine in an action that sent lightning surging through every nerve in
Merlin's body. His other hand glided down Merlin's flank to span the small of his back.

While his hands were busy this way, Arthur's lips brushed over his chin, then the side of his neck. His teeth nibbled at the sensitive spot under his ear that made shivers spread down Merlin's spine.

Closing his eyes and fanning out a breath, Merlin squirmed in pleasure. A gasp surged out of him when Arthur's mouth inched down towards Merlin collar.

Helpless, Merlin just threw his head back, parted his lips, and made a sound that was pure hunger.

Encouraged, Arthur nuzzled his ear and the base of his throat. Wet and hot. His breath coming ragged just as Merlin's did.

Loving the attention, Merlin shuddered and writhed against him.

Realising he wanted more, his fingers moved slowly down the buttons of Arthur's shirt that were still done up, unbuttoning them one by one. But the space between their bodies wasn't such as to allow for quick undressing.

As much as Merlin was coming undone then and there, he also needed to have Arthur naked. “Come on, Arthur--” He gasped when Arthur's teeth closed around a tendon in a short electrifying bite. “Clothes. They need to come off. Please.”

“Can't stop touching you.” The words were formed against Merlin's skin.

In fact Arthur was happily nibbling and sucking on Merlin's neck, alternately dropping feather-light kisses all over it. When he wasn't doing that his mouth was trailing down the opposite way, his tongue rasping across flesh.

Though his body was sending him signals entailing 'never stop him from touching you', Merlin pushed Arthur away, placing both hands against his broad chest. “Clothes, Arthur, clothes.”

Arthur smiled lopsidedly and finished undoing the shirt Merlin had pawed open. He dropped it.

Merlin's breath hitched. His gaze tracked a line from Arthur's shoulder to his hips, and his mind wandered. He imagined trailing his lips over that taut expanse of skin, kissing it, and inhaling Arthur's scent.

The most fleeting day dream about how Arthur smelled intimately had him curling his hands in fists. Calm down, he had to calm down.

“Like what you see?” Arthur asked, but for all the world his inflection wasn't cocky and Merlin realised that Arthur wasn't sure Merlin did like him.

Even though his mind was a bit dazed with lust, Merlin understood. Arthur had no way of knowing that Merlin was into him as a man.

They'd slept together, that was true, but Arthur thought Merlin had only enlisted in the Selection to save his skin.

While Merlin hadn't had winning on his mind when he'd grudgingly realised he had no way of backing out of the competition without his background being checked, he'd also only slept with Arthur because he'd wanted to.

Maybe Arthur still thought Merlin had somehow been paying lip-service to the competition though.
Even in bed. He surely no longer thought Merlin had seduced him to kill him, but if he still entertained the notion that Merlin had been serving his own ends...

God, that was... not something he wanted between them. So now was no time to be shy. “I do,” he said, feeling hot all over with embarrassment, from the tip of his ears down to his toes. “And I want to look at you and look at you. And be there with you and for you. I want to fuck you or let you do it to me as raw as you want. I want to come with you.”

By now he was beet red. To be honest, Arthur didn't look better off, though his eyes were twinkling and he was standing taller. “You want that, do you?”

Merlin nodded.

Arthur prowled up to him half predatorily, half shyly. His body moved with assurance but he dropped his eyes from time to time and there was a nice blush coating his nose. “Good, because I want to do that too.”

Arthur slipped the front of Merlin shirt free of Merlin's jeans. The back he'd already made a mess of raking his hands up Merlin's spine.

Merlin said nothing, he didn't think he had enough breath left for words anyway, but pulled his shirt over his head. He waited, a-shiver, for Arthur's reaction.

When he saw the hungry-sweet look in Arthur's eyes most of his embarrassment melted away. He trailed his hand down his belly to the button on his jeans.

He was getting unbearably hard in anticipation and self conscious for it. But Arthur looking at him as if he was the best thing since slice bread helped matters.

“So this okay?”

Arthur swallowed, his Adam's apple diving and popping up again, and closed the distance between them.

Once they were standing so close Merlin thought Arthur could hear his heartbeat through his skin, Arthur probed his chest with his palms, kneading pectorals, tweaking a nipple, tangling his fingers in the hair there. “More than.”

“So on a scale from okay to this-is-exactly-what-I-want--”

“Shh,” Arthur whispered, leaning down to kiss Merlin once more. He slid his tongue inside Merlin's mouth and Merlin could think of doing nothing better than giving way and giving back, taking his time exploring Arthur's mouth, deepening a kiss that was already passionate as it was.

Breathless, they both took a step back, Arthur buried his head in Merlin's neck and panted fast against his skin.

Merlin wrapped his arms around Arthur and clung to him for all his might.

After a few seconds Arthur did the same, letting his lips skim the side of Merlin's throat, raising goose flesh just by virtue of breathing.

Torsos both bare, they were practically doing nothing but embracing.

Their cocks were both hard, bulging under a layer of denim, but that wasn't much the point.
They weren't doing anything like humping each other, seeking friction or even purposefully setting their groins on a collision course.

The physical contact was what counted.

That and only that was enough to send Merlin's heart drumming crazy fast and to make him realise that Merlin loved Arthur with every bit of his heart and every piece of his soul. “Arthur--”

Arthur kissed his temple and moved backwards. Out of Merlin's arms.

Though that wasn't what Merlin wanted, it was also what was needed to get them back on track.

“You wanted us naked, didn't you?”

“We can do it clothed too.”

“But that's not half as fun,” Arthur said, then scanning the room he added, “And we don't have all the time in the world to slowly decide what to do. There's people around, right?”

Right, people who mustn't know what they were doing. And Arthur was right. As much as he wanted to go slow, to get to know Arthur better now that all the cards were on the table, now wasn't the time.

He'd make time for that, he swore, but in this moment he also wanted to feel Arthur on his skin.

“Right.” He made himself grin and after a few seconds all grim thoughts genuinely vanished and only left room for anticipation and the low thrum of happiness. “You go first.”

“Why me?”

“Because I'm bossy in bed, didn't you know?” Merlin quipped.

“Oh, in that case.”

Arthur's hands went to his zip but he didn't act on it. He just drummed his fingers on the top button, the bastard. He was teasing. But he'd also gone all pink.

Merlin met Arthur's gaze and filling his with humour and warmth, he reached for Arthur's jeans. He dragged the zip downwards and pulled them down to Arthur's ankles.

Arthur toed off his shoes and socks and stepped out of the garment.

Jeans gone from his line of sight, Merlin couldn't fail to notice Arthur's cock and how it had started to push out of the thin pale cotton briefs he was wearing.

It was wet at the tip already though Merlin couldn't see the rest of it because the fabric was clinging to every curve and bulge on display.

In reaction he felt his whole body flush and he just moved. He nipped his hand inside Arthur's briefs and stroked his cock slowly.

It was fever hot to the touch, hard and velvety. It twitched in Merlin's hand just as Arthur groaned and pressed his groin closer to Merlin's.

Merlin put a kiss to the side of his neck and whispered, “Are you liking this?”
Low, nearly pained sounds tore from Arthur's chest. His jaw dropped and he took in deep, panting
breaths. “Yeah, far too much.”

If possible, Arthur’s prick went harder against his curled fingers and that was a little bit of an
incentive to tease more of a reaction out of Arthur.

His fingers closed over the width and glided down to the slit. He swept his thumb over the drop of
pre-come budding there and spread it around and over the crown, massaging the wetness all over the
underside of Arthur’s cock.

Arthur trembled beneath Merlin’s touch and more drops of pre-come welled one after the other from
the narrow, pink slit at the top of his cock head.

Merlin was about to twist his wrist or rub the length, when Arthur’s hand shot out and stopped his.
“Ah, no, not yet.” Arthur’s chest rose and fell. “Or I’m coming.”

Merlin held his hands up. “Okay then, sorry, I thought--”

“I--” Arthur ground out in between pants. “I’ve wanted you for far too long.”

Merlin gaped the tiniest little bit. “You’ve had me, before.”

The circumstances hadn’t been perfect and they’d fallen out right afterwards, but it hadn’t been that
long.

Arthur smiled a be-addled smile that had an edge of need to it and said, “I liked you from the
moment I saw the picture that came with your form. And before you think me shallow I liked the fact
that your eyes sparked with humour.”

Merlin affected a grin though his heart was beating a tattoo. “I always was proud of my sense of
humour.”

Arthur didn’t take the out Merlin had given him and continued on a serious note. “But I’ve truly
wanted you since you spoke up to me and ever since. Even after-- even after everything, when I
followed you and found you with Ruadan, I was telling myself I hated you. That I must. That you
were nothing but a traitor. But, no, I still wanted you.”

The words sent a branding iron right through Merlin’s body.

He didn’t even mind the fact Arthur was only talking about sex. That he’d said ‘I still wanted you
and not ‘I still was your friend’ or ‘fond of you’. He couldn’t parse details like that.


Arthur went to him, reaching out and unbuckling Merlin’s jeans. He was so swift about it, it only
took a few seconds before Merlin was as naked as Arthur and they were clinging to each other.

Merlin trembled, but it had nothing to do with the temperature in Morgana’s fucking rambling
mansion and everything to do with the full body touch. Arthur’s hands roaming on his skin, moving,
palm wide, up his back and flank and down to his arse, were the most amazing thing he’d ever felt.

When Arthur swept his hands back up and over his shoulders, he stopped. “This is what you were
hiding from me.” He lightly poked at the scar that still flamed red on Merlin’s shoulder. “When we
mad-- when we were together. This is what you were hiding under that shirt.”
Merlin cast his eyes down, uncomfortably shuffling from foot to foot. “Forgive me,” he said in a mortified rasp. “I-- I know that was a way of lying and though I fully meant to I'm sorry I did.”

Arthur's fingers played on his skin lightly, the whorls of his pads scuffing across Merlin's jaw.

Every single twitch of his fingers played out a soft rhythm on Merlin's fever hot skin that was tender and almost hypnotic.

Not content, Arthur brushed his lips against the side of Merlin's face, the thrum of his voice vibrating against the bow of Merlin's. “You're the one that's got to forgive me. My people almost killed you. They—”

Arthur's sigh echoed from deep within him, sounding almost like a sob.

His words stopped as though he was having trouble formulating them. But his hands never did.

They wove their own brand of magic on Merlin's skin. They were perfect; down to the slight but perceptible tremors in Arthur's hands as they mapped his body. It was as though Arthur couldn't hold it in, rein himself in.

Similarly, Merlin couldn't bear to think he'd almost lost Arthur by way of keeping secrets. He knew he couldn't have done anything else. He still wished they'd gone about this completely backwards. Talking first, having sex later.

Arthur brushed his mouth close to his forehead. “Hey, are you still with me?”

“Yeah, sure, yeah,” Merlin said, giving Arthur a brief kiss on the mouth.

“Because I was about to suggest we use the bed now.”

As much as standing here touching Arthur was everything Merlin wanted, he also needed to feel Arthur closer. A bed would lend itself to exactly that purpose.

“Trundle bed,” Merlin joked weakly.

Arthur picked him up on it and said, “Yeah, Morgana's stingy.”

Merlin laughed. They both did and then turned and walked over to the bed.

Merlin shoved Arthur down first, watching as the dying but warm late afternoon light pooling in from the window reflected off his skin and made it look as perfect and golden as it had when Arthur had been free to go about as he pleased, courting the sun’s rays.

Merlin promised himself he would give Arthur that freedom back, but before he could grow mushier, Arthur pulled him down and on top of him so that Merlin was sitting in his lap, their cocks standing up at attention and brushing one against the other.

Merlin thought about cracking a joke, saying 'duelling swords' or some such idiotic piece of bollocks, but Arthur peered at him with a knowing air and pulled the blanket over their heads.

Merlin's throat tightened. It was warm in here and it felt safe. As though the world outside – Morgana, Uther and their troubles – didn't exist.

This was a tight cocoon of their own creation and they were both safe.

Arthur's body was firm and grounding beneath him, hot to the touch, a proof of the strength in him, a
strength that would always sustain him.

Tugging him down by the neck, Arthur kissed Merlin, sweet and deep, then his hands moved to cup Merlin's arse cheeks. His palms squeezed them, up and apart.

Merlin's breath came out in a rush. He shifted into the touch, then away from it, then upwards and into it again.

As Merlin swayed, their pricks touched, the pressure not quite enough to get them off.

Arthur skimmed his fingers around the furl of skin his fingers found in their wanderings.

Merlin's muscles went liquid and he took them both in hand, before stopping short. Ygraine's wedding band.

“The ring,” he said, looking down at his hands. “Maybe it's chafing you. I've never --” He went scarlet. “I've never given a hand job wearing a ring. Should I take it off?”

Arthur looked up from under his fringe, his hand covering Merlin's for a moment, a fingertip sweeping across the platinum surface. “No, don't take it off,” he said in a rasp.

Merlin studied Arthur to confirm the ring wasn't hurting him or that the connection to his mum wasn't offending him.

When he was sure Arthur was okay with it, Merlin reprised rubbing his thumb over the head of Arthur's cock and wetting it with his pre-come.

More forcefully, he pulled at them both from the root up. He squeezed and scraped with his fingernails. He tugged and pistoned his hand.

Arthur's finger penetrated him as he did so, and Merlin responded by lifting up, easing the pressure inside him, and then plunging back down.

Again he slid forward, placing a hand on Arthur's solid chest without forgetting to jack them off with the other.

Arthur moaned, pupils bloating. “Merlin, more.”

“Kay-- can do that.”

Arthur ran the fingers of his free hand over Merlin’s chin and down his chest. In his mapping of Merlin's skin he found a nipple he teased with his thumb and forefinger, and rubbed at until it hardened.


Arthur worried his lower lip in concentration and swiped Merlin's other nipple until it was a perfect point.

Heat unfurled in the pit of Merlin's stomach. The sensation was perfect and he arched his back, a sigh of pleasure leaving him as he pushed his cock against Arthur's and into his own fist that was gripping them both.

He grazed the rough side of his thumb over the tip of Arthur's prick until he'd caused Arthur to make wet noises.
“I want to taste you,” he whispered almost to himself.

Arthur had heard him though, for he said, “Not objecting here.”

He let go of Merlin's buttocks and stopped playing at tracing his rim and breaching him, leaving Merlin a little bereft and stranded on a high.

But that was worth it because of the noise Arthur made when Merlin scooted lower and found the tip of Arthur's cock with his mouth.

He let his mouth slip fully over the head until it was in his throat. Then he allowed his tongue to alternately press at the undertip right at the edge of the hole, and to curl down the length.

Slipping back up, he dabbed it with his tongue, drawing Arthur's pre-come to his lips in a ropey string.

Arthur grunted and bucked.

Things were getting messy with bodily fluids when Merlin licked back down the shaft, swallowing Arthur to the root.

This time, Arthur did more than grunt. He silenced a shout against his fist.

As he sucked, Merlin gazed up to see Arthur’s face and what he took in was beauty itself.

Arthur had his eyes closed and his lips had fallen apart. He seemed to be breathing through his mouth, his chest rising to catch up. He was red in the face, forehead shiny with sweat, golden hair sticking to his skull in sweaty strands that looked darker because of how drenched they were.

Merlin couldn’t frankly imagine a sight better than that. Arthur's naked body would arouse a statue. Arthur's sweet face made his heart clench and squeeze.

And that was how it hit him.

Finding out that what mattered more – the most – wasn’t Arthur being hot, but the level of adoration he had for his features, the little sweet things about him.

So, yeah, he did love him.

Merlin had come about it in the most circuitous way possible, he realised, but now he was dead sure.

Merlin was almost about to say it, say that he was in love with Arthur, but then re-thought it.

Arthur had married him to spare him a meet and greet with the executioner. For honour's sake. Arthur liked sex with him. He was being accepting about his magic, but that didn't mean he loved Merlin or that Merlin would be doing the right thing pressuring him into it.

He was perfectly okay being the only one who knew about this love thing.

For now, that would be his secret, though he'd overtly do everything in his power to protect Arthur, who'd grown so much and made giant steps and was on the way to becoming the great man Merlin had thought he could be.

And he’d also do everything in his power to give him pleasure because God knew how long they had before trouble knocked on their door again. (It just tended to.)
Trying not to focus on those serious thoughts or on how aroused he himself was, he kissed a line up and down Arthur's cock, then lapped around the crown, taking time to listen to Arthur's littlest intake of breath.

He wanted Arthur to retain a memory of this, to connect it to happy times, no matter what happened to them next.

“Merlin.” It was said in a shallow voice that was mostly broken.

Being otherwise engaged, Merlin couldn't reply but he inched his mouth to the base of Arthur's cock, then grasped around the root with his hand.

Looking up from his activities, he watched as Arthur's body tensed.

Releasing Arthur with a wet pop, Merlin smiled, then started going down on Arthur all over again, working his way back to the root.

The bitter, bitter taste of pre-come that was now flooding his mouth made Merlin's own cock ache, but he ignored it so he could give Arthur pleasure.

“So good,” Arthur said low, his hips lifting to feed Merlin more of his cock.

He carded his fingers through Merlin's already naturally messy hair, pulling on it when Merlin hollowed his cheeks and sucked for all he was worth.

Merlin rumbled contentedly around Arthur's cock, but Arthur yanked harder at his hair, nearly scalping him he was so frantic. “God. Merlin. I'm about to come.”

Merlin released him from his mouth. “Can't have that yet. I have glorious plans.”

He kissed his way back up Arthur's heaving, flushed torso and found his lips. “You're going to like 'em, promise.”

He realised he probably should finish this so that he could sneak out of Arthur's room and make sure none of their enemies knew what they'd been about, but he couldn't bring himself to leave Arthur yet, so he kept coming up with ways to make them both last.

"Oh, yeah?"

“Yeah.” Merlin playfully nodded his head, dimpling up. “I'm going to fuck you slow.”

Arthur's cheeks blossomed apple red. Or redder than the rest of his already flushed body anyway.

For a moment Merlin was sure Arthur would refuse him, say that he either wasn't into bottoming or just didn't trust him enough to go that route. Which would be perfectly fine with Merlin. Arthur had had to fight his suspicions of him to get here and it would be perfectly okay if he didn't want to go there.

Arthur surprised him by saying. “Yeah, I want that.” He made a moue. “Unless you've changed your mind, of course.”

Merlin's smile spread from ear to ear and he pulled Arthur's face to his. “Trust me,” he said once the kiss had broken. “I have a way.”

Arthur's eyes widened in recollection. “Crap, no lube or condoms.”
“I have my magic back,” Merlin reminded Arthur.

Perhaps Arthur had no idea about this, being non-magical, but some things came pretty easy to magic users.

He closed his eyes and when he re-opened them he had a bottle of scented oil with sitting on his palm.

It wasn't industrial lube exactly but his magic wasn't likely to rifle Boots for supplies. It didn't work that way.

Arthur barked a laugh. “Condom?”

“Uh, right,” Merlin said. “My magic can't easily fashion something that specific. I mean if I saw a packet on a shelf, my magic could filch it for me. Recreation an industrial product down to its smallest qualities... Not so easy. I'd have to picture every part of it down to invisible components. I could be at it all night.” He'd said that a bit breathlessly, wanting Arthur to understand how his magic worked. “It's entirely up to you, though I suppose this is where I say I'm clean. Haven't had sex in a while. Busy--”

“Saving innocents,” Arthur said with a smile that looked proud to Merlin. “By the way me too. I mean, I undergo lots of check-ups as Prince and I'm as healthy as a horse. Oh and--” Arthur ran both his hands up Merlin's arms then back again in a massaging motion, his eyes tracking the movement rather than meeting Merlin's. “And I haven't been sleeping around. It's not me. Not what I do. I'm pretty faithful once I--” He shrugged. “You know.”

“So we're...”

“Doing it bare, yeah,” Arthur said. “Actually that's... that's something I want. Feeling flesh, you coming inside me. That is, if you wan--”

Merlin's lips curled around Arthur's fleetingly. “Still on board, yep.”

Arthur's eyes twinkled; he flashed Merlin the widest smile he'd given him to date. Then he rolled over onto his belly, resting his head on crossed arms, and wriggled his lower back and arse.

Gulping, mouth all dry at the sight, Merlin crawled onto his thighs and began to knead Arthur's shoulders and upper back in case he needed some help relaxing. He just wanted Arthur to be happy with his choice.

“Feels nice,” Arthur said, telling Merlin he was going about it in the right way.

His own skin prickled with a low burning fire from being so close to Arthur. He was loving it all so much he hoped he could make Arthur feel just half as good as he was.

In a bid to do so, his hands ghosted over the planes of shoulders that rippled with muscle, his lips trailing in the wake of his hands.

His tongue ran along the patches of skin he found under his mouth.

Moving lower, he nipped at Arthur’s taut back until he found his buttocks.

He nosed there. “You're lovely, every part of you,” Merlin said in an undertone.

“Touch me,” Arthur said, voice pitched so low it made Merlin hungry on its own. “Finger me; rim
me, anything.”

“Oh God, you do want me to make me come untouched,” Merlin’s words hissed out of him, but he
did what Arthur asked of him.

He spread Arthur wide with shaking hands, leaned in and ran his tongue around the rim of his
arsehole.

Sticking his face against the crack of Arthur’s cheeks, he began sucking and nibbling on the
puckered hole, his breath warm against it, until he finally stabbed his tongue inside Arthur.

He penetrated him wetly as he would with his cock, spread moisture around, and licked it back and
forth, then inside again, suctioning when he got tired of jabbing his tongue as deep in as he could.

When he got Arthur rutting against the mattress or conversely pushing into his touch, biting on his
arm to quash his sobs, Merlin knew it was enough, verging on too much.

He backed off, pressing a finger inside Arthur, stretching him while searching for just the right spot,
that little round and firm gland that was so easy to find.

Arthur gasped and went rigid all over as a second finger joined the first and touched his prostate. It
didn’t seem as though Arthur had tensed in pain but Merlin needed to ask. “Okay?”

Arthur answered in a wrecked voice. “More, you’re driving me crazy. More. I want it to burn.”

Merlin complied, stimulating Arthur’s prostate with light pressure and repetitive circlings of his
fingers.

Arthur’s hips shot forward. “Oh God, oh God, oh God,” he shouted.

mustn’t know.”

Arthur’s next attempt at keening was buried in his pillow, which allowed Merlin to go back to work.

As Merlin did, Arthur’s sighed rhythmic vowel-ly sighs and his hands curled into fists. He was
slamming his pelvis forward, then backing into Merlin’s hand.

Merlin knew what this felt like. Knew that Arthur was in a frenzy, vibrations likely shooting up his
spine, transferring to his hard-as-rock, soaking wet cock.

The thought of getting Arthur off when he was this desperate drew Merlin’s balls up tight.

“Merlin, please.”

Getting Arthur’s desperation very well, Merlin finished working Arthur open with the scented oil
he’d magically summoned.

To do this he had to ignore the staccato sounds coming from Arthur’s mouth – highly distracting –
and his own fat, flapping cock.

When it was clear this was going to be too much for either of them he coated his cock with more oil,
till it was positively dripping with both that liquid and his pre-come.

"Turn around,” he grunted, wanting to be able to look into Arthur’s eyes when he did this, so that he
could tell him what he felt silently and with his body, rather than with words that would force him
into decisions Arthur probably didn't want.

Arthur, hair all in disarray, face red, turned around, just as Merlin had asked.

His cock was jutting proudly between his legs, grown a shade darker and looking as though the smallest thing could set it off into spurting ropes and ropes of come.

Now ready, Merlin slapped one last measure of oil on his prick. He did it under Arthur's watchful gaze. Then he caught Arthur's lips for a kiss that was all mouths and a smattering of tongue, and pressed against Arthur's hole.

To jog things along, Arthur raised his legs and opened them.

Both their lips parted and they panted into each other's mouths.

Merlin worked his hips against the pressure he felt, and eased inside.

“Does it burn?” he asked in a wrecked tone.

“In the best possible way, you moron.”

Feeling Arthur relax, Merlin pressed harder.

Arthur bit his nose.

Taking that as his cue, Merlin began to move, starting his thrust in and out of Arthur.

He went as deep as he could, appreciating the tightness and the hot wetness created by the oil, but loving the tender look Arthur was giving him more – or the way Arthur was straining to tenderly kiss his shoulder scar with lips that were open, moist, soft and reverent, and massaging his other thigh scar.

He adored the way Arthur was cradling him in the V of his spread legs, the way his hitched breath signalled how wrecked his body was.

He was mad about the grip of Arthur's hands on his flanks, possessive and wanting, driving him on with just as much wild need as Merlin was displaying.

For a few seconds Merlin scooted back, watching his prick disappearing inside Arthur with every push and every little shove of his hips. Hot, he privately thought.

But not even that was enough to make him climb towards orgasm and Merlin had to increase the length and depth of his thrusts, pulling his cock almost all the way out before he was able to slam it back in again, to near that crest.

It was glorious, agonisingly blissful. It was the most perfect sex he'd ever had.

It was more than that because this was Arthur and Arthur seemed to be as into it as Merlin was: keening, clawing, spanning his arm around Merlin's body as though he couldn't let go.

Merlin wanted to give him the world, not just this, so the experience was ten times more satisfying.

Merlin's heart shot up in his chest, so deadpan he thought it would burst. His throat closed with emotion.

Thinking that way didn't help him hold the reins of his control and his movements got sharper, more
frantic.

Arthur noticed, his body becoming a vise around Merlin's, their legs tangled, their breaths doing their level best to imitate their limbs.

Their mouths joined or rather clashed together with next to no coordination, wet lips on lips, tongues sucking on his tongues, teeth scraping along chins -- little bites that left no mark – mouths on jaws and closing round the flesher nubs of a lip arch.


“Merlin,” Arthur panted against the seam of his mouth, his eyes preternaturally blue. “I don’t think I'm lasting this time. I’m going to come.”

“It’s okay. I can’t stop myself either.”

As he kept on pulling on Arthur's cock from the base upwards, Arthur's puffed out breaths started feeling furnace hot against Merlin's skin.

“Then don’t try to.”

Arthur sighed into Merlin's neck as he wetted Merlin's hand with his come.

Merlin's tensed above him, muscles locking tight, tight, tight, as he unravelled. The room lit up, washed in bright lights like a rainbow.

Though Merlin had feared that manifestation of his magic would repulse Arthur, that didn't happen.

He pulled Merlin's shuddering body against him, kissed the side of his throat available to him, and traced a foot up his leg as though he wanted to keep Merlin in place.

Spent, they clung to each other, trembling, quivering, panting, the sweat they'd shed and Arthur's come hot between them.

Their breaths, at first ragged an syncopated, slowed, eased, but that didn't seem to be a clue for them to stop touching.

On the contrary they held each other. As they came down, Arthur combed his fingers through Merlin's hair and coaxed him into not moving. If you could coax someone into inaction, that was.

Despite their skin sticking together, Merlin was so loathe to bodily part from Arthur that he let himself be manhandled. “I'm sorry,” Merlin said.

Even though Merlin's now limp cock slipped out of him, Arthur continued to mouth at his hairline, the curl of his fingers skimming down the stand-out notches of his spine.


“About the magic show,” Merlin said sleepily.

“I loved it. It was... kind of amazing really.” Arthur released a good-humoured snort. “And flattering. I made you go nuclear.”

“Shut up,” Merlin said, trying to slap the first part of Arthur that presented itself to his attention. “I mean it though. My magic, I won't use it in bed if it annoys you or anything, but I will use it for you, generally speaking. Not for Morgana and not for anyone else though. I'll put everything to rights.”
Arthur kissed the top of his head. “I don’t need that kind of vow. You and your magic are free as a bird.”

Merlin smiled and toppled off Arthur, coming to lie on his side, facing Arthur and playing with his chest hair. “I don't want it to be.”

“But it will be.” Arthur pulled up the sheets that had pooled at the bottom of the bed and covered them with it. “Now sleep.”

A prickle of worry nagged at Merlin despite the drowsiness Arthur had picked up on. “Shouldn't I go back to my room to save appearances?”

“I'll wake you up in an hour,” Arthur said, covering Merlin's hand with his, lying where it was on Arthur's chest. “And send you your way. Just... let us pretend this is normal.”

“Okay,” Merlin agreed though he knew he ought to disagree. The fact was that he felt so warm and safe he couldn't really believe anything bad could happen to him right now. Besides, he didn't want to move. “'kay.”

Merlin drifted off.

He was on the cusp of unconsciousness when he thought he heard a door snick closed.

If he had been a little less done for he would have probably roused himself, but Arthur hadn't reacted, meaning no danger lurked, and he was so beat that he let himself fall asleep in Arthur's arms.

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Merlin cupped his hands together, making a cradle of them. He let his eyelids flutter shut and delved into the deepest parts of himself.

He envisioned a spark, thought of a heartbeat. A tiny but steady flicker of one, gentle but ever present, tumbling towards its destiny.

He imagined the gossamer fabric of wings, the scales pigmented into a variety of blues, greens, and jade with purple notes.

He saw their iridescence bloom bright and challenging the sun. He saw the body with its tiny head, furry thorax and convex abdomen. The beat of a wing; the flick of antennae.

When he opened his eyes again, he unlocked his hands and a butterfly spread its wings and flew free.

Merlin watched it flap its wings and breeze up over stony ledges. It landed on one, rubbed its legs together and then took off again, floating out of sight.

Merlin was beginning to smile, a sense of marvel pushing at the edges of his consciousness, when a roar deafened him.

That definitely wasn't normal. The ground rippled and vibrated with the tremor.

A cloud of dust rolled forwards and mushroomed into the crystal chamber.
If this was a seismic area, Merlin would have called this the by-product of an earthquake. But it wasn't. Odds were that someone had done something to cause this uproar.

His first suspicions fell on Sadok, obviously.

The man was impatient enough to come and trespass on magical, hallowed ground. And who knew what happened when a soul at war with magic trod upon sacred spaces.

It was possible that something would happen just as it was probable that Sadok would do something stupid. (The more so since, on Merlin asking for some solitude, Balinor hadn't come and hadn't consequently threatened Sadok into behaving.)

It stood to reason to think that Sadok had done something.

Merlin had no idea how long he'd been meditating in the cave but there was a chance it had been long enough for Sadok to get annoyed with him, come looking, and trigger some disastrous events.

Merlin spent a few seconds trying to understand the whys and wherefores of what he was witnessing but then the cloud of dust boiled down the channel separating it from the area where Merlin was.

It tumbled down over both him and the crop of crystal stalactites that sprung everywhere around the cave.

Merlin had never seen a whirlwind of dust particles move so fast before.

When it reached him, it stung his eyes. Coughing and sneezing, he had to turn his head to the side to avoid inhaling mass quantities of it. He covered his mouth with his arm, but the mouthful of dust he'd already imbibed burned in the back of his throat, clogged his nostrils, and nearly stopped up his lungs. They were fouling his mouth too. Gah.

There was nothing for it; he had to get out of here.

His eyes mere slits, he forged back towards the entrance. He stumbled at first, climbing over piles of crumbled rock, struggling to make out what obstacles lay ahead. Then he steadied a bit but he was still proceeding half-blind.

However many spells he thought of, the dust cloud kept coming at him. It kept blurring the path ahead, forming shadows where shadows weren't supposed to be, worsening his sense of disorientation.

Thankfully, he remembered the lay-out of the cave. He should be able to march on even if he couldn't see that well. But walking into a wall and hurting himself wasn't something he looked forward to, especially in such a dangerous situation, so he stopped for a moment to rub his eyes.

Carefully, he wiped his sleeve across them and blinked a few times.

When his vision cleared, he pronounced himself satisfied. He would still shield his eyes with one arm so as not to be further blinded by the fine particles riding on the air, but now he could at least proceed.

He'd just started fumbling ahead again when a piece of rock that had fallen from up ahead hit him on the forehead, causing his hands to leave his eyes and clutch the hurt spot.

He was anticipating detecting blood staining his fingers, yet there was none. Finding that it was so, he sighed in relief. He'd only sport a bruise for a few days, maybe a little scratch. He was fine.
Bending now that the passage was lowering, Merlin plodded ahead and towards the entrance to the cave, his magic lighting the way even though it couldn't quite penetrate the milky film of dust that coated the air.

Advancing was like walking through a murky fog that whipped at skin, made it redden and called blood to the surface.

It wasn't particularly pleasant and it chafed like nothing else.

That aside, Merlin couldn't be sure of his bearings, but was quite hopeful about being close to the entrance, when he realised that no natural light was flooding in.

The cave was darker than it should have been, not even a spiral of light piercing the overbearing shadows.

That was wrong. Even allowing for the obscuring effect of the dust there should be some vestige of light by now.

There had been when he'd come in, covering this track in the inverse direction, and there had been each time he'd got out in the past. This was the third time he'd come to the cave. He would know by now.

So something wasn't right.

His heart lurched with misgiving and his already taxed lungs felt suddenly smaller. And it wasn't the unbreathable air that was causing the unpleasant sensation. Rather it was the nagging feeling that something bad was about to happen.

Merlin didn't have the gift of the sight but his instincts weren't proven wrong.

When he came upon the antechamber, he found a wall of rock in place of the exit.

Sharp giant boulders of a jagged nature and light pink colouring barred all egress.

There were no two ways around it; there'd be no getting out of here through that passage. Unless he either found a way to remove those boulders or discovered a new exit, he was entombed.

Ashen faced and retching, he went to his knees. He couldn't breathe. The air in the cave was dank and, thanks to the debris shower, suffocating. But that wasn't the reason his chest was constricting. No, it was doing that because he was panicking.

What if his magic wasn't enough to blast away the rocks? What if it did nothing?

Back in the crystal chamber he'd thought it was back full throttle. The butterfly, a fully functioning living creature, had seemed to be a promise of that. But what if he'd been mistaken? He had neither pick nor shovel; he wouldn't easily get out of here.

And that was so, so bad. Besides he was starting to think this cave-in wasn't coincidental at all.

Sadok alone couldn't have caused it. Too much upheaval for a single man to spark. This cave had stood here for millennia. Was Merlin supposed to believe those big slabs of immoveable rock had come down on their own today of all days?

That wasn't likely. And if that wasn't likely, there could only be another cause for the cave-in.

Someone had triggered the rock fall on purpose.
There was only a reason for this hypothetical someone to do so. They wanted Merlin trapped and trapped when his powers weren't still fully back. Were they right? Had they succeeded in blotting him out from the picture?

Hunched over, as if he was wriggling under the weight of a heavy wave crushing him, Merlin sucked air into lungs that wouldn't expand. There was a hard tight place in his chest that felt as though it would never inflate again to allow proper breathing. His chest squeezed tighter, clamping down on organs that refused to work, his heart unable to believe what his mind now saw with perfect clarity.

If the plan to separate him from the outside world had worked, if he was trapped, then he wouldn't be able to rejoin Arthur and help him.

He refused to contemplate that; he wouldn't give up on Arthur when Arthur most likely needed him. He couldn't just sit back and go 'woe is me' when he hadn't even tried his best to get out yet.

Failing was scary but not even trying was stupid. He was going to face whatever hurdle they'd thrown at him first.

For Arthur.

Cold sweat setting him a-shiver, Merlin hauled himself to his feet. He picked his way carefully between the over-large stones so he could go touch the slab that was keeping him shut in.

He had a feeling that if he got a sense for it, its shape and position, he would be better able to remove it. Hopefully.

On his way over he tripped over a dislodged rock though and slammed his knee down on the hard uneven surface.

It made him grit his teeth and blanched his vision for a second, a sharp twinge of a recoil travelling up his leg, but he made himself go on, pain notwithstanding.

At last he'd inched forward enough to worm his way close to the main slab. He placed his hand flat on its surface and tapped into his magic.

Feeling it tingle inside him, he directed it outwards. It granted him an insight of the shape and position of the rock. It gave him an idea of its place in the universe. Its composition and make-up. There was a chance he could dislodge it.

Centring himself around the core of magic he was once more master of, he took a step back and pushed his arms outwards.

The rock shook and thrummed, then exploded, pelting him with fragments and sending them in all directions.

The shattered rock stung his face but that was of little to no account. He'd carved his own way out.

Sunlight flooded in and fresh air wafted through.

It was a huge relief, a victory almost, but not one he could bask in for long.

Jaw set and determined to find out what had caused the landslide, Merlin marched out.

He soon find himself past the small rocky corridor that led back to the cave and climbed the by now
familiar slope that opened into the clearing he’d left Sadok guarding.

Breath a little laboured, he burst into the latter.

Sadok wasn't there. But Morgause, a pale and hunched version of her, hand holding her side where her wound had been, was.

“How could you possibly have made it out of there?” she asked, sounding as though she was talking mostly to herself. “You were supposed to still be on the way to recovery.”

Merlin set his legs wide apart. “I'm more powerful than before. Sorry to disappoint.”

Morgause smirked. “Repairing that mistake will be easy.” Her eyes went rimmed with both gold and red in a look that appeared fairly demonic. She reached her arm out and hurled his magic at him.

Even though that attack could potentially kill him, Merlin smiled.

He felt his magic surge through him, ready at his fingertips as it had never been. At no point in time had he been more assured of his powers than now. They had never risen quite so promptly before, making him feel so super-charged, so wound tight with them he could take over the world.

In this frame of mind, he easily blasted her back, causing her body to collide against the trunk of a tree.

Her moan of pain resounded in the clearing and blood trickled out of her mouth in crimson droplets that stained her teeth. Her shirt was getting mottled with blood too. Her wound had to have re-opened.

Attempting to shut out all pity he might at one point have felt for her, he jerked his hand and the roots that gave life to the tree wrapped themselves around her torso, trapping her.

Though she could incant, she couldn't move. That made Merlin feel a little bit safer in approaching her.

Most magic users needed their hands to direct their magic. Having no recourse to them didn't impinge them from accessing it at all but their aim would be less than true.

Besides Morgause was slumping against the tree, blood pouring out of her. The blood loss wasn't massive but had to be enough to stun her into being a little bit more docile.

In other circumstances and if this had been anyone but an ally of Morgana's, he would have felt sorry for her and released her, but now was not the time for sympathy, not when her presence signalled a danger to Arthur.

“Why did you try to trap me?”

Morgause hissed. “I should have killed you when I had the chance, Emrys.”

“Sorry that didn't work out for you,” Merlin said, ducking to avoid being spat in the face. “Why did you try and trap me?”

Morgause didn’t seem to want to answer that one. Her eyes went a swirling amber and it was clear she was preparing to do magic.

Merlin made the roots around her tighten so that they would squeeze enough air out of her to divert her attention away from any aggressive spell. “Uh, uh, none of that, Morgause, I want an answer to
Morgause wriggled to free herself from the roots that bound her to the tree. The bark dug into her flesh, making her bleed. “But that's easily answered,” she said, gloating despite the pain and discomfort she must be enduring. “Morgana went to look for Arthur and instead found glaring and rather pornographic proof of your betrayal, you undeserving cur. So she's pre-empted you.”

Merlin grabbed a fistful of her shirt. “What do you mean!”

Morgause smiled a bloody smile. “As we speak she's marching on Buckingham Palace, using Arthur to get both security teams and armed forces to surrender. Once there, she'll kill Uther, kill your beloved pet prince and take the throne, starting a new purge, hitting all of those that have blindly supported Uther. And you, you traitor to your race, won't be able to do anything about it because you're here.”

As Merlin was trying to control the seething rage Morgause was inspiring in him, she acted. His distraction was enough for her to succeed in casting a spell.

She sent him flying into a tree he bounced off of, landing with a disorientating thud. Not content with this Morgause started playing with him again so he was the mouse to her cat.

He was magically lifted once more. Waving his arms wildly he found himself air born anew, at least until he hit the ground full length with a resounding crash.

For a moment it was like everything was in slow motion.

He was bleeding from a variety of small cuts, his chest burning from the repeated dull landings and the blows she was magically battering him with.

Trying to recover was difficult because Morgause kept relentlessly aiming blasts of magic at him.

He didn't have to stare back at her to know that she was the source of this beating or that she was directing it with her eyes. So much for her being unable to channel well with her hands tied!

Well, that was beside the point now, wasn't it? He had lost a wager he'd made with himself; now he'd better recoup even though it was hard.

Getting his act together was so difficult because she was trying to drive him out of his mind so he couldn't find a way to hit back.

A thousand invisible but no less real needles started to stab him. Blasts of air pummelled him like airy fists. They hurt like real ones too, very real ones. Heavy-weight boxing style.

But he couldn't just passively lie there and take it. Arthur needed him. Even now he could be in great danger, or worse, dead. Merlin was done trying to spare Morgause simply because she was magic, like him.

An accident of birth – being magical or no – shouldn't condition who you became.

Staring up through straggly black tree branches, he took a big cleansing breath, then another one.

Braced, he rolled onto his back and coughed up a dollop of blood. Then, knowing that he needed to move to keep Morgause guessing as to where she had to aim her magical volleys, he vaulted to his feet and darted from side to side of the clearing. As he did so, he held up his hand, summoning a wind as strong as any of Morgause's.
Full of fury, he directed it at her. Mumbling words of power, he unleashed a whirlwind that stopped
her from incanting.

It had picked up its fullness from him. It fed on his anger and on his magic.

The whirlwind grew in strength and power; got bigger and bigger until it encircled her. It spiralled
around, reaching for her. Then it exploded skywards, spinning in wider and wider motions and
making a high-pitched, howling sound.

Clumps of earth whipped around her face. Leaves were torn loose from their branches and slapped
her all over.

To protect herself from the debris, Morgause put her hands up and closed her eyes. But the mini
tornado rushed her. Strands of her golden hair lashed across her face and swirled above her. A fierce
girdle of air closed around her, buffeting her until she slumped.

When she did, the wind died, the crackle of static charging the air subsiding.

Merlin didn't know whether she was alive or not and didn't want to check. If she was alive, he didn't
want to have to finish her. He was aware that leaving her behind to fight another day was stupid,
possibly recklessly dangerous, but he couldn't finish someone when they were unconscious.

He was leaving himself vulnerable, but he just couldn't bring himself to kill someone in cold blood.
He wasn't an executioner and he had something else to think about to boot: how to get to Arthur.

He'd reached the forest riding in the same MPV Sadok drove. But Sadok was Morgana's man and
had surely just abandoned him there for Morgause to dispose of. There was no trace of him around
and if there had been Merlin would never have trusted him.

That means of transport was consequently out. But Morgause surely hadn't teleported herself here.
No magic user could. So all he needed to do was find Morgause's conveyance. Wherever it was, it
wasn't here, but that wasn't to say it had been parked far off.

On the look out for a vehicle, he started searching the area, moving outwards towards the limit of the
forest.

His search was a hurried one, with him running from one location to next as soon as it became clear
that no car or van was anywhere in sight. But it was still thorough enough.

Panting, he ran up a a slight incline and through narrow avenues of trees. Never stopping, he wove
his way through them, along winding paths and unbeaten tracks, the musky air heady in his worked-
up lungs.

Branches stung his face as he ran, their whipping limbs battering him. But he forged ahead, cutting
paths, dodging the dark trees that lay everywhere, fighting to see what lay ahead.

Everything was a blur of greens; everything was the same. But he couldn't stop, the thought of
Arthur in danger spurred him on even when he had no breath left. So he leapt over bushes and rocks,
through vines and brush, always on, his feet thundering as they hit the ground.

As he darted between the trees and hurdled over shrubs and scrub, his muscles tensed and his
breathing became laboured.

He hadn't moved this fast since dodging Section Seven before meeting Arthur. He'd hoped he'd
never have to do so again but his hopes had apparently come to nothing. He'd have to make do.
Desperation drove him on.

Never slowing down, he hit a drop off and kept running along a trail worn deep into the brown porous soil that characterised this section of the woods.

From the little he could tell careening so fast along it, it was clear that it looked like some kind of earthy ribbon, hollowed out around some kind of protruding formation, sheltered by trees. Could this track lie around a stretch of motorway? Merlin wasn't sure.

To be honest, he did not know what direction he was going, but he kept moving. Please Arthur, please, be alive.

He was so focused on thoughts of Arthur and picturing what could be going on at the Palace that he got tangled up in something that was twisting around his feet and legs.

He fell with a humping sound, hitting the ground with his elbows. The fall took the breath out of him and for a moment he feared Morgause had charmed a root to trap him, that she'd found him, and would now prevent him from saving Arthur.

But when, with a bit of wiggling, he turned around, he found he'd just stumbled into a grass knot.

He freed himself with little difficulty and that was when it hit him.

He was an idiot. As soon as Morgause had given him her Morgana news, he had panicked and just started running, searching for Morgause's vehicle. But he'd shouldn't have been so rash. He should have taken some time to think, for God's sake! He had all of his magic back. He could use it.

So he focused on it, making it look for anything man-made, and made himself magically follow the invisible thread leading him to it.

Having new bearings, he got to his feet. With his mind's eye he searched the path, a variety of them, diverging and converging. With his magic he scoped out the area. Images flashed to him. Bright and overly saturated but clear. He knew where to go.

His senses overcame every obstacle and led him to the spot so he easily he came to a dirt road he would never have otherwise spotted.

He walked to the hawthorn bush his vision had shown him and displaced the layers of branches his mind had told him would be there, uncovering a motorbike.

Perfect. This was exactly what he needed to get back to London fast. It didn't matter that he'd never ridden one. A combination of common sense and his magic would see him through this too. He had to be able to figure this out. He had to make it to Arthur in time.

Kicking up the bike's kickstand, he climbed onto it. A quick study of the thing told him where the start button was.

Murmuring a silent prayer, he flipped it down and then turned the key Morgause had helpfully left in the ignition. Every warning light the bike had went off like a tacky Christmas tree. The speedometer even pinned itself and then returned back to a flashy zero.

Hoping that was normal and that Morgause hadn't warded the bike against theft, Merlin disengaged the clutch. A slight twist of the throttle and onwards the bike lurched. Merlin revved the engine and a few seconds later he was off, following the dirt road and then joining the motorway.
He used his magic to keep his balance and help him navigate, but once he was on a proper carriageway he accelerated like mad.

Wind flowing through his hair, his body straining forward with every movement of the bike, he rode on till he reached London.

Initially nothing odd struck him.

Traffic was heavy but that was typical of any big city. Nothing seemed to speak of danger, of a major attack on the places of power.

Buses were functioning, tube stops were disgorging rivers of people and the pedestrians seemed to be going about their business quietly.

But what he saw when he neared the Mall changed his mind.

Helicopters were flying over the Palace, as if they were reconnoitring the area, hovering close, then droning away like winged insects scared by flames.

Behind the cordoned off areas stood crowds of civilians. They were being held back by a mix of uniformed constables and plain-clothes police; their faces blank, their mouths drawn and lined, their cheeks hollowed, their eyes sightless, their expression crestfallen.

They looked, in other words, mighty scared. Some were simple onlookers, caught into something they hadn't expected to see happen; others seemed to have more of a purpose.

Those were the members of the press, distinguishable by virtue of the passes they were flashing and the microphones they were wielding. They were milling around, waiting for something, asking questions, snapping pictures. They had cameras sending live feeds to their stations. Cameras that nearly blinded Merlin as he passed them.

A stretcher was hoisted into a waiting ambulance. To be precise lots of ambulances lined the street.

Entire Section Seven units were gathered around the monument celebrating Queen Victoria, Uther's great-great grandmother. One of them was led by Aeredian in person, dark and ominous in his black gear.

Merlin had never seen as many S7 as today. There had to be hundreds of them. Perhaps more. And they were joined by police special forces as well as by army troops.

And yet none of those people were doing anything. No one stopped him. No one even bothered to ask him what he was doing there. It was as if they were completely incapable to take action.

It didn't take him long to figure out why. Even from a distance he could see that the huge, dark steel gates of the palace had been blown clear of their hinges, their graceful, serviceable lines marred and bent by what must have been a magical explosion of great force.

Not fussed too much by the presence of Section Seven officials, Merlin dropped his bike with a clatter and just advanced past the gates.

What he saw there made him swallow drily.

The bodies of King's Guards and Section Seven officers were scattered around the courtyard, lifeless, bloody, limp.
They were all without exception staring vacantly at a sky they would never see again. The lighter red of the former uniforms' smeared with the darker crimson of their clotted blood.

Cupping his mouth, Merlin fought the urge to vomit. His stomach roiled. The only way to avoid retching away the contents of his stomach was for him to look away. He'd never seen so many dead.

But now he understood. Now he saw why all those S7 men outside were doing nothing. Morgana was in the palace. She surely had Arthur and the King. Without powers none of the guards nor S7 could truly have stopped her, not unless they slugger her. And to do so they'd have to have a clear target. Which they couldn't have if she was, God forbid, using Arthur as her shield.

Worse, Merlin suspected them of buying their time. If Morgana killed Arthur and Uther, she was next in line. The new ruler.

The first thing she'd do would be massacring the one elite corps that had been persecuting magic users through the years; the second would be turning her attention on those who'd leant a deaf ear to their plight.

Section Seven wouldn't do a thing because they were biding their time. They already couldn't move because Arthur was Morgana's hostage. That was probably sanctioned. Their next step would be turning their backs on the situation in case Morgana poured out her wrath upon them.

Aeredian, whose hatred of Morgana and magic was surely pure enough to allow him to act, might egg his men on, but that didn't mean his men would jump at his order.

As things stood, they were more likely to turn on him. A man alone could do precious little and survival instincts often mattered.

Apparently the task of saving Arthur now rested on a single pair of shoulders: Merlin's.

Swallowing hard at the nausea the sight of all the corpses littering the courtyard gave him, Merlin stepped forwards.

Magic at his fingertips, he crossed the quadrangle and made for the central block.

Where guards should have stood, only corpses held a wake. Merlin stepped over them and inside the Palace proper.

The first thing he saw was a grand gilded staircase carpeted by a red runner nailed to the treads.

On his former visits he hadn't passed this way but that didn't matter much. The plan of the palace was unimportant. He was homing in on Morgana's magic, not looking for a particular set of rooms.

He climbed the first flight at a run, then, at the first landing where the staircase curved, he continued on and down a long hallway that was all marbles and plaster, dotted with antique plinths supporting pale busts and oil paintings that seemed to be staring down at him.

Floor squeaking under his feet, carpet nearly tripping him, Merlin ran. Ahead and ahead until he heard voices, which got him sprinting even faster.

He'd nearly reached a wide double set of doors, when he heard Morgana's voice, high and thundering. “The time has come for you to pay, Uther,” she was saying. “Nothing tastes sweeter than revenge.”

Based on what she'd said, Merlin had no idea whether Arthur was there with her or no. Was he even
alive at this point? Now that Morgana had gained access to the Palace, she would have no interest in keeping Arthur around. Arthur was just one more obstacle on Morgana’s way to the throne.

Merlin decided to listen for a few more seconds so he’d be able to better settle on what to do.

Morgana was talking. “How does it feel Uther? How does it feel to know that the one you banished is the one who takes everything from you?”

“Morgana,” King Uther, Merlin would know that voice everywhere, said, “take a moment to think about this. Let Arthur go.”

Merlin put a hand on his heart and released the littlest muffled breath. He wasn't too late. Arthur was still alive. He could do this. He could save the day.

Attempting to make no noise as he crossed a stretch of flooring tarnished by squeaky boards, he stole up to the door, ensuring he was still hidden behind it.

Quickly, he peeked his head around the door to ascertain the situation.

In the vast throne room the strangest assemble of people Merlin had seen so far stood.

Uther was perched on the steps leading to the throne itself, his hand on the throne's armrest, clutching it.

Morgana was facing him, restraining Arthur by the neck. She had a group of mercenaries with her among whom the leader, Helios, stood out.

They were all armed to the teeth but that didn't matter much to Merlin. They had no magic and Merlin could face all of them without breaking a sweat.

Without Morgause there, Morgana had no other magical allies though Mordred and Gilli were with her.

Merlin had no idea if the two of them had really decided to back Morgana or if their arm had been twisted into participating in this coup.

Preoccupied with getting his magic back and with seeing Arthur as often as possible, Merlin hadn't found a way to suss those two out.

The reign of fear that reigned in Morgana's mansion would have made anyone toe the line and feign to play her game. But were they? Would they turn on her when it was possible for them to without losing their lives. Would they side against her, if they saw they had help in the shape of Merlin?

The last person in the throne room to have come with Morgana was Forridel. She was aiming her rifle at Uther, just like Helios' mercenaries were, but with her Merlin knew it was just an act.

She was surely loyal to Merlin and doing what he'd told her to do, pretending she sided with Morgana to avoid her ire.

His faith in Forridel was what decided him on his course of action. It would be a risk for her but she was at risk anyway. Being non magical she’d be the first person Morgana would turn against, especially if Forridel hesitated executing Morgana's orders.

This could go wrong for Forridel in so many ways it wasn't funny. The only way she had to be safe was removing the threat and Merlin was ready to bet she'd be ready to do just that if she so much as
thought she had help.

To catch her eyes, he popped his head round the door frame again. Since she was standing to Morgana’s side, angled more towards the door, she saw him.

Now that he was sure he had her attention, Merlin tried to make signs with his head to convey his meaning. First he tipped his head to point at Morgana, then he narrowed his eyes at Forridel’s rifle.

Forridel looked briefly down at her weapon. Her mouth opened. She sneaked a glance at the ranting Morgana, goggling the slightest little bit.

Merlin knew what she was thinking. Even if she managed to surprise Morgana and shoot her, she wasn't sure to down her. And if she didn't, Morgana would turn on her and have no pity.

But the truth was that Forridel didn't need to kill Morgana, she just needed to wound her long enough for Merlin to step in.

He didn't know how to communicate that silently. Then he had an idea. He winked and pointed his thumb at his chest.

Forridel lowered her head subtly.

Merlin was sure she'd got him.

And she had. In the blink of an eye she whirled on Morgana and fired.

With a loud sigh, Morgana moved to clutch at her arm, stopping up her wound. In order to do so she'd briefly let go of Arthur. Eyes swirling, she rounded on Forridel.

That was when Merlin stepped in. Arm held out, he roared, “Ágréte.”

Morgana went hurtling across the room. Because of the momentum her body had acquired, she went crashing into one of the gilded chairs that were lined against the wall, practically destroying it. She only stopped sliding backwards when her body hit the fireplace.

But that wasn't nearly enough to stop Morgana. She swiftly pushed herself from the floor, shaking her head. She was recouping, Merlin could see.

Everybody could see that. As the trained paramilitary person he was, Helios was the first to react.

He rounded his semi-automatic on Uther. Uther stood gaping and petrified as Helios leered at him, ready to squeeze the trigger.

Arthur was shouting, “Merlin,” while looking horrified at Helios. Merlin saw how torn he was. How he wanted to make sure his father was all right while also needing confirmation Merlin wouldn't do anything stupid to endanger his own life.

Well, Merlin couldn't promise him that. Quite the contrary. He was planning to do the stupidest thing he possibly could.

Instead of taking Morgana out now that she was dazed, he focused on Helios. He shouldn't have. Morgana was more dangerous than any mercenary. Morgana was a thousand times more dangerous than him. But Helios was the one closest to acting, closest to killing Uther.

Merlin couldn't let that happen. However much he hated and disapproved of Uther Pendragon, Merlin couldn't let him die under his son’s eyes.
If that happened Arthur would suffer too much, because Arthur loved his father. Merlin would do anything to protect Arthur, even from emotional harm. So Uther mustn’t die that way.

Channelling his magic, Merlin made it so that one of the big gilded fixtures attached to the wall flew off its moorings.

It hit Helios square in the head, making him roll his eyes back in his head and faint.

With Helios out, his men were a little more reluctant to take action even though Morgana was shouting. “Kill the King. I want him dead.”

Merlin flicked his palm and the weapons flew out of the mercenaries' hands.

Those guys seen to, Merlin turned to Morgana but not in time to react to the power bolt she shot him. Oh, yes, the downside of bad timing.

The bolt sent him careening across the room, slamming him against the wall with a thud that shook the wall.

He gasped heavily. An incandescent ball of searing pain exploded up the left side of his body. His head buzzed, scrambling his thoughts. Pain swamped his mind under a wash of grey.

But he clung to the pain that was screaming inside him to force himself to remain aware and awake.

“Stop it, Morgana!” Arthur cried out. “Cut it out. What do you want, my life? You can have it.”

Morgana sneered. “Very touching, little brother. I'll kill you, don't worry. But I have to punish Merlin first. See, he's a traitor to his kind.”

A lump shifted in Merlin's throat; Arthur was so sweet even trying to intervene with no powers and no weapons.

“Morgana, please!” Arthur was pleading. “Listen to what you're saying. You have beef with me, welcome, but Merlin is only trying to avoid bloodshed. He didn't make the laws.”

“But he supports you!” Morgana yelled. “Anyone who does deserves nothing short of death. They support inflicting it on magic users!”

“Morgana, we can discuss that,” Arthur persisted, trying to inch closer to Morgana. “We can reach an agreement that will make all the deaths stop. On your side and on my side.”

As Arthur persuaded Morgana, Merlin tried to get back to his feet.

Unfortunately, Morgana wasn't easily fooled. She noticed and flashed him with a blast of power.

Instinctively, Merlin rolled out of its path, gained his feet once more and returned blast for blast. He scored a direct hit and Morgana's body bounced backwards like a rubber doll, falling to the floor.

While this happened, Merlin noticed Aeredian sneaking in from one of the doors opening to the side of the throne dais, which was placed to his rear. He was wielding a slug-gun, acting stealthily. Merlin wasn't sure of what he had in mind; couldn't tell what he'd do. He was a wild card.

Morgana hadn't noticed him yet, too busy trying to get back to her feet and shouting for Mordred and Gilli to do something. “Blast Merlin, for heaven's sake,” she was ordering them. But neither moved. Neither did her mercenaries. They were looking at Merlin warily, backing away, hunched in on themselves so that they'd present the smallest front possible, their tails between their legs.
Not that Morgana needed them. She tipped her head back and started a chant Merlin had no knowledge of but that made his insides quake. Then she opened her palm and a flame sparked from it. That couldn't be good.

When she started rotating her hand, Merlin understood what she was about to do.

Summoning all of his magic he threw a shield just as a whooshing wall of flames slammed against it. The flames leaped high as though they were trying to climb it. They licked at its edges, trying to find him, trying to burn him.

To avoiding the roaring fire wall, everybody else in the throne room had backed away towards its edges.

Uther, Arthur and Aeredian were wedged between dais and side door. Gilli, Mordred, Forridel and the mercenaries stood huddled at the other end of the chamber. The only two people standing in the middle of it were Merlin and Morgana.

Morgana was using the power of her anger to fuel her magic. Her flame wall was trying to engulf Merlin's shield.

Merlin wouldn't have it. He was tired of playing. Deep down he was aware of a strength that had been lurking inside him for a long time now, probably since forever.

He'd never used this core stash of magic, feared unleashing it a little bit, but ever since he'd taken up meditation in the Crystal Cave he'd known it was there. Had always been.

Now it was high time to access it. Roaring a spell that was all gutturals and that made the walls shake, Merlin launched his magic at Morgana's.

Sheets of light swirled around the flame wall, wrapping themselves around it, slowly dousing it, till its height was reduced to half its original reach.

Feeling, ironically, on fire, Merlin continued incanting his spell, shouting it in a voice that wasn't his but that rang like thunder.

The more he incanted, the more Morgana's flame wall sputtered and shuddered, struggling to hold on.

Merlin was about to unleash a last spell that would knock Morgana out for a week at least when a new arrival appeared on the scene.

It was a dishevelled, gaunt and bleeding Morgause, who, as soon as she was there, started a chant.

Merlin had never heard it prior to now but knew even before it had properly started that it was bad news for him; the more so when Morgana's swirling amber eyes went completely red.

As though her power was being fed by the chant, Morgana straightened and her flame wall got higher. The room lit up with its eerie brightness. An angry sizzle came from the smouldering flares. “Morgause, you can't give me your magic,” Morgana was wailing, even though it looked as though she was being overwhelmed by a power she couldn't quite stop wielding, a ferocious force she was the conduit of. “You'll kill yourself. You must think of yourself, not me.”

Morgause didn't stop chanting, apparently feeding Morgana her life power, but she tenderly looked at Morgana, as though the sun rose and set by her.
That was when Merlin understood what was going on.

Morgause was surrendering her magic to Morgana and Morgana was now twice as powerful.

From what Merlin had seen, Morgause was magically on a level with a high priestess of old. Morgana herself was one of the greatest sorceresses Merlin had ever met. Their magic combined would reach pinnacles that could thwart Merlin's.

Meanwhile, the fire was crackling louder than before, spreading around. A thunderous boom resounded. The moment it did, Merlin's shield was snuffed out, its pale light extinguished by the raging inferno Morgana had let loose.

When Merlin had no more defence, Morgana and Morgause started a second spell.

The air crackled. The ceiling cracked and through the crack fell a bolt of lightning. It shone stark blue-white, showering the room with a dazzling luminescence, and fed into Morgana's hand.

She smirked and hurled it at Merlin who was hit right in the chest.

He went crashing backwards, knocked down to the ground, his heart thud-thudding, stopping, starting, stopping, starting, his shirt torn were the bold had struck.

"Merlin!" Arthur shouted.

Merlin's chest heaved; all the air in his lungs had exploded from his mouth in an unchecked rattle.

His body shook violently. His chest burned like no tomorrow, like pouring vinegar on an open wound, only worse, as if licks of live fire were breathing on him.

Terror seized him. He couldn't pick himself up. He could only thrash around, his arms and legs spasming.

Merlin could barely control his seizing limbs to see what was happening, but what he did make out told him he was done.

Thunderclap sounded. A web-work of cracks raced down the walls of the throne-room.

Morgana opened her palm, a jubilant but cold smile on her lips. She held her arm up above her head, and held a new lightning bolt in her hand as though it had shape and substance.

Awareness of what was about to happen seeped into Merlin and fed his fear. He was going to die.

Except no, for Arthur darted sideways, grabbed Aeredian's slug-gun and shot Morgana with it. She went down.

Her wail was loud and desperate, echoing through the chamber and filling Merlin's ears till he feared his ear-drums would split.

It was heart-rending and inarticulate, the ferocious desperate keening of a trapped animal who'd lost the will to fight.

It brought tears to Merlin's eyes. He understood what Morgana was going through. He had lived through it and could sympathise. The experience was excruciating and enough to rob someone of the will to live.

There was nothing worse for a sorcerer than to lose their magic, the very thing that made them tick.
He'd been lucky, his was a magic that beat in unison with the earth's, fed by it forever and ever, one with it. Hers wasn't. So, if she survived, her pain wouldn't abate easily at all. If--

The thought that Morgana was done must have driven Morgause to action for she shot forwards.

With all her remaining strength, she reconvened the particles that had made up Morgana's bolt of lightning and that had scattered around the atmosphere with a hiss of static.

Merlin didn't need her death glare to know she was going to direct it at him.

Slug guns had only one cartridge. There was no way Arthur could pull a feat similar to his first and stop Morgause. Merlin had to either take control and retaliate or accept a defeat that would be final.

Enough. He'd had enough. Coughing, chest rising painfully, Merlin struggled to his feet.

As Morgause cried, “Forbearne!” Merlin let himself feel all the anger that he'd had raging inside him since he'd found out Morgana and Morgause wanted to kill Arthur and everyone who, however innocent, was thrust against them by circumstance.

Hate had begotten hate and it would never cease unless Morgause did.

Magic would never be free to flourish unless extremists were stopped. He was doing this for all those sorcerers who had always lived in peace and had a right to prosper without being associated with Morgana's tactics. As long as they were they would always be persecuted.

Drawing on every little thread of magic housed in his aching body, Merlin thrust his hand out.

He took charge of the powers nature was so ready to feed into him. He focused on them and made himself the master of them. They poured into him happily, thrumming, singing under his skin, making of him his vessel.

When he had enough power, so much of it he could have blasted whole cities apart had he so wanted, he struck Morgause.

Lightning pierced her, stabbed through her, left her limp. She fell in a heap, eyes sightless.

Morgana's repetition of, “No, no, no, please, no,” was what told him that it was done. That Morgause was dead and that Morgana was close to the brink of the abyss herself.

Suddenly, Merlin deflated. So much pure magic gone. So much potential wasted.

Both Morgause and Morgana could have been splendid sorceresses. If Uther hadn't forbidden all forms of practice, they'd be high priestesses of the old religion.

The sense of loss for the magic world made Merlin want to weep.

The decision was easy to make. He tottered across the room and, wheezing, knelt by Morgana's side.

“What are you doing?” thundered Uther mistrustfully.

“Healing her,” Merlin said, swiping a hand down her leg, where Arthur had aimed the slug dart.

Arthur, expression pretty much like that of a deer caught in the headlights, said, “But if you give her her magic back...”

Merlin could guess what Arthur meant. If Morgana had her magic back, she would start this all over
again. She'd cause another war. She'd be even more relentless because of Morgause's loss.

Tiredly, he said, “I can't give her her magic back. It's beyond anyone,” Merlin said, snapping the slug cartridge in two, and clearing the wound, drawing the venom out and into himself. “I can only make sure she doesn't die.”

Eyebrows knotted across his forehead, Arthur said, “But you got it back.”

Busy tending to the semi-unconscious, shivering Morgana, Merlin said, “I'm different. My magic is eternal.”

Arthur gaped. He hadn't known that because Merlin had never shared the full import of Balinor's words with him. It hadn't seemed necessary and it would have appeared a lot like bragging. At the time he'd only felt the necessity of pledging his magic to Arthur.

When he was done gaping, Arthur knelt at his sister's side and said, “What are you doing now?”

“Cleansing her body of the slug venom,” Merlin said. “Taking it into myself.”

Arthur touched his wrist, fingers trembling. “But--”

“I'm stronger than it,” Merlin said. “My system defeated it once, it can do so again and again.” It would hurt a bit but he owed it to Morgana. She'd been mad acting the way she had. He'd had to stop her for Arthur and the magic users who would be hurt by virtue of being associated with her. Nobody could have had peace while Morgana schemed. Even so she was like him and he'd betrayed her. He had to give her this, guarantee her survival. When he was done draining Morgana of the venom, he passed a hand over her brow and said, “Onslep.”

Morgana exhaled and fell into a sleep Merlin knew to be deep.

As soon as that happened she regained some colour. Merlin still didn't think she'd be happy when she awoke. She'd lost a beloved person and the most essential part of herself. But she would live.

Merlin felt sorry for her and just wished she'd chosen to fight her battle in a different way from the one she had gone for.

He wished he could have fought by her side instead of against her. But that would have been impossible. Some things couldn't be changed.

The moment Morgana started looking more alive, Uther leapt forwards. Pointing at Merlin, he shouted at Aeredian. “Arrest him--”

Aeredian was about to move, hand on his normal, non-slug charge holster, when Arthur started upright, whirled on his father and said, “You can't.”

“Just because he's saved us doesn't mean we should stand back and let him do as he pleases,” Uther said, his eyes full of a venom that was clearly directed at Merlin. “He's a sorcerer and as such he deserve that one's fate.” He tilted his head at Morgause's corpse.

Arthur smiled, eyes devoid of light. “You can't arrest him because he's my husband.”

“Our what!” spluttered Uther, his incredulity warring with what looked like a massive dose of disdain. “He can't be. You're lying to save him in a misguided attempt to make up for what happened to your even more misguided sister. Thankfully now that she's been purged of the vile poison that was her magic--”
Arthur reached for the wallet that was in his trousers back pocket and produced three separate sheets of paper. “I have proof. I married him when he was being held in Belmarsh in a perfectly legal ceremony officiated by a registrar.”

Uther snatched one of the documents from him and read it from top to bottom. When he’d done so, he tore it up.

“The registrar will have a copy,” said Arthur. “There were witnesses. By now I’m sure even Aeredian knows.”

Uther fired Aeredian a look and Aeredian shrugged.

The King wiggled his shoulders in an attempt to make them appear larger. “Doesn't matter. That marriage won't stand. It happened in prison, right?” A flash of devilish cunning glinted in the King’s eyes. “It can't have been consummated. We'll have it easily annulled.”

“Actually it was,” Arthur said, walking up to his father. “Twice.”

Uther became very red in the face. “Immaterial. You can't prove it and I won't let you marry such a filthy—”

Merlin's shoulder-blades twitched. In one move he stalked up to Uther, grabbed him by his shirt's collar and spat in his face, “You won't bully your children any more. Look—” Merlin cupped Uther's neck to direct his line of sight. “You've caused your daughter to go so mad with grief she became ruthless and hollow. And now she's lost everything, everything she ever had.” Merlin made sure that Uther was now looking at Arthur. “And him. You fed him propaganda lies to make sure his heart would be filled with hatred. Thankfully he's a thousand times the man you are and he's no longer listening to you. And why should he?” Merlin's mouth curled coldly. “Even now you're going against him. And all for what? To stop up your grief over your wife? Well you've certainly fed others', persecuted us to the point of slaughter, tortured us.” Merlin let go of a blanching Uther, fanning his hands wide. “But you won't anymore.”

“Wh-- what--” Uther was stuttering now.

Merlin continued as though Uther hadn't tried to put a word in. “You will abdicate and leave the throne to your son.”

Uther laughed, though his mouth spasmed and his face was as pale as that of a corpse's. “Why should I do that? I can have you killed in a heartbeat.” He snapped his fingers together to exemplify. “Besides, Arthur has been brainwashed by you and is clearly not fit for ruling a kingdom. His mind has been poisoned. Tainted. He's too weak and gullible to succeed me now. I'll have to teach him everything from scratch again, erasing your venom from his system.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Merlin saw Arthur's fists ball up. “Father,” he said, angry, low and wounded. He was shaking his head in fierce denial and contempt at his father's words.

Because of Arthur's wounded tone alone, Merlin got all up into Uther's face again. “You're so very wrong.”

“And who's to make me so?” Uther challenged, the vein in his temple ticking.

“I am,” said Merlin, in a matter of fact undertone that he made sure would sound lethal to the right ears. “I'll stop you.”

“You can't.”
Merlin’s lips again tilted. “Of course I can. You can't stop me. I'm the most powerful sorcerer this
country has ever seen. You can't rob me of my magic. Slugs can't do a thing to me. You can't contain
me. You can't hold me. You don't want me against you.”

Uther’s eyes sparked with fire. “And who's to say you wouldn't kill Arthur next and take the throne
or yourself.”

“One,” said Merlin, brushing imaginary lint off Uther's shoulder, “my magic's for Arthur and Arthur
alone and two I'm not interested in a coup. I don't want that power. I have enough to last me ten
lifetimes and you have no idea how terrifying it is.” Merlin cocked his head. “What do you say?”

Uther bowed his head; the veins on his fists stood out. “I'll abdicate.”

“Good, and you'll take Aeredian with you. He's never to work for the government again.”

Aeredian's eyes flashed at that but he subsided when his King said, “Agreed.”

“You'll step down today and make a public announcement tomorrow,” Merlin said.

Again Uther said, “Agreed.”

Merlin turned to Arthur.

He'd acted without consulting him but in good conscience and in the name of magic people he
couldn't let Uther rule. He wouldn't kill him because of Arthur and what it would do to him, but he'd
happily depose him. He refused to see another generation of sorcerers suffer because of Uther
Pendragon. “Is that what you want, Arthur?”

Arthur smiled wanly. “My father can't rule anymore. He shouldn't be allowed to. And though I've
surely my own burden of guilt to bear, I'll alone by shouldering the responsibilities that go with
making up for the wrongs my household inflicted on a generation of magic users.”

Smiling sincerely now, Merlin walked up to Arthur. He held his eyes for the longest time, then went
to his knees, put his hand on his heart, and said, “Then it's all decided, Your Majesty.”

****

The coach rolled and bumped along. Merlin felt the completely unfamiliar tilt of the road under its
wheels, pressing him against the heavily cushioned back of his seat.

At times the coach went a little bit faster: at other times it merely slowly thumped along, even more
so when it turned, squeaking and jerking at the beginning of every bend.

The curtains were drawn, so Merlin had little to no idea of what lay outside, though he could hear the
roar of the crowd. It was both inspiring and scary.

Merlin decided he'd better not consider that and shift his attention onto something else. Like the play
of light in the confined space he was in.

Through a gap in the curtains, a shaft of bright sunlight crept in, in fact. It illuminated a patch of the
floor.
Merlin pondered it a while, humming softly and a little nervously, then allowed his gaze to travel up Arthur's legs.

The carefully pressed trousers of his dress uniform were a study in the geometry of lines. The array of medals on his chest glittered, while his garter sash reined his chest muscles in.

The small sliver of sunlight that had flooded in from outside gave him almost a halo.

Arthur was handsome and sombre like that: his eyes cast down, his hands splayed on his thighs with their fingers twitching nervously from time to time, his face turned towards the window just so, unconsciously showing Merlin a profile Merlin thought of as regal.

Arthur really cut a beautiful picture, like a fairy tale prince.

Heart galloping at the speed of a runaway train, Merlin swallowed. He cleared his throat until he had Arthur's attention back.

“I'm sorry,” Arthur said, giving him a sweet smile. “Big day. I--”

“You were nervous,” Merlin teased, though his own lips were trembling and his smile quivering. “You can admit it.”


“You are king already,” Merlin pointed out. “You've already acceded to the throne.”

Arthur's Adam's apple bobbed; his neck corded above the collar of his crisp uniform. “Yes, but today I swear my oath to the nation. A nation I've betrayed.” Arthur pretended he had some interest in the curtain's pattern. “It's different.”

Merlin put his hand on Arthur's knee, lightly, so as not to crease the fabric of his trousers. They had to look as crisp as possible because this was the public outing of Arthur's life. “You're going to be perfect. And you know it.”

A smile faltered on Arthur's lips. “You have a lot of confidence in me even though I've done little in my life to earn it.”

“You know where you went wrong,” said Merlin, thinking that Uther's negative influence had finally been laid to rest. He also spared a thought for his fellow magic users, seeing hope for their future now that Arthur had taken his father's place. “You're going to do great.”

Arthur nodded thoughtfully. The tendons in his neck and shoulder stood out as knife-like shadows. But his expression had cleared and his eyes shone brightly. “That's thanks to you. Without you I--”

And that's when Merlin felt called to say what he'd been pondering over the weeks starting from Arthur's accession onwards. “I was a way for you to see,” said Merlin in a voice that was half broken. “A tool. Just that Arthur.”

“No, Merlin, wait,” Arthur said, lines upon lines forming on his forehead. “That's not true. You've--”

Arthur's appreciation would only hurt more so Merlin pre-empted him.

“I was the emissary of a message you needed to hear. And I'm glad I had the chance to be. I got to get over my own biases, I got to meet you and--” If this was confession time then Merlin was damned if he didn't say everything there was to be said. The truth needed to be outed. “I got to love
you. And I'd never been—” Merlin wetted his lips. “In love with anyone – before, before you.”

Arthur's eyes flared wide, lighting up wildly. His chest expanded and he let air blow through lips that had parted in surprise. He started for Merlin.

Merlin held his hand up. “Wait, wait, let me finish. I know how much you've doubted me, and for a reason. And I know I've blown it.” Merlin hung his head. “And that you cannot possibly be interested in me beyond some fun and games.”

After Uther's abdication they hadn't seen each other much. Arthur had been whisked here and there by Palace personnel and Merlin had barely had the opportunity to talk to him one on one, so even the chance for some 'fun' had entirely bypassed them. And it wasn't even what mattered. Arthur's happiness did.

“I just want to make things right for no other reason than I should.” He paused, needing breath if he didn't just want to implode. It felt as though his brain was starving for it. Or perhaps this was just him having pre-confession jitters. “I need you to know that I respect you and love you and will never forget you.”

Arthur's mouth moved soundlessly; his very nostrils appeared to dilate. “Merlin—”

Merlin took off the ring Arthur had given him and that he'd lately been holding on to because he loved it and Arthur hadn't asked for it back yet. “But I need you to know that you're free. Nobody knows about me yet. You're free to divorce me low-key. You're free to make the right choice this time without the pressure that comes with saving someone's neck in an entirely gorgeous display of selflessness and chivalry. You should be – and I want you to be – free to marry for love. Like you should. Just ditch the Selection next time.”

Arthur closed Merlin's hand around the ring, shook his head and laughed. “You love me and you're giving me my ring back?”

“Yeah,” Merlin said. He thought it was fairly obvious. He was giving Arthur his freedom and his life back. The freedom he'd had to sacrifice to save Merlin. “You deserve to have all the happiness you want and you can't have that if you're tied to me.”

Arthur huffed. He looked at the curtains again, cupped his mouth, tapped his foot. “I guess I deserve it.”

“Yeah,” Merlin was saying, pushing his ring back at Arthur. It was Arthur's mother's and Merlin didn't want it to be lost. “I want you to have someone you love.”

“I guess I deserve it,” Arthur continued, “for being coward enough not to tell you, to let you go ahead and think that I don't—”

He scrubbed a hand over his mouth.

“But the unvarnished truth is that I fell arse over tits for you from the moment you stood up to me and then to my father, not caring whose feathers you were ruffling.”

Arthur took a deep breath as if he needed more air than normal to finish the speech he'd started.

“And when I married you... Well, without the pressure of your death sentence, I wouldn't have done it, not when I did, because I thought you hated me and I was still conflicted, – I'd been teaching myself to hate you too – but deep down, deep down I—“
Arthur's face flamed so bright it was as if someone had shone a light on his features. “I wished it could have been real. And when I said my vows, they were true. I didn't lie.” Arthur tossed his head back proudly. “I wouldn't have lied in those circumstances.” Arthur's head went down again. “Though I guess that I've been less than brave ever since.”

Arthur's words left Merlin breathless, well, more like pole-axed. The look in Arthur's eyes -- the warmth in them, his embarrassment, his high flush -- made Merlin's heart ache and flutter off beat. To make sure he wasn't hearing things, Merlin looked searchingly into that stupidly dear face of Arthur's and when he couldn't find any signs of equivocation, he let himself believe Arthur. “So you're telling me that—”

“Yeah,” said Arthur, a grin spreading from ear to ear. “That's what I'm telling you.”

“I thought it was imposi--”

Arthur darted forwards and pressed his mouth to Merlin's. His lips were warm and firm, chasing the shape of Merlin's. He sucked on Merlin’s lips, nibbling at his tongue before taking it into his mouth.

Letting himself enjoy the kiss, Merlin tipped his head back, returning Arthur's attentions with as much passion as he could allow himself without creasing Arthur's dress uniform or messing up his hair.

Lips on lips and no other form of touching would be allowed.

And as he snogged Arthur,, he felt his head spinning with a growing tenderness that had no bounds.

God, he wanted Arthur by his side, he thought fiercely. He wanted to touch him and kiss him and never let go. He even tried to drag his scent into his lungs and to impress a sense memory of him on his brain, he was so mad about him.

Every part of Merlin, every muscle, every bone in his body, every nerve-ending was totally aware of Arthur, of the warmth of his breath and of his body as he leant close. Of the sensuality of his kiss, of the soft caress of his hands on Merlin's face as they held him tight.

Then drawing back, Arthur wrested Ygraine's ring from the hold Merlin had it in. “I,” he said, lips blooming red, “would be honoured if you chose to stay my husband.”

Blood rushing to his head and in his ears, Merlin made an incoherent noise. He was too shaken, giddy and light-headed to say anything that would make sense, but he knew how to act now.

He took the ring, and, feeling for the first time as though it belonged there, he put it on his finger. Lower lip tucked under his upper one so he would not bud into a lunatic smile, he nodded his head fiercely.

Wearing a smile that was as mushy and crazy as the one Merlin had feared to let out, Arthur nodded his head in tandem with his, eyes twinkling. “Marry me again,” he said, in a voice that had gone more than a fair bit low. “For all the nation to see.”

“I don't need the nation, or the title,” Merlin was saying just as Arthur butted in saying, “For me then.”

“For you then.”

Arthur had just begun to move his head towards Merlin, angling it as though he was going for a kiss,
when the coach rolled to a stop.

A deafening din of cheers crashed upon their privacy and a jubilant shout, of “Long live the King!” alerted them to the fact that they'd arrived.

Westminster Abbey was waiting for Arthur.

Merlin draped the velvet and ermine state robe Arthur had refused to put on until now over Arthur's shoulders, made sure it fell in nice folds along his body, and said, “Go and get crowned, Arthur. They want to see you.”

Arthur's squeezed Merlin's fist. “Make sure you'll be there.”

“I'll be there shouting 'God Save the King' louder than anybody else. Stadium anthem like.”

Arthur bobbed his head, smiled sweetly at him one last time, and tapped his hand on the panel at the coach's side.

As soon as he'd done this, a valet came up to open the door and Arthur hopped off.

Still ensconced inside, Merlin heard the roar of welcome that saluted Arthur's arrival. It sounded as though hundreds of thousands of voices had joined to feed it.

When he'd given it enough time and the crowd was sure not to be looking to the coach Arthur had just vacated, Merlin slipped out.

Hittin the pavement, he gave the locale a once over.

The crowds collected here were massive and, judging by their robes of state, seemed to include peers.

Merlin had no doubt that ambassadors and foreign dignitaries also made up a share of the bystanders. But they weren't alone.

A great number of commoners had turned up too. They were standing behind the police lines, clapping, and cheering, calling Arthur's name as though it was a breath of hope.

This fact brought a smile to Merlin's lips, one that was smothered only by the appearance of four members of Arthur's own security detail, who recognised him, tapped their fingers to their earpieces, and started flanking him.

Though he didn't need it – he could repulse any attacker recognising him as a Selection participant or from the footage of the attack on the palace – he was escorted by the foursome into the abbey.

On his way into the church and up a fraction of the nave, he avoided the curious glances of the bystanders.

A little reluctantly – he'd rather they left him alone – he was accompanied to a row of pews that was at the back of the abbey and left to get seated.

“Thanks,” Merlin said but then he had to fall quiet because the proceedings had began and a hush had fallen over those present.

When Merlin wasn't there, Arthur had slid up the nave of the church.

At a stately pace, robe trailing behind him, he was currently passing into and through the choir.
Slowly, held head high, his eyes trained right ahead of him as though he couldn't see anything but his objective, he went up a series of steps. There he knelt at the stool set for him.

Even though Merlin was very far behind he could see Arthur's lips move in silent prayer. And as Arthur invoked powers greater than him, Merlin's heart went out to him.

He was hoping Arthur would find the peace and support he needed through prayer. He also briefly wondered what Arthur was asking for. Maybe strength to rule wisely or merely for the ability to pull today off?

However uncertain of the aim and character of Arthur's prayer, Merlin was sure it was real and not put on for show. Arthur would never try to come across as something he wasn't, in this case a devout man.

Convinced of the genuineness of Arthur plea, Merlin sent him an old magic blessing. “Farne.”

When Arthur had gathered himself enough and was ready to continue with the rite, he sat in the Chair of State.

His fists curled on the armrests; his gaze trained on no one, not even following the bishops that were placing a Bible, paten, and chalice on the nearby altar.

He didn't even seem to see the Lords of the Realm present the regalia to the Archbishop.

He only shook himself from his apparent state of high strung concentration when the next phase of the proceedings began.

Arthur had explained to him what would happen in detail so Merlin wasn't at a loss to figure out what was going on.

Arthur needed to be presented to the people by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord High Chancellor, the Lord Great Chamberlain, the Lord High Constable, the Earl Marshal, and the Garter King of Arms.

As per the custom, these dignitaries directed their steps towards different sides of the Abbey. When they’d reached them, their voices boomed the words, “Sirs, I here present unto you King Arthur, your undoubted King, wherefore all you who are come this day to do your homage and service. Are you willing to do the same?”

All the people present cried out, “God Save King Arthur.”

Merlin was sure he was the loudest among them. He was certainly proud and his pride couldn't be contained, so he pushed it out with the air that was leaving his lungs.

His voice even had a trembling warble to it and his eyes stung with the certainty that things were falling into place, that justice would be done, and that Arthur would be a great man. The right one for this kingdom.

When this ceremony was over, Arthur would rise a crowned King. He would give to the nation what it needed. He would be the one to turn that new page that had long needed turning and restore harmony between the magic and non-magic population of the land.

As if to underscore Merlin’s inner jubilation, trumpets sounded.

When they stopped, the Archbishop came to stand before the King's Chair.
In a ritualistic tone he asked, “Sir, is your Majesty willing to take the Oath?”

Arthur's voice sounded clogged and strained when he said, “I am willing.”

Statement made, Arthur was given a book to hold.

The Archbishop continued with his questioning. “Will you solemnly promise and swear to govern the Peoples of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland according to their customs?”

This time Arthur's voice was leveller though so formal as to be scarcely human when he said, “I solemnly promise so to do.”

Merlin felt as though Arthur trying to stay detached so as not to get nervous.

Arthur might say that awareness of the importance of his office could never agitate him, that he was able to cope with the stress that went with all manners or ritual displays because he'd been born to them, but that wasn't true at all.

Arthur was clearly affected by all this, likely scared by the burden it presented, and trying to be the best he could to atone for his Father's mistakes.

And he was doing so alone.

Uther wasn't present, having preferred to retire from the public scene.

Morgana had gone back to her mansion, broken and lost, mourning the magic that would never return to her and a cousin she had loved.

Other members of Arthur's family, distant cousins and other relatives, were present but Arthur had revealed he barely knew any of them.

Because of this estrangement, they couldn't offer him the support he most probably needed.

Arthur's burden would have been heavy to bear for anyone who had the support of a close-knitted family, let alone for Arthur, who'd been left with no one to rely on.

Moved by that, by Arthur's little boy on his best behaviour air, Merlin spoke a little spell under his breath, sending Arthur a subliminal message he hoped Arthur could read in his heart of hearts. “I'm with you.”

Merlin couldn't tell whether Arthur had received it or no, but he did straighten in his big chair of state.

“Will you to your power cause Law and Justice, in Mercy, to be executed in all your judgements?” the Archbishop asked Arthur in a droning voice, surprising Merlin out of his Arthur-focused reverie.

Arthur sounded very decided when he said, “I will.”

“Will you to the utmost of your power maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel. Will you to the utmost of your power maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law? Will you maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England? And will you preserve unto the Bishops and Clergy of England, and to the Churches there committed to their charge, all such rights and privileges, as by law do or shall
appertain to them or any of them?"

At this point there was a pause. Up till now Arthur's answers had come fast on the heels of the Archbishop’s questions. Now there was some hesitation on Arthur's part. “All this I promise to do,” he said, and then added, “And I promise to uphold the religion of old.”

That wasn't a part of the script; Merlin was pretty sure of that. Arthur had been reciting the Oath back to him on and off for weeks to make sure he had his answers down. Merlin knew that part of the protocol and that vow hadn't been part of it. It had been an impromptu addition.

Merlin, however, saw it as more than just that. It was the first step towards the acknowledgement of magic in the Kingdom. That's what he interpreted it as.

A murmur rose among the crowd, speculation or approval, Merlin couldn't tell.

The Archbishop reacted by seeming taken a-back. He adjusted his mitre on his head, his lips turned severely downwards and his eyebrows crumpled together. It was apparent he wasn't happy with Arthur's addition but then why would he be?

The old religion had once been a competitor to other forms of worship. Then modernity had happened and the interest in it on the part of those who hadn't had a Druidic upbringing had dwindled.

Then Uther had come and the old religion had been outlawed. Yet it contained nuggets of wisdom that would appear wholly new to people not used to it and coming to it for the first time.

A rise in following, people seeking out the wisdom of the old cult, wasn't difficult to conceive.

Merlin didn't think the Archbishop – a man appointed by the PM on Uther's suggestion – would be happy about that.

Still, the show had to go on, and the Archbishop had to conclude the ceremony. The acknowledgment of the Old Religion would be discussed elsewhere.

The Archbishop shook himself and, as if nothing had happened, carried an ancient bible to the altar.

At the same time. Arthur had risen from his chair. Attentive of his robe, he began to make his way towards the altar the Archbishop had left the bible on.

A group of fancily clad individuals were carrying the Sword of State, its blade glinting in the sun, before him.

Once Arthur had reached the altar, he laid his right hand on the gospel, knelt, and said, “The things which I have here before promised, I will perform, and keep. So help me God.”

With those words, Arthur kissed the Bible and signed the Oath document.

Merlin knew that the ceremony was one step closer to finishing.

As the antique Bible was delivered to the Dean of Westminster for safe-keeping, Arthur returned to his chair.

That was when psalms started being read out in a sing song voice and when Merlin tuned out. They were that boring, unfortunately.

Afterwards, Arthur, once again going to his knees as a token of humility, was anointed, blessed and
consecrated by the Archbishop, the audience responding as they were bid by the ritual.

After he'd been anointed, Arthur was helped into a sleeveless white garment and a robe of cloth of gold.

In that moment Arthur shone like a king of old or one of those angels that were plentiful in religious iconography.

Merlin's breath was taken away at the sight and though he'd been a little bit less than attentive when the psalms had been slowly recited, he was concentrating again now, struck as he always was of late by the aura of power and beauty that Merlin had learnt to see in Arthur.

A bit dazed with this recognition of his unbounded admiration of Arthur, Merlin watched on.

Merlin paid close attention when the Lord Chamberlain presented Arthur the traditional golden spurs that were to meant to be produced at this point in the proceedings. Arthur had explained their meaning to him and now Merlin knew that they were symbols of chivalry.

Merlin could think of no symbol more appropriate for Arthur to wear.

Then the Archbishop of Canterbury turned up again. Focused on Arthur as Merlin was, he'd completely forgotten the Archbishop and his big conical hat. But there he was, ready to observe the ritual. The Archbishop presented Arthur with a jewelled Sword, armills, and golden bracelets.

Merlin had forgotten what those stood for but it didn't matter much. They were pretty to look at, golden and gleaming, and complimented Arthur as Merlin thought they would no other man.

At last Arthur put on a cloth of gold mantle and received an orb, the Coronation ring and the two sceptres.

Merlin wondered what Arthur was meant to do with two of them but again there was no one he could ask and the detail seemed irrelevant.

This was pageantry and while there was significance to each and every action performed, the overall meaning of this was a celebration of tradition and Arthur's power.

A power Merlin was confident Arthur would put to good use.

Finally, the climax of the ceremony took place and Arthur was crowned.

The Archbishop boomed, “O God the Crown of the faithful: Bless we beseech thee this Crown, and so sanctify thy servant Arthur upon whose head this day thou dost place it for a sign of royal majesty,that he may be filled by thine abundant grace with all princely virtues.”

Merlin didn't hear the last words because the audience rose before their cue and shouted, “God Save the king.”

Merlin was too close to tears, his chest too full or him to be able to shout with them, but he was happy the people seemed to love Arthur so much they were ready to commit a breach of etiquette to tell him so.

With Arthur crowned, all the nobles, plus Arthur's relatives who were princes and princesses, peers and peeresses, put on their coronets.

The ceremony didn't last too long after that. Arthur received the homage that was due to him from
spiritual and temporal lords alike, was sworn allegiance to, and then retired to a side chapel to change and meditate.

It was a while before Merlin saw Arthur again. At least an hour or so. But he knew how to be patient.

At last Arthur jumped back into the carriage with him so they could start the procession back to Buckingham Palace.

For a while Arthur didn't talk much, looking away from Merlin and as if he was in a world of his own, until he burst out with the words, “I heard you, you know, in my head.” Arthur tapped his temple. “Saying you'd be there for me.”

Merlin wanted to crack a quip but somehow felt as though he couldn't.

His tongue was cleaving to the roof of his mouth and his heartbeat was drumming too fast for him to be able to summon enough spirit to joke around. He was in a sappily solemn mood, that was what he was. So he said, “That's true. Whatever happens, Arthur, I will always be.”

Though Merlin had feared he would, Arthur didn't question his promise. He just said, “I'm calling the PM tomorrow. We're fully legalising magic.”

Merlin didn't know whether to laugh or cry so he did a bit of both. “Sorcerers all over the kingdom will be so happy. I know I am.”

“That's still too little too late,” Arthur said more sombrely. “But I'll do my best. I'll welcome back those who were forced to flee, make reparations.”

Merlin swiped a thumb over Arthur's knuckles. “You will. You will do all that and better, more.”

“You sound as though you trust me to do the right thing even though I've haven't been known to before,” Arthur said his eyes sweeping over Merlin with both warmth and incredulity. “I don't know how you manage to have so much faith in me.”

Before kissing Arthur on the lips, Merlin made sure the curtains were safely drawn so tight that nothing of what was going on inside the carriage could be seen. Then he leant in and covered Arthur's lips with his.

The kiss was shallow and swift but he hoped Arthur would like it all the same. For all its brevity Merlin had poured his heart into it. “That's because I have. Plus, if you have any questions about magic, I'll be there to clear your doubts. I swear. I'll be there by your side.”

“Will you only be my counsel?”

Merlin's lips trembled into a joyful smile. “Don't fish, Arthur. You already have my answer on that.”

Arthur locked their fingers together. “I wish we hadn't kept our marriage secret. Back in there you should have been crowned with me.”

Merlin shook his head. “We did because I thought I'd be giving you your freedom back, and because you can't say to the public that their king got married in a prison. But I don't mind. I have you. If you're happy with me--”

Arthur tugged on his hand, his smile saying 'shut up' for him better than words could.
“If you're happy with me a crown's just a fancy hat.”

Arthur bumped his shoulder with his. “Hey, mine is much more than a fancy hat.”

“Oh yes.” Merlin rolled his eyes. “It's a shiny, fancy hat.”

Arthur howled with laughter and would have probably done more to break protocol if the coach hadn't stopped again.

They were back at Buckingham Palace. Time tended to fly by when Merlin was alone with Arthur.

“Come,” Arthur said, “I've got to greet the people.”

Merlin didn't know why his presence was needed but he followed Arthur back into the palace and into the great balcony room that faced east, onto the forecourt and the Mall.

The balcony had been opened by attendants and, to a chorus of cheers, Arthur stepped outside, washed in sunlight, one hand held up to sway in a slow wave, the other placed on the red drapery decked the railing.

Merlin was telling an aide that Arthur was looking, “Really, really, properly regal,” when Arthur reached his hand back.

Merlin tilted his head speculatively.

The aide pushed him forwards at the same time Arthur grabbed him so that he stumbled onto the balcony.


By the time Merlin had righted himself, the crowd had redoubled its cheers and shouts.

The End.

Chapter End Notes

Part of the wedding ritual has lines lifted verbatim from the civil marriage protocol.

The oath Arthur swears is the one -- word for word -- Queen Elisabeth II gave when she was crowned.

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