Counterpoint

by PlaneJane

Summary

Twenty years after The Great Purge and the continuing effects of a High Priestess’s curse, Albion is a nation on the brink of collapse. Not even High Chancellor Uther Pendragon’s Compatibility Regime can curb the plummeting population. To add to his troubles, his wayward son, Arthur, makes no disguise of his unwillingness to wed. With good reason. Arthur is secretly leading the Movement, a covert organisation plotting to overthrow the government and return magic to Albion. Not to mention, it’s been foreseen that Arthur’s future, his destiny, is an indomitable union with a warlock—not marriage to the farm-boy matched to him by Uther’s Compatibility Machines.

Notes

Alby_mangroves, my wonderful artist. I don’t know how you do it, but it’s like you can see inside my mind and you know just how to render what’s there. I’m so grateful to you for illustrating this story and deftly bringing retro-styled teen-Merlin and Arthur to life.

The art is embedded in the story, but please go to the Art Masterpost on AO3 or on Livejournal to leave kudos and comments for the artist. ♥

So much gratitude also falls to my beta, Sylvanwitch. Her beta skills are exemplary. Thank you, dear friend, for all your feedback and encouragement. Thanks also to Themosteponte for
the read through and all the friends who’ve cheered me on and buoyed me through the low points during the last five months.

The_muppet, it was a labour of love, I know. I hope you also know that you’ve done a sterling job and truly enriched Merlin fandom with this fest.

**Disclaimer:** The Merlin characters belong to the BBC and Shine. No harm or disrespect is meant. The views expressed in this fan work do not necessarily reflect those of the author.
The incessant whir and wheeze of the processing-machine didn’t end when Merlin left the factory at midnight. Two hours after his shift was over—that’s how long it took to get the wretched thing running smoothly again—and its drone persisted, filling his head, pulling the muscles in his shoulders taut as a coiled spring. Curled on his side, the blanket pulled up around his neck, the noise of the jammed grinder lingered, holding him back from tipping over the edge into sleep.

He was due back at the factory at ten the next morning. Each sleepless hour was a taunt and a curse. The mental din took on a musical quality, a mocking hurdy-gurdy, playing over and over, *Ealdor, Ealdor, Ealdor:* the place where Merlin lived, worked, ate and slept, the place where ambitions always died unrealised, the place where those men lucky (or unlucky) enough to leave never came back.

To that perverted lullaby he fell asleep.

He was awoken at dawn by an altogether different sound.

There was a car in the lane. The deep purr of its engine, the scrape and crunch of its tyres over the gravel were rare, unsettling noises. Merlin leapt from his bed as his heart leapt into his throat. He’d kept his insolent mouth shut for months now. No more talk of how things could be changed, no more suggestion that *this* was not enough. He was certain, certain as the endurance of Ealdor’s factory machines they weren’t coming for him. Or were they?

By the time he reached the top of the stairs, the hammering on the front door was shaking the floorboards. Halfway down and his mother was already there, opening the door before he could protest, fight, run. He might have laughed at the futility of the notion were it not for the crippling fear turning the bones in his legs to dust.

A single uniformed soldier, wearing the red, dragon-crested jacket and grey trousers of Camelot troops, stood stiffly on the doorstep.

Merlin was only wearing his pants.
It was curious that the soldier had knocked, hadn’t barged his way in. Clinging to the banister, Merlin inched his way down the last of the stairs. His mother, Hunith, was leaning against the windowsill. She’d knocked the bowl they kept the keys in onto the floor. She didn’t seem to notice. Her wide, frightened eyes were fixed on her misfit of a son.

The soldier was tall, broad-shouldered and handsome. They didn’t make them like that here.

“Merlin Fowler?” the soldier said.

“Yes.”

“This is for you.”

He held out an envelope: large, crisp and cream-coloured, gilded in the corner with Camelot’s dragon crest. Merlin took it, hand shaking.

The soldier departed without another word.

Hunith dropped to her knees. Sobbing, she clutched at Merlin’s bare leg and said, “My darling boy. What have you done?”

Uther was dunking strips of toast (soldiers, he called them) into his three-minute boiled egg. Stab, stab, stab. Taking a pastry from the platter on the sideboard, Arthur slid silently into the chair opposite. He poured himself black coffee as Uther demolished the last of his soldiers, licking his fingers, one after the other.

When Uther was done, he failed to extend even a cursory morning salutation. This should have been a forewarning, though nothing could have adequately prepared Arthur for what was to follow. He noticed the envelope on the table between them—to late to be ashamed at his lack of observation. Uther was reaching into his pocket and from the jangling sound Arthur knew what was coming before he could protest, fight, run. He might have laughed at the futility of the notion, were it not for the dread tightly squeezing his chest. Uther dropped the keys on top of the envelope.

“Leon will drive you over to take a look at the place. You can pick out your own furnishings. I firmly believe the boy will be to your liking.” He looked away; his top lip flinched. “You’ve got three weeks to get your affairs in order, though I’ve arranged for you to meet him beforehand, in a fortnight.”

Curling his fingers around the keys, Arthur implored weakly, “I thought we agreed I was to get another year.”

“We agreed nothing of the sort. It was never going to be easy, finding a suitable match for a man with your genotype and preferences. This boy is a rarity—Genotype Class A and fertile. Then there was your Compatibility Rating—a resounding 98%.” At this revelation, Uther’s expression changed from disdain to animated delight. Such was the affecting power of his new and improved, mechanised and prized Department of Compatibility. “Consider yourself lucky. It wasn’t so long ago you’d have been married to a woman, whether it suited you or not.”

That was it then. Uther was happy. At twenty-two, Arthur was at last to become his lauded poster-child.
It had never been enough—Arthur had never been enough—just being his child.

I

Ten days after the delivery of the letter another car pulled up outside Merlin’s door. Hunith had packed Merlin’s case. He dutifully carried it down the stairs and put it by the front door. Then he held his mum close until the soldier, a different one from last time, came knocking. The radio in the kitchen was playing a popular song, a catchy number made for foot-tapping and singing along. Hunith had said it lifted her spirits, to have a cheerful tune in the background during the drudge of the working day—but at the imminent and permanent departure of her only child?

Up to now, Merlin had thought Hunith content, if not happy. He wasn’t sure how that would change once he was gone. She wouldn’t cry, not in front of him. He knew that much. She always shed her tears in the bleak black of night when she thought Merlin was sleeping.

Merlin swallowed back the lump in his throat. “It’s time, mum. I have to go.”

“I know, darling, I know. Remember what I told you?”

“Yes, I remember.” The name and address of a dear friend from a long time ago, when the borders were open, when Camelot scientists were working their way across the counties gathering data. The contact might be useless. Everything had changed since then.

The soldier gave them a full half a minute before he said, “We have to leave now.”

Merlin bent to pick up the case. The soldier closed an iron fist around Merlin’s wrist. “No belongings.”

“Please,” Merlin implored, his eyes darting in his mother’s direction. It was better coming from him, less risky.

The soldier’s mouth lifted at the corners. “All right,” he said, beckoning Merlin to follow with a tilt of his head.

There was no one but Hunith to send Merlin off. Not like the girls going to the Blooms, where the villagers would come out and line the road, littering it with wild flowers and soaking it with their tears. Merlin had volunteered to leave the Eastern Counties for his own benefit; the girls were chosen, to serve their country, to help their fellow countrymen. Like Merlin, they never came back.

The soldier opened the rear door and stood to attention: shoulders back, stance rigid, unforgiving. Merlin paused, took one last look at his mother and committed her warm, sad smile to memory before climbing in. He’d never spent a single night away from home, not once in his eighteen and a half years. This was a quick, clean break, and the pain was sharp and blinding. It was the sun in his eyes that made him look away, not his tears.

A few miles from Ealdor, the driver stopped the car. The soldier got out and opened Merlin’s door. Merlin recoiled instinctively but the soldier only said, “The suitcase.”

Merlin handed it over. Protest was pointless. The soldier carried the case to the verge and flung it over the hedge. There was wheat beyond, ripe for harvest. The combine would have it shredded inside a week, along with Merlin’s case and its contents. Merlin was glad for the most part to see it go. He was only sorry for the pie, neatly wrapped in waxed paper, that his mother had tucked between his blue jumper and a pair of new pyjamas. The letter from the Department of Compatibility
had clearly stated no personal possessions were permitted. Hunith knew it; that didn’t mean she could bear to let her boy leave her empty-handed.

They’d been in the car some time, bumping along a pitted track to the driver’s curses, before they reached a tarmac road. Merlin had seen one once, in the distance, back in the days when he used to spend part of his summer holidays picking hops. It snaked along the rise of a distant hill, a black viper on its way to greener pastures. Ever since then, he’d dreamed of finding out where it went.

The ride was smooth on the road and the back seat comfortable. Merlin relaxed into the plush leather and stared out of the window, watching the landscape slowly change from verdant field and pasture to acres of scrubby wasteland scarred with swathes of stone and gravel. Far behind a wire fence there were houses too, rows upon rows of them, with tiny front gardens that were overgrown with weeds. Broken windows stared back at Merlin like haunted eyes. Their inhabitants had long departed—lost to the war.

The City of Camelot was encircled by a wall. Merlin didn’t notice it at first, sweeping out along the horizon. His attention was seized by the towers beyond, shining glass and silver metal, worshipping arms to the heavens shooting up into the cloudless sky. The wall was high, topped with spikes. As it loomed, taking over the skyline, the car slowed, finally stopping at a guarded gate. They were waved on through and that, for the time being, was all Merlin saw of Camelot.

They descended through a tunnel and emerged into a holding area, a large and uninviting expanse of strip-lights and grey, where a flurry of white coats brusquely ushered other young men and women from vehicles similar to the one in which Merlin was sitting. There was a tap on the window and Merlin’s stomach coiled into a knot of dread as the passenger door was opened.

More than an hour must have passed with Merlin sitting neglected in the examination room. There was no clock, nothing on the walls except a plain plaque embossed with Albion’s motto: *Compatibility-Stability-Peace*. He was shivering, his stomach rumbling despite his growing apprehension. The smug-faced orderly, George, had long since disappeared with Merlin’s clothes in a cloth sack labelled *Incinerator*. Thus, Merlin was abandoned, sitting completely naked on a paper-covered examination bench, legs dangling over the side, with no idea what fate was in store for him —

The door swung open and a middle-aged woman in a white coat rushed in. Startled, Merlin jumped —and clamped his hands over his privates.

“Merlin Fowler?” she exclaimed.

“Y-yes,” he stammered, teeth chattering.

“This won’t do at all. Not one bit,” she said, her whole body stiffening. Merlin sensed panic, not revulsion. She leaned out into the corridor and shouted, “George! George! Get Mr Fowler a robe and slippers. At once!”

The woman was flustered, her round face florid as she closed the door and approached Merlin. “I’m so sorry, you poor dear. I’m Dr Hargreaves. You can call me Alice.” She held out her hand, glanced down at Merlin’s situation, and quickly withdrew it again.

There was a knock. George lumbered in, proffering a long, thick burgundy robe and velvety slippers. Merlin was hastily clad and, with Alice’s arm at his back, was ushered from the examination room, speechless and confused.

The gleaming corridor was empty, the doors that flanked its length closed and not a sound from
behind any of them. They returned to the lift that had brought Merlin up from underground, only instead of the stern, stony silence that had brought him as far as the second floor, Alice said cheerily, “Top floor for you.”

The rooms on the twentieth floor were luxuriously appointed, opulent beyond anything Merlin had ever seen, even on television. He was seated on a soft, low couch at a small table and served hot tea and a fragrant sandwich from a silver platter before Alice politely asked if she had his permission to begin her examination.

In the space of minutes, Merlin had quite literally been transported to the top of the world.

He was measured and weighed, his heart rate and blood pressure taken, and blood drawn. Alice considered the numbers. She looked at Merlin with her head to one side and said seriously, “I didn’t realise there was a problem with the food supply in the Eastern Counties.”

“There isn’t. We get enough.”

“But your weight—”

“I eat like a horse. My mum says I have hollow legs.”

Alice smiled fondly. “You’ll grow into your body. You’re still young.”

“Do you think I’ll grow into my ears?” Merlin laughed, just as everyone else did, as his heart skipped a beat.

Not Alice. She didn’t laugh. She said, “He’s going to adore you. Smile like that and he won’t have a choice in the matter.”

She must have had a charmed life.

Merlin was returned to the couch. While Alice pored over her notes there was a continual in-and-out from a variety of other personnel, each as polite and deferent as the last. Some quietly conferred with Alice, some made deliveries and some cleared things away. Amidst this activity, Alice and Merlin talked and talked, until his anxiety gradually eased.

At last, she said, “I’m curious. You’re young enough to have been selected for transfer to Camelot when you were a baby. Do you know why you were missed?”

The medical officer at the factory, the one who had endorsed his application, had explained it to Merlin. In turn, he started to explain to Alice, “I was preemie. Six weeks before full term, my mother said.”

Merlin didn’t need to finish. Alice concurred and replied, “Ah. Yes. When you were born the hospitals in the farming counties didn’t always have the facilities to ensure early babies thrived. The war had only just ended and resources were scarce. They must have assumed, quite incorrectly, that you’d be deficient.”

Deficient. An ugly word, a condemnation. Merlin had lived with it, endured it—and the subsequent irony—for as long as he could remember.

“And yet,” Alice continued, “the last school records we have for you are from four years ago, when you were fourteen.”

“They ran out of things to teach me.”
“In theory, that’s not possible.” Alice smirked. “So what happened after your teachers got tired of you?”

“I was shoved here and there for a bit. They didn’t know what to do with me. I was rubbish at picking and sorting and too young to operate the machinery. In the end, I ended up in the machine shop at the factory, in the office for a while then out on the floor, servicing, maintaining and fixing the machines. I have a knack, apparently.”

“I see. That would explain your hearing loss. It’s minimal. I’ll make a note that if it hasn’t improved in six months you’ll need some remediation. Is there anything else you’d like to ask me?”

Merlin assumed she was talking about his health, about the medical. His one and only question had nothing to do with that. It was the obvious question, really, but he knew better than to ask out of turn. The letter from the Department was explicit; there would be no contact and no information regarding his intended until the wedding day.

*In Camelot We Trust*—the first lesson every child learned at school.

Biting his lip in case his tongue betrayed him, Merlin shook his head and stared into his lap.

“Merlin? Really? You don’t want to ask me about who it is you’re to marry?”

Was she daring him to ask? Was she testing his obedience?

“Of course,” he said quietly, lifting his chin, uncertain. “But it’s not allowed.”

“Not ordinarily. However, in your case some of the usual protocols have been adjusted.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re going to be marrying someone very … high-profile. Someone you will have no doubt seen on television, on the news probably.”

“Who?”

Alice’s excitement was palpable. She reached across from her chair and took Merlin’s hands in hers. “Arthur Pendragon, the High Commissioner’s son.”

Merlin did watch the news on the television and on occasion he caught a glimpse of the small-sheet newspapers, Ealdor’s other prime source of news—though more often gossip. If a fraction of what was in those news reports was true...

Merlin felt a tiny bit sick, but he only had himself to blame. It was too late for regrets. This was what he got for not being entirely truthful on the Personality Profile Questionnaire.

“I’m to be married, to a man from the Eastern Counties.” Arthur paused, reconsidered. “Actually, he’s only eighteen, hardly more than a boy.”

Morgause stood abruptly, toppling her chair. Her anger thrummed out through her clenched fist, rattling the china teacup and saucer on the table between them. Morgana rescued the cup and took another sip. She was imbibing insipid beer. In the Lower Town it was safer to drink than the water. Arthur wished there was a way he could smuggle in tea for her, to provide her with a modicum of
comfort in this hell-hole.

“When?” Morgause said, through gritted teeth.

“I meet him in four days; the ceremony is a week after that.”

“When does he arrive in Camelot?”

Arthur knew what Morgause was thinking. He’d anticipated this would be her response—eradicate the problem before it became a problem. In that regard she was a lot like Uther, though he’d never say it out loud. Sometimes he wondered if she had a heart. Then he’d catch her looking at Morgana and remember why she was like she was, and what a disservice it was to ever compare her to his father.

“It’s too late,” Arthur said, “he’s already in Camelot. I tried to get here sooner but I’m being watched, more so now than ever.”

He hated to lie. He could have stolen here a week earlier, shown Morgause the letter, let her people find and intercept the car carrying his betrothed. Random acts of pro-magic rebellion—terrorism—were few and far between these days but had not been wiped out altogether. There were still a number of active rebel factions not associated with the highly secretive Movement opposed to Uther’s post-war regime that could be blamed. However, the boy inside that car was an innocent and too many of those had died already. Arthur had no mind to resort to such tactics, not yet.

Morgause paced, her heavy boots grinding the threadbare carpet beneath her feet. This building used to be a grand hotel, years ago, filled with wealthy paying guests. Nowadays the part-time residents were of a different stripe, though no less exclusive. Their currency was loyalty and promises, which didn’t cover the cost of food, let alone maintaining the tired and tarnished furnishings.

“You can’t marry him, Arthur,” Morgause said. “You’re destined for another. Your future, our future, the future of Albion depends upon it.” She stopped pacing and stared at him, eyes feral. “You know people on the inside. You’ll have to take care of it.”

“You would ask me to have him killed, in Confinement? I think that would raise suspicions, don’t you?”

Morgana reached out for Morgause, who came to her, fingers winding through the long, black tresses of Morgana’s hair. “He’s right,” Morgana said anxiously. “If Uther finds out he won’t flinch at having Arthur executed, only son or not.”

“They what else?” Morgause’s voice rose with her frustration, as pulses of her magic shook the chandelier above them. One day it was going to fall. The ceiling was riddled with cracks. Arthur vowed to himself that before then he would have them out of here, close to him, where they belonged.

“I don’t know what to do,” Arthur admitted wearily. “All I know is that we have eleven more days before I’m expected to start behaving like a married man. I won’t get any special allowances. If anything my father will expect…” Arthur dropped his head into his hands, scrubbing at his hair as if he could erase the image from his mind.

He didn’t need to say it. He and his husband would be expected to be a model couple, a shining example to the nation of how government-controlled matrimony and procreation were the only way to increase the population and ensure lasting security and peace. Staying out all night wasting his money at seedy nightclubs and getting into scrapes—a carefully constructed ruse for the gossip-
mongers and Uther’s spies—would have to stop.

How was he going to orchestrate a coup from an armchair by the fire?

There again, it wasn’t unheard of for men and women like him, upper-class *Fertiles*, society’s most elite, to continue to live as *Libertines* after marriage. In certain over-privileged and arrogant circles, his husband’s newly-acquired rank and wealth would be considered ample compensation for any indiscretion on Arthur’s part.

“No good moping, sweetling,” Morgause said, sliding Arthur a wine glass across the table. The rim was chipped and the crystal dull from age. She filled his before she filled her own and chinked the tops together. “We’ll think of something.”

“No assassination attempts. I don’t want any of you near the Citadel. Things have been quiet long enough the security has become complacent and I don’t want to lose that advantage.” Arthur knocked back the sweet liquor, Solana, in one swift gulp, slammed the glass back onto the table and shuddered involuntarily. The bitter aftertaste was its most innocuous property. Arthur wouldn’t risk more than a couple of glasses—not if he wanted to get home alive and in one piece.

Morgana poured his refill and said, “I know you, Arthur. You’re going to marry this boy because you’re good and noble and you want to help everyone, and maybe we can work around that. But if the Department of Compatibility are as good as they say they are, what are the chances you’re going to fall for him?”

“No,” he said too quickly. He knew nothing about the boy, except a column full of figures that marked them as an ideal match. If there was anything more than luck on the Department of Compatibility’s side, Arthur might, whether he liked the idea or not, fall in love with the spouse they’d found him in their extensive database and remain happily married until the end of his days.

It sounded good, in theory—it had supposedly worked for generations—except when a secret army of druids and seers, and your clairvoyant half-sister, said you were destined for an indomitable union with a warlock, a man with magic, and this union was Albion’s only hope in restoring the balance his father had destroyed.

The problem was, since the war, in the aftermath of The Great Purge, the few covert magic-users still alive were elusive, virtually impossible to find even with Morgause and Morgana at the helm of the search. Despite years of looking for him with all the means at their disposal, both magic and non-magic, the warlock had not been found.

They commiserated with the remainder of the Solana and Morgause’s tales of the days before the war. She’d scarcely been more than a child when the conflict began. Still, she remembered well enough when sorcery was as much-needed a part of society as electricity and oil. Morgana and Arthur listened, side-by-side and worlds apart.

When it was time for him to leave her eyes filled with tears. If she shed them, it wouldn’t be until after he left.

With a heavy heart, Arthur said, “I can’t risk coming back here for a while.”

They held each other close. Morgana whispered, “I miss you, baby brother. I miss your stupid face.”

“You’ll see it again,” Arthur said, though he had no idea when that might be.
Chapter 2

II

Arthur took his time with his coffee, sitting on his father’s expansive terrace, regarding the sweeping lawn. Leon was positioned unobtrusively on a bench to his far right, his back to Arthur, no doubt keenly observant of the surroundings. To Arthur’s left he caught a glimpse of Lance, close to the fence. Those two men were his: Camelot soldiers also working secretly for the Movement. The rest of the security team, scattered in various positions about the property, were solely Uther’s.

The French doors that lead into the study were open. Arthur heard Uther’s dulcet tones, ushering in his precious redeemer as he emptied his cup. He remained seated though the wind was picking up, whistling sorrowfully through the spiralled stone balusters. Soon enough, Uther would parade the boy out here.

Arthur had secretly been thinking about this moment more or less constantly for the last fortnight. He’d been afforded many privileges in his life. Like his generation and several before them, the freedom to choose who and when to marry wasn’t one of them. Unlike his peers, Arthur was inexorably caught between the Old Religion and The Compatibility Regime, between a union with warlock and marriage to a serf. It was a desolate place.

“Arthur,” Uther said, “this is Merlin.”

Deliberately, slowly, Arthur looked him up and down, this Merlin. He was dark-haired, pale-skinned and slender. The tailors must have worked night and day. The dark blue suit he wore was well-made; the colour suited his complexion and the cut flattered his angular frame. He was very lean but looked healthy.

Arthur studied Merlin’s face. Considered singularly, each of his features were too big—wide blue eyes, curvaceous lips, prominent cheekbones—and whoever styled his hair had failed in their attempt to assuage the shock of his ears. Yet when he smiled, as tentative as it was, he was uncommonly arresting. He probably had no idea how attractive he was.

“Hello, Arthur.”

Arthur rose from his seat and extended his arm. “Merlin,” he said, taking the hand offered and shaking it very firmly. “You must be quite overwhelmed at your change of fortune.”

“I am,” Merlin said, his smile broadening, his grip on Arthur’s hand unwavering. “As you must be yours.”

On another occasion, Arthur might have laughed—from fear as much as joy. This he had not expected.

Merlin was like no one he’d ever met.

For his breakfast, Merlin enjoyed a feast of smoked fish, called kippers, scrambled egg and a selection of syrupy fruit, much of which he didn’t recognise. From his window, he watched another volunteer crossing the courtyard with her chaperone. Like him, she’d have come from one of the
counties outside the City of Camelot. She’d have met the criteria to go beyond her home county for marriage in order to find a life more compatible with her abilities. Like Merlin, she’d have eaten her breakfast in her room, though he’d never know what she’d eaten.

Volunteers were not allowed to fraternise. Their only contact with each other was during their induction seminars, and there was no opportunity for chit-chat then. No one had seen fit to explain the precise reasons for their solitary confinement and Merlin didn’t want to jeopardise his future by asking the wrong types of questions. In any case, after his brief meeting with Arthur, his surly and aloof future husband, Merlin no longer trusted what anyone told him. Adore him, indeed. In the hour they’d spent together, Arthur couldn’t have made his disdain for their impending marriage any clearer.

Merlin shouldn’t have been too surprised. In one of the many seminars he’d already endured, the tutor had warned there might be some initial hostility from their new spouses, especially if there was a big difference in their respective backgrounds.

With luck, Arthur would come around.

On the other hand, in Merlin’s experience, leaving his fortune to chance usually reaped lesser rewards than purposeful endeavour—his match to Arthur notwithstanding. Which lead Merlin to the sorry conclusion he may well be—not to put too fine and ambiguous a point on it—fucked.

“Merlin?” The door opened and Merlin’s chaperone for the morning poked his head around the door and said, “Time for the tour.”

They were transported, the ten volunteers, each with their own chaperone, to the Department of Compatibility Research Centre, to the place where it all happened; where their fates had been decided.

It was an austere building. Ten storeys of plain, sandstone walls and dark glass windows enclosed inside an imposing electric fence. Their bus was waved through and its occupants greeted by a welcoming party of four armed guards and a serious-looking, red-headed man in the standard scientist white coat.

Mostly the tour was boring. They were shuffled past offices where expressionless drones, also in white coats, stared at black and green flickering screens while Dr Aredian blathered on about how many thousands of samples were processed every month, how many technicians worked in the facility and a barrage of other facts and figures no one would remember after they’d exited the Centre’s doors.

“These laboratories are where we process the blood samples taken from all Fertiles, from every background, high or humble.” With a smile and a nod to his charges, Dr Aredian said, “You valuable young people are a rarity—Genotype and Fertility Class A! That quality elevates you above everyone, regardless of place of birth or family name.”

From Merlin’s meeting with Arthur, from the way Arthur had wasted no time in saying, “I hope you weren’t expecting me to be happy about this match, because I’m not,” Merlin suspected that sentiment was not necessarily shared by everyone. There again, perhaps the problem wasn’t that Merlin was from lowly Ealdor. Perhaps what Arthur had meant was that Merlin’s looks didn’t meet his expectations. There wasn’t anything Merlin could do about either. He couldn’t change where he came from or who he was and by rights he didn’t need to. The Department of Compatibility always found the right match. Merlin had to keep a tight lid on his scepticism. He had to have faith.

There again, if the newspaper reports were anything to go on, Arthur was a Libertine. Where Uther
might be ecstatic a match was found for his wayward son, Arthur was cursing that someone, anyone, had been found for him, regardless of who he turned out to be.

Ultimately, only time would tell where the source of Arthur’s hostility lay, and whether Merlin would be able to do anything to endear him.

Under the scrutiny of the lights, Merlin felt an unsettling tightness growing behind his eyes—a headache brewing. He focused on the tour and hoped it wouldn’t worsen.

A tall young woman with flawless olive skin and a pretty face raised her hand, “What factors constitute Genotype A?”

“A very good question. The number of deciding factors is vast and must be looked at holistically and in relation to the genotypes of potential partners. It’s a science of multitudinous variables and as a result has taken many years to refine. However, qualifying genotypes have in common high intellect, sound health and absence of certain genetic mutations.”

Shored up by Dr Aredian’s enthusiasm, someone else asked, “You mean inherited diseases, like haemophilia?”

“Or chromosome defects, such as trisomy?” said another.

“Yes, for one thing, though it goes much further!” A vein pulsed in the doctor’s temple. He looked positively rapt. Merlin felt nauseous. Perhaps the fish was disagreeing with him. “Predisposition for heart disease, obesity, mental illness and many more—all are screened out for qualification to Class A.”

Merlin wanted to ask who made that decision. Who decided which traits were sufficiently undesirable for disqualification from Class A? Where did it end? Only his head was throbbing and his stomach churning, and perhaps that was just as well. It would seem like a criticism—because it was—and those never went down well with officials.

Someone else piped up, “You haven’t been able to find the genes responsible for the ability to use magic?”

A sudden and weighty hush fell over the gathered crowd. Merely saying the word magic was enough to make people uncomfortable, nervous.

Dr Aredian spent a long time clearing his throat before he answered. “Our extensive and lengthy research has shown there is no genetic component. The evidence suggests magic-use is a learned trait, the result of long-term induction into practices in direct discord with civilised society.”

The quiet panic was averted. There were audible sighs of relief. Thus another voice asked, though more timorously than the last, “It’s not possible to be born with the ability to use magic?”

“Absolutely not. And since the practice of magic has been outlawed within Albion’s borders, it is highly likely that there are no longer any magic-users left in this great land.” Dr Aredian was in his element.

Another voice chimed in, “How were magic-users caught, if you couldn’t do a genetic test?”

“Another wonderful question. One to which I am not at liberty to divulge the answer—for matters of national security, you understand. Rest assured though, boys and girls, you no longer have anything to fear. The scourge of magic is long gone from inside these city walls. But we digress. On to the Psychometric Analysis Suite we go!”
Merlin wondered how many of the others were thinking the same as him—that Dr Aredian was either a liar or a fool. Merlin would have put money on the former, if he’d had any.

He regarded his company as they made their way along the corridor. One of the young men, another volunteer, was looking at the floor as he walked, his head hanging down as if he was afraid to let anyone see his face, as if his expression might give away something he wanted to keep secret. Merlin had seen that look and where it got people. Something that Dr Aredian or one of the volunteers had said had got him worried. That’s what magic-talk did to people, perfectly innocent people. The fear of magic was so entrenched in those born after the war and The Great Purge that those simply possessing a nervous disposition made themselves targets of suspicion.

A little over twenty years ago, scientists in Camelot discovered a direct link between magic-use and the prevalence of mental illness, crime and all manner of deviancy. High Chancellor Uther Pendragon decreed magic was a danger to society and had to be wiped out, thus beginning the war on magic. There were no negotiations and no compromises. Using magic, having magic, harbouring or helping those with magic—all were punishable by death. Aided by sympathisers—terrorists—some magic-users fled to the neutral Isle of Annis. Most were executed in what became known as The Great Purge. Within two years, Uther had won his war but lost a third of the population. But it didn’t end there. In a final act of retaliation, the last of the High Priestesses cursed Albion to barrenness. A year later, the birth rate plummeted.

Hunith’s memories were different, of magic, of High Priestesses, warlocks and witches. She recalled a time when magic was as much an accepted part of society as science, with good aspects and bad. Indeed, she told Merlin rumour had it that the High Chancellor himself had taken counsel from a High Priestess of the Old Religion when his need arose. The allegation was refuted in official circles but, like an indelible stain, its memory persisted.

Merlin tried to catch the man’s eye, to give him a sign not to worry, before they were hustled into two separate lifts and Merlin didn’t see him again until they were heading across a thick-carpeted foyer into the Psychometric Analysis Suite. It was very different from the offices and laboratories below. The glass doors were decoratively embellished with its initials, PAS, and the walls lined with framed art: geometric, coloured shapes, monochrome ink blots and foreign landscapes.

The fluorescent strip-lights overhead flickered. Merlin’s headache was getting worse and the floor was swaying. He tried to blink back the clawing inside his skull; he wanted to close his eyes, to find darkness and quiet.

It had been more than a year since one of these headaches. Merlin thought he’d grown out of them; it was just his rotten luck to get one now. He was due for a final suit fitting in the afternoon and a lesson in dining etiquette but he’d reached the point where he wasn’t sure how he was going to make it through the next hour let alone the rest of the day.

“Are you all right?” Merlin’s chaperone said, taking his arm.

Though the medical hadn’t picked up any concerns with Merlin’s health, he didn’t want to give anyone a reason to stamp his file with Rejected, not after he’d come this far. His head hurt too much to be able to think. His eyes were filling with tears, his stomach aggressively protesting its contents. Like the rolling in of the tide there was no stopping the inevitable.

Everyone was looking at him as Merlin gasped, “I don’t feel well,” before loudly heaving and throwing up his breakfast, over his chaperone and his brand new shoes.

There were shocked exclamations and a rush of bodies as Merlin crumpled to his knees, coughing and holding his head.
“It’s all right,” a voice said. “Relax.”

A hand, a very warm hand, closed about the back of Merlin’s neck. When he cracked open his eyes he found himself looking at the young man, the one he’d tried to comfort earlier. His eyes were captivating—chestnut brown, or perhaps, weirdly, they were golden. The contact was as fleeting as a sigh yet Merlin felt the pain lift, leaving him only with a dull ache at his temples. Then, with frightening speed, the young man was dragged away and Merlin lifted to his feet.

The next minutes were a blur. The young man who’d helped Merlin was out of sight before Merlin could come to his defence, not that there was anything he could say for him. Merlin had never seen anyone use magic before. Somehow, instinctively, he knew that was what he’d just seen and he knew the consequences for using it. The sobs he’d been choking back as he battled the pain in his head escaped, uncontrolled; his tears as much for the young man whose name he didn’t know as for himself.

Merlin was whisked to a quiet room where he was mopped clean and prodded by what he supposed was an on-site doctor. The chaperone didn’t leave Merlin’s side, not for a moment, even as he stripped out of his once-pristine suit and into a borrowed outfit—a green cotton tunic and trousers.

“How are you feeling?” the doctor asked.

“Much better now,” Merlin said. “Fine actually.” He looked dolefully at his ruined brown leather shoes and silently bemoaned the trail of chaos they’d left behind.

The doctor shifted from foot to foot, like he couldn’t wait to get out the door. “In that case, I’m happy to give you the all-clear. I suspect the sickness is just a case of nerves, what with your big day coming up.” He added, “We’ve arranged for a car to take you back to the Confinement Centre. Rest today.”

There were no more questions, no interrogations. Expediency had presided, though for whose benefit Merlin wasn’t sure.

The chaperone sat in the back of the car next to a boneless Merlin, not in the front with the driver, and didn’t make a fuss about the smell of vomit.

“What’s your name?” Merlin asked him as they sped away.

“Elyan.”

“Sorry about your suit, Elyan.”

“Don’t be. It’s borrowed from my sister’s friend.” He patted Merlin’s arm and smiled. “Still, this is turning out to be one hell of a first day.”

“Today’s your first day?”

“And probably my last.” Elyan shook his head. “My sister got me this job—she’s going to flip.” Merlin’s stomach did the same. “Why?”

“I’m supposed to look after you.”

“You did. You still are.”

“Put a word in for me then?”
“Of course.”

Elyan sighed with relief though whether Merlin’s word would hold any sway was a matter of conjecture.

Upon arrival back at the Confinement Centre, doors were gently opened and closed. Concerned voices, barely above a whisper, sent orders for clothes to be washed and broth to be administered. Hours passed before Merlin was left in restless peace.

Lying on his bed, staring at the blank white ceiling, hearing not listening to the muted noises of activity beyond his door, Merlin had some rare time to think. By virtue of his genetics, some interviews and questionnaires, Merlin had in the space of days become a very important person, one for whom exceptions were regularly made.

In some respects, Merlin’s life back in Ealdor had been like that and for the most part it hadn’t felt like a good thing.

He wasn’t so sure this new life was going to be any different.
Chapter 3

III

“We need to leave now or we’ll be late,” Leon said, reaching for the front-door knob.

Arthur must have checked over his (and Merlin’s) new house a dozen times. He’d already spent two
nights there, making sure everything was in working order; making sure things were exactly right.

“Just take one more look at his room?” he asked Leon. “See what you think.”

Leon was married. He knew about these things—house things.

“It’s fine, Arthur. It’s better than anything he’s been used to—”

“That’s not the point. He’s got to get used to this now.”

Arthur considered he might be going mad. On the one hand, making sure Merlin wouldn’t stumble
upon his secret compartment in the attic fireplace, on the other, worrying about whether Merlin
would like his bedroom.

“You’re nervous,” Leon said.

“Shitting a brick.” Though it wasn’t the ceremony that had his guts churning. “How long do you
think, before he truly hates me, before he gives up trying?” It was a cruel question to ask, especially
of a man who’d grown from mentor into best friend, but he trusted Leon for an honest answer.

“A year at the most if you don’t give him any reasons to like you. The real problem will be if you
end up liking him.”

“I won’t like him. He was chosen for me by a machine.”

“Elyan said—”

Arthur shook his head. He didn’t want to know, and even if he did, not here, not now. They really
ought to leave; get it over and done with. There wasn’t going to be a last-minute intervention. The
Movement wasn’t ready for a coup. They didn’t have their warlock, Arthur’s warlock. The only sure
thing Arthur had was Merlin, and that was worse than having nothing at all.

He was delaying the inevitable when he asked, “Did you check everything? What about the light
bulbs?”

“Twice. I’m absolutely certain, no one’s listening.”

“Then let’s go.”

Leon drove fast. Perhaps he was anxious that in a fit of panic Arthur would try to jump.

As they sped to the Inner Citadel, Arthur couldn’t help reflecting upon the latest intel from Elyan, of
the death of a young man who’d been on probation in the Confinement Centre at the same time as
Merlin—a young man who’d had magic. Security had been stepped up again and there were
whispers in the Council Chambers of returning public executions to the Central Square. Rightly or
wrongly, Arthur took time to mull over what he might have cost the Movement by not arranging for
Merlin’s ‘removal’.
Uther and several officials were waiting for them in the ante-room to the Assembly Hall. Arthur braced himself for the admonition over his tardiness and for the long speech about his many failings. It usually started with Uther clearing the room followed by his throat. Arthur wasn’t to be disappointed.

Uther said, “I know you don’t want any advice from me. I’m going to give you some anyway. This is a big day for Merlin, the biggest. Be kind, if only for the cameras and Merlin’s mother. Don’t spoil it for her; don’t give her cause to worry for her son.”

It was nice to know that Uther cared so much for his people’s feelings, especially Merlin’s and his mother’s. It was surely nothing to do with Merlin being the living proof that scientific selection was the answer for everyone, the way forward to a successful society. The High Commissioner’s only son was marrying a commoner—it was the perfect way of reassuring the public of the impartiality and accuracy of the Compatibility Machines.

Arthur could have asked why Merlin’s mother was only permitted under strict escort to see her son married; why it was necessary to prohibit any further contact. But he wasn’t going to start that argument again and he wasn’t going to dignify his father’s advice with a response.

Uther waited a long moment before he said, “Afterwards,” then paused. It seemed he was having difficulty finding the right words. “This place you go to at night, the nightclub in the Lower Town. It has to stop.” He paused again and sighed. “You have to work at marriage. Everyone does, no matter the circumstances of their betrothal. If you betray Merlin’s trust, you might never be able to win it back and you both have a long life ahead of you.”

It had always been Arthur’s firm belief that Uther’s only concern was for his public image, not his son’s or his future son-in-law’s happiness; that he was determined Arthur’s marriage to Merlin was not perceived by the public to be a failure. However, there was something in the slope of Uther’s shoulders and the dragging lines in the corners of his eyes that made Arthur doubt himself.

He laid his hand upon Uther’s shoulder and said, “If I tell you it’s not my plan to hurt him, will you stay out of our affairs?”

“Of course. I had no intention—”

“I’ll look after him. I promise, father.”

“He’s the one you need to make that promise to. Come on, he’s waiting.”

The intermittent camera flashes were blinding; without the guiding hand of his chaperone at his elbow, Merlin didn’t know how he’d have managed his entrance. He was escorted to the centre of the red-carpeted dais at which point the flashes ceased. There was no music; no sound except the silence of a few hundred people holding their breath. They were all looking at him.

Merlin recognised only three people: High Commissioner Uther Pendragon, Arthur Pendragon, Uther’s Heir Apparent, and his mother. Hunith was wearing a green dress and hat—and a wan smile. Uther was standing sternly in full Camelot Reds next to Arthur, who was similarly attired, though his face was a mask, a breathtakingly handsome mask.
A Breathtakingly Handsome Mask
A shaft of sunlight beamed down through the window above, picking up the gold in Arthur’s hair, making it shine as if it had a luminescence of its own. Merlin was blinded by him in an entirely different way and for a spellbound moment it didn’t seem to matter that Arthur didn’t want him.

They stood, face-to-face, at the front of the hall and repeated the vows that would bind them.

Patience and kindness
This is how love grows
Open heart and mind
This is how love grows
With faith and devotion
This is how love grows

After Arthur placed the ring upon Merlin’s finger, he closed his hand around Merlin’s and held it, bestowing him the smallest trace of a smile. Arthur’s gaze further fuelled the warmth of his touch; it spread through Merlin, swelling from his chest to his cheeks. The affection felt so real Merlin wondered if in the last week Arthur had changed his mind. The smile Merlin returned him was from deep inside and shone with hope.

A woman in a long, blue dress stepped up to the podium and began to sing while Arthur took Merlin’s hand and walked him through the centre of the Assembly Hall, to the applause of his guests.

Hunith didn’t clap. She pressed her fingers to her lips, extended her hand and blew a kiss, her blessing, in Arthur and Merlin’s path. Merlin was too overwhelmed to return it, to tell her one last time to her face that he loved her and that he was sorry for leaving.

Merlin was in a trance.

This is my husband, Arthur Pendragon. We are married. He turned the words over and over, the words that described the many facets of this new and singularly defining aspect of his existence. It would have been unbelievable, except for the band of gold on his finger, which felt unfamiliar, thick and awkward, that said loud and clear this marriage is real.

They toasted in a modest room in the State Building: Arthur, Merlin, Uther and prominent members of the High Council. Merlin shook everyone’s hands, forgetting their names the instant he was introduced to the next person. He’d barely taken a sip of his wine and he was reeling.

As if sensing it, Uther loomed up like a dark cloud behind Merlin, guiding him away from Arthur’s side to the single table in the middle of the room. “Take a seat.”

The hairs on the back of Merlin’s neck stood on end.

Uther sat down next to him, so close their thighs were almost touching. “I have Arthur’s promise that he’ll look after you.”

Merlin nodded.

Uther leaned in closer, too close, and said very quietly, “If he doesn’t, you let me know?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good.”

Merlin shuddered and watched speechless as Uther rose from his chair, gliding slick and seamless, back to his guests. No matter what happened between him and Arthur, Merlin had no intention of
ever uttering a single word of it to Uther. His loyalty was to his husband. He’d made a promise.

“What was that all about?” Arthur said, as if on cue.

“Nothing. Just your dad welcoming me to the family.”

“Already?” Arthur tensed and banged his clenched fist on the back of Merlin’s chair.

Uther Pendragon was terrifying, even when he smiled—in fact, more so when he smiled. Arthur, however, wasn’t one bit terrifying to Merlin even when he looked ready to punch a hole through the wall.

Merlin felt better, well enough to boldly ask, “How long do we have to stay here?”

“You want to leave?”

“Yes. Do you?”

Arthur took a small, black device from his pocket and before Merlin knew it they were bidding their good-byes and being accompanied to the main doors of the State Building.

* *

In the car, heading home, Arthur calmed and attempted to put his thoughts in order. The first and most important thing he decided was that he’d have to try harder to ensure he didn’t give Merlin reason to smile in his presence. It was disarming in a way that could completely disrupt every resolution he’d made concerning him and this marriage situation.

The second was the none-too-small matter of his father. There was nothing to suggest Merlin was a spy for Uther. He’d done a significant amount of digging in that regard, but he had to be sure Merlin didn’t inadvertently let anything slip, during Sunday lunch—

“This is it? This is your house?” Merlin pressed his hands and face against the car window as Leon pulled onto the drive.


They weren’t going on a honeymoon. Those were a thing of the past, from the days when the wedding night was the culmination of a courtship. Nowadays, the courtship was meant to begin after the wedding ceremony.

Leon deposited Merlin’s two suitcases in the hallway. He shook Merlin’s hand before turning to Arthur and pulling him close. “Good luck,” he whispered.

“Thank you. I’m going to need it, aren’t I?”

“Yes, I think you are.”

Leon departed, leaving Arthur alone with Merlin, who was turning a slow circle in the centre of the hallway, his face tilted up to the zigzag of the stairs. “All this, just for us?”

“For now. I’ve declined our entitlement to a housekeeper, so I hope you’re up to sharing domestic duties.”

“You mean housework?” Merlin was grinning stupidly. Frankly, Arthur didn’t see what was funny.
“Yes.”

“You are going to do housework?” Merlin asked again. This time his eyebrows shot up and he actually sniggered.

“We’re going to do half each. I don’t want strangers snooping around the house.”

“Have you done it before? *Housework*?”

Arthur reconsidered. Merlin’s grin was becoming an irritation. Obviously, he had a lot to learn about life in Camelot, but he was supposed to be intelligent. This Merlin was an idiot. That’s what happened when a machine used a bunch of code and tick boxes on a questionnaire to match two living, breathing people—highly trained soldiers got lumbered with country bumpkin blithering idiots.

“For your information, *Merlin*, in the Camelot Reds soldiers share equally in every aspect of domestic duty. For the first three years of my service, I was resident in barracks. I am quite familiar with the use of a mop and bucket. I also have more than adequate culinary skills. What about you? Have you ever wielded anything other than … a pitch fork?”

Arthur might have admitted his tone was somewhat sanctimonious. He didn’t think what he’d said was particularly crushing but Merlin’s face fell and he replied softly, “I helped my mum around the house. She couldn’t do everything on her own.”

*Shit.* If Merlin cried Arthur would be done for.

“She’ll get help, now you’re here,” Arthur said. It was the way things were done. Merlin’s mother had lost her only son, so in return she’d get a better income and extra help if she needed it. “Why don’t I show you the rest of the house then you can get changed?”

Merlin was quiet after that. He followed Arthur without remark except for insisting he carry his suitcases up the stairs himself. Arthur left him sitting on the edge of his brand new bed, tugging at the laces of his shiny black shoes—and Arthur’s traitorous heartstrings.

There was coffee in the pantry and steak in the fridge. They had a television and access to every broadcast channel in Albion. The following week, Merlin would enrol at the University and Arthur would continue with his political and military training. Theirs was to be a comfortable life.

Nonetheless, it had been eleven days since Arthur had seen his sister with no idea of when he could engineer another illicit visit and Merlin had said his final farewell to his mother knowing he would never see her again.

If life was full of losses and gains, Arthur paused to wonder how Merlin’s balance sheet compared to his.

Perhaps they weren’t so different after all.
Lunch was a long hour when spent alone. Merlin ate his sandwich sitting on a bench overlooking the lake. By the time he was finished, the bracing November air had numbed his fingers.

He hadn’t assumed being married to Arthur would automatically make him popular. Neither had he imagined it would make him a social pariah. Merlin didn’t understand why no one wanted to associate with him and so far no one had taken the trouble to enlighten him. The rejections were polite and swift, with no redress. It wouldn’t have been like that in Ealdor. The kids at school and later the workers at the farm factory were only too happy to tell Merlin, in no uncertain terms, why he would never fit in there. *You think you’re better than us. You’re too clever for your own good. You can’t keep your smart mouth shut. You’re all brains and no common sense.* That was the least of it.

With forty minutes to kill until his afternoon lecture, Merlin pushed up to go for a walk, to get his blood circulating back to his fingers and toes. The University of Camelot campus sat around a small, circular lake, consisting of roughly twenty faculty buildings facing the water. Between the buildings there were footpaths and flowerbeds and places to sit sheltered by trees and alcoves. It was a pleasant place to be when there were no welcoming seats in the canteen.

Sidestepping groups of students walking in the opposite direction, Merlin strolled the winding path, stopping in front of the first building he came to—the Faculty of Chemistry. He knew the ground floor very well; in the last few weeks he’d already spent many extra hours in the labs in a bid to catch up with the other Freshers. The floors above were the domain of professors, none of whom bore the name Merlin had been looking for. The fifth floor, at the top, was a mystery; the directory in the foyer a blank. If the man Merlin was looking for was still here, perhaps that was where he would find him.

Merlin took the stairs, cautiously at first, bounding two at a time the nearer he got to his destination. He was sweating beneath his thick woollen coat and scarf by the time he reached the door that opened into the echoing hush of the fifth floor corridor. It was deserted, apart from a few old desks littered with dusty papers and books. Merlin wandered its length, passing doors that opened into empty rooms. The last door, however, was closed and on the wall outside a tarnished, brass plaque said *Professor Gaius.* Beyond, Merlin could hear the low crooning of orchestral music. He was in there! Stomach aflutter, Merlin knocked and opened the door.

The room was vast and crammed to the ceiling with books, bottles and boxes—on shelves, stacked on the floor and toppling over the side of a long, wide desk.

“Hello? Professor Gaius?”

A second door on the other side of the room was ajar. Next to it a radio perched on a shelf—the source of the soothing melody Merlin had heard before venturing in. From behind it, a gruff voice shouted, “No one should be up here. Go away.”

Merlin was undeterred—he’d spent his whole life being an annoyance. “Then what are *you* doing up here?” he called back.

There was a pause before a white-haired, sturdy old man appeared, wearing a long tunic and fingerless gloves, carrying a teapot. When he saw Merlin his eyebrows formed an angry ‘V’. “A
smart Alec. A Fresher no doubt. Yes, I’m Gaius. What do you want?”

“My mother, Hunith, told me you’d be here. She said you were friends, many years ago, before the war. I’m Merlin.”

Gaius froze, as if time had stopped for him and him alone. The teapot threatened to slip from his aged fingers; Merlin lunged forward in time to catch the spout and set it on the desk. The sudden motion must have jolted Gaius back into action as he juddered, leaned in close with his watery eyes narrowed and said, “Merlin,” like the word itself was a memory. “Merlin? Hunith’s boy?”

“Yes.”

A light went on; Gaius smiled and pulled Merlin into an embrace that was unexpectedly crushing for a man his age. “Merlin! What are you doing here?”

“I’m studying at the University. I thought I’d pay you a visit,” Merlin said brightly, cheered that for the first time since his wedding someone looked pleased to see him.

It didn’t last. Gaius’ considerable jowls fell and his frown returned. “No, no. In Camelot. Why are you in Camelot?”

“I’m married, to Arthur Pendragon, for over a month now. You didn’t see it on the television?”

“I don’t own a television.”

“In the newspapers?”

“I haven’t read a newspaper in twenty years.” Gaius reached into a tatty cardboard box beside the teapot, extracting two mugs as he pondered, “Married?”

Merlin wasn’t sure if he was asking for confirmation or if this recent turn of events was taking a long time to sink in.

“Yes, married. I volunteered to go out of county.” From the grimace on Gaius’ face, the news hadn’t gone down well. Merlin was beginning to spot an unfortunate pattern. He decided on a change of subject. “Mum said I might find you here, though she didn’t know if you were still alive.”

Gaius motioned towards a chair. Merlin moved several hefty tomes from the seat to the floor and sat down as Gaius passed him a mug.

“Still alive,” Gaius said, like it was an inconvenience. “I don’t go out much. I don’t like those wretched televisions. Bullshit boxes, that’s what I call them.”

Merlin laughed and in turn the old man softened.

Sitting down on the only other chair, Gaius said, “Tell me, Merlin, how are you? Are you quite well?”

“Fine.” It was an unusually personal question to ask someone he’d just met. Merlin supposed it was because Gaius had been there when Merlin was a baby, when he was born early and everyone thought he’d grow up deficient. With no further remark about it from Gaius, Merlin continued, “I mean, there’s so much to learn but I’m getting there. I’ve only been lost once this week. I’ve got the hang of the PayCard and the buses and I’ve started a photography class on a Thursday evening.”

Merlin hadn’t realised until he began, how much he missed talking. He was comfortable in the
armchair; while Gaius listened, little by little Merlin recounted the wedding, the lay of his new house, the many subjects he was studying and how excited he was to be getting an education. He avoided telling Gaius anything that might put Arthur in a bad light, which was almost everything about him, and Gaius didn’t ask.

It wasn’t until Merlin lifted his mug to his lips to take a sip of his lukewarm tea that he realised how much time had passed. “Oh no! I’ve missed half my Cultural History lecture. I have to go!” he said, jumping to his feet.

“That old fart Geoffrey still teaching it?” Gaius asked dismissively.

“Yes.”

“Don’t bother. Come and see me when you’ve got time. I can tell you what you need to know.”

“Really? That would be great. Yes, great.”

“Then I’ll look forward to seeing you again. Come up here whenever you like.”

Gaius’ fond expression had smoothed his brow; it was almost impossible to imagine this was the same person Merlin had barged in on an hour earlier.

With a spring in his step, Merlin left Gaius and headed straight for the library. He’d pass a few hours reading and writing. He had a lot of ground to make up compared to his peers. Later, he would reward his labour by perusing the rows and rows of bookshelves with no intent on a particular title, joyful to be surrounded by bountiful knowledge.

Finally, it felt like things were looking up.

It had been dark a few hours when the bus dropped Merlin at the end of the street. He showed his identity card to the Red on the corner and walked around the barrier, past the houses that looked almost identical to the one he shared with Arthur, the rest of the way home.

In the daytime, Merlin had seen children playing outside. These houses were allocated to *Fertiles or Class A Infertiles* with higher level professions. One of the houses belonged to Arthur’s friend, Leon, who was a bodyguard and driver for Uther. He was married but Merlin knew nothing of his wife or whether they had children.

Lower classes of childless couples, as well as singles, were allocated far more modest accommodations than these, in a different sub-division, as befitting their status. That was one of the many regulations instituted after The Great Purge, and it had met with no resistance. With fertility levels at a meagre twenty per cent and the country’s infrastructure in danger of collapse, drastic measures to support the successful upbringing of the city’s diminished number of children had been imperative.

Merlin’s shoulder bag was heavy, a dozen more books on top of the two folders he’d left the house with that morning. Hefting it over his other shoulder, he dug the keys out from his jacket pocket and went in to the empty house. Arthur wasn’t home yet. He’d worked late practically every night since the wedding and when he didn’t work late he went over to Leon’s to play cards. Merlin wasn’t invited.

Merlin went straight upstairs to his room, dumped his bag, kicked off his shoes and flopped down on his giant bed. The house was unsettlingly quiet. Reaching for the radio on the bedside table, Merlin turned the dial through station after station. He wasn’t in the mood for a play or the news or an orchestra. He craved something light, something he could tap his foot to, maybe sing along. The
music popular in Ealdor was only played on weekends here. Anyway, Merlin didn’t really want to listen to that.

Instead of moping in his room, he settled on going downstairs to watch the television. There were plenty of channels, showing many different sorts of films, and sports and interesting documentaries. In Ealdor, there had only been three channels, which fed the populace a bland diet of soap, game shows and a smattering of inconsequential ‘news’. Merlin hadn’t minded it at the time; he hadn’t known anything else. Things were different now.

Before descending the stairs, Merlin lingered in his doorway. Across the landing was Arthur’s bedroom, door locked. There was no lock on Merlin’s door. As if Merlin wasn’t already aware of the inequity in their relationship, Arthur had to slap him in the face with it. He hated him a little bit for that. The kernel of resentment that had lodged in Merlin’s gut that first night hadn’t budged, when Arthur had pulled off his wedding ring and left Merlin in his room with a curt, “I want to get one thing straight—you’ve got your life and I’ve got mine. The only time there’s a ‘we’ is when the obligations of our respective positions demand it.” Since then, they’d barely spent ten consecutive minutes in each other’s company.

Arthur wasn’t mean or cruel (a condescending prat, maybe). He was bitter about being forced into marriage and the trappings it came with. He’d never said that he found Merlin unattractive or that he wasn’t his type. He’d never said he would be ashamed to be seen with him. Merlin took some solace from that. The match had to be right. Arthur just didn’t want to be married to anyone yet. He would change his mind eventually.

In the meantime, another lonely weekend loomed.

After the brightness of the entrance, Arthur had to wait for his eyes to adjust to the low lights in the nightclub. He took his time, scanning the place, looking without moving his head, only his eyes, to give the impression he wasn’t looking. Gregory, as Arthur knew him, was sitting at the end of the bar in his usual spot. When he saw Arthur, he downed his drink and meandered across the dance floor. He didn’t look in Arthur’s direction and Arthur didn’t look in his.

It was busy at The Tavern. Friday was wages day for the blue collars and there was no work tomorrow. This place was a favourite haunt, especially for men who liked men. The drinks were cheap, if of dubious quality, the music was loud, but not too loud, and there were enough dark alcoves for all manner of intimacy. Arthur ordered a vodka shot, downed it and headed for the toilets.

Gregory was leaning against a sink, eyeing Arthur’s crotch. “Miss me?” he said, his green eyes shining.

Arthur barked out a laugh. “You have no idea. Come on. Last cubicle’s empty.” He grabbed one of Gregory’s belt loops and coaxed him to the far end of the room.

There was one other man in the toilets, pissing into a urinal. He didn’t turn around—but there was no doubt in Arthur’s mind that he’d seen them.

Gregory wedged himself in the space to the side of the toilet while Arthur locked the door. The cubicle was hardly big enough for both of them, particularly when they were trying to get undressed. Everything, right down to their underwear, had to be exchanged. Arthur’s pale blue jeans swapped for brown corduroys, his shirt for a t-shirt, a black jacket for a khaki. That was the easy part. The
next part was a trial in pain, which was in its own way a blessing. The noises they made would, to anyone outside the cubicle, sound like they were doing, well, whatever two men in the toilet cubicle of a seedy nightclub did.

Gregory extracted two vials from the pocket inside his jacket. There was no preamble. They’d got this down to a fine art. They downed their potions and waited with their arms around each other, forehead to forehead, for balance and strength.

The transformation was as swift as it was agonising. When it was done, Arthur was looking at the image of himself, flushed and sweaty. The man standing in front of him—Gregory—would go and sit at a quiet table in the corner of the bar. He’d be polite, but he wouldn’t invite company or conversation. He’d stay there a couple of hours, watching the other patrons, drowning his sorrows. If anyone was asked, Arthur imagined they’d say, “That bloke in the corner? That’s Arthur Pendragon, but it’s no good thinking you’ll get anything out of him. He already hooked up with a twink earlier on in the evening. Don’t know who he was, hadn’t seen him here before, and he’s gone now.”

Meanwhile, Arthur, looking like a slender teen with dark brown, wavy hair and pale green eyes, left The Tavern and ambled away through the Lower Town. The boarded-up Evermore Hotel was at the far end of a largely derelict street. The whole area had long been earmarked for demolition but the money from the Inner Citadel rarely trickled down to this part of the city. Instead, a circle of guards closely policed who came and went as part of a less-than-subtle quarantine. Arthur walked unimpeded around to the back, stepping over the bags of rubbish in the alleyway, and quick-fire knocked on the fire exit door.

Morgause was waiting.

“Arthur,” she said, clutching his arm, “at last.”

“I got here as soon as I could.”

They went upstairs, to the rooms Morgana and Morgause lived in. There was a long coat, fur trim on the collar, and a pair of battered boots, flung in the corner next to a box of Solana. That meant Cenred was somewhere about. Arthur found him boorish but he was the go-to man in the Lower Town for contraband. He had smuggling routes that ran the length and breadth of Albion. If Cenred couldn’t get it through Camelot’s walls, no one could. They needed him for that. Morgause, however, also wanted him for reasons Arthur didn’t care to dwell on. Cenred looked like he washed twice a year at best.

Morgause didn’t waste any time. “Is it true? We had a magic-user in the Confinement Centre?”

“That’s what Elyan says. He was from the Western Counties, a tin-mining town.” Elyan hadn’t been able to give Arthur any more information than that. No one in the vicinity of the incident had witnessed anything out of the ordinary.

“How did we not know about this? We should have protected him. Instead, he was outed by your dearly beloved. Another one dead…” her voice trailed off. Morgause was gaunt and ghostly. When she was like this, agitated, grieving, she sometimes didn’t eat for days. Every death cut her to the bone, as if it were her own kin slaughtered.

“It was out of my control.” Arthur felt responsible, nonetheless. He meant no accusation when he said, “If you didn’t know he was there… How is that even possible?”

“Low ability, healer. No telepathic powers. It’s not that difficult to keep magic abilities a secret if you don’t use them, no matter what any of those idiots in the government say. Maybe he wanted to
integrate and thought he could get away with it. Who knows?” Angrily, she asked, “How is the new toy, anyway?”

“Don’t call him that. From what I can tell, he seems fine. Bogged down with university work, comes home at a sensible time every night, doesn’t drink and eats twice as much as I thought he would. He’s untidy but he’s quiet. That’s all I’ve got.”

Ironically, in the process of studiously avoiding him, Arthur had come to know the particulars of Merlin’s comings, goings and personal habits, not to mention the geography of his skin, in excruciating detail—just like a good spy would.

Merlin bathed on a Sunday night and boldly crossed the landing with nothing but a towel around his slender waist, while his raven hair dripped water down his shoulders and flanks. The urge to taste the moisture from his warm, flushed skin had been as tempting as if it was ambrosia.

Arthur had been caught out twice, which was twice too often—and ever since, somehow, not enough.

That aside, that Merlin still spent his free time alone, even after a month in Camelot, hadn’t escaped Arthur’s notice. The light had gone from Merlin’s smile. His sharp retorts, that had from the get-go amused Arthur far more than they annoyed him, had lost their bite. He slept late at the weekends and still looked tired.

Merlin was lonely. It hurt Arthur to see it, just as it would anyone with an ounce of humanity.

Morgana’s voice preceded her entrance. “Arthur! You’re here at last!” She came striding in with her arms open wide. “Gone for the Celtic look tonight?”

“Like it?” he said.

“Well, you’re very handsome but I prefer blonds.”

Arthur held her close, breathing in the dusky floral scent she dabbed on her neck. Cenred would have supplied it. Morgause would have asked him to get it for her. As always, Arthur came to Morgana empty-handed. It was too much of a risk for him to be carrying perfume or tea through the security gates that delineated the Lower Town from the Upper. Arthur was too well-known. Questions would be asked. He had to satisfy himself that the information he brought, and his company, were enough to sustain her. Morgana looked drawn and pale, and winter wasn’t fully upon them yet. Heat and food weren’t going to be enough to bring the colour to her cheeks.

“When was the last time you slept?” Arthur asked.

“Last night.”

“Liar.”

“I did. For a few hours.” Morgana sat on the end of the Chesterfield under the blacked-out window. The flickering light from the oil lamp on the table beside her cast grim shadows across her face—a fractured picture show of her tormented mind. While Morgana, like Morgause, was grieving for the lost magic-user, the demands of her abilities were also taking their toll. Her dreams were vivid and sometimes terrifying. They often made no sense or their meaning would take weeks or months to be revealed.

Arthur sat down beside her and Morgause pulled up a rickety wooden chair.
“Is Cenred joining us tonight?” Arthur asked.

“No,” said Morgause. “He’s out, finding us fuel.”

She meant nothing by it. Nonetheless, Arthur bristled. That it was Cenred taking care of them, not him, was a constant torment. No matter what he did, what risks he took, it never felt like enough.

The three of them held hands, joining together in a triangle, to strengthen the magic. Arthur closed his eyes and attempted to relax. When they first did this he thought it would help if he deliberately tried to recall things that might be important. Experience taught them that Morgana had the most success if Arthur simply opened his mind and let her in to wander free. It was best to let Morgana decide what she needed.

Since the last time they were together, over a month ago, Arthur, as always, had dedicated significant energy into intel-gathering. He read all the reports that crossed his desk where his contemporaries would skim and sign and pass along. He ate his lunch in the Chambers Restaurant and made sure to mingle, to engage in conversation with as many members as he could. In the afternoons, Arthur continued to train with the Reds, running drills and sharing a drink or two in the mess. Once a week, he suffered his father’s company for dinner and never turned down an engagement that included the presence of any members of the scientific community or the ruling classes.

This dedicated activity marked Arthur among the High Council, the military and the civilians that crossed his path as a true man of the people, someone who didn’t take for granted the privileges of his birth and position. Then there were Arthur’s purported extra-curricular activities, which in a perverse way, probably did the same.

There again, though no one expressly said anything to his face, there were a lot of people who vehemently disapproved. Arthur knew a sidelong glance when he got one, and what it was to be regarded with ill-disguised scorn. He also knew how to ignore it. That was a lesson he’d learned a long, long time ago.

“You’re tense, Arthur. I feel like you’re holding back,” said Morgana.

“Not holding back. I’m tired.”

Morgana shifted closer and put her head on his shoulder. “You’re sad. I can tell. More than usual.”

Morgause squeezed his hand. “I’m sorry. I don’t blame you for any of this and we’d have no chance without you.”

Arthur was about to reply, to tell her she mustn’t worry about him, when Morgana stiffened and inhaled a loud, shocked gasp.

Together, Arthur and Morgause exclaimed, “What is it?”

Morgana’s eyes shifted wildly, seeing something distressing that they couldn’t. “I can’t—”

Morgause came to her side and soothed her, holding her, gentling her from her frenzy.

It was already late in the evening. Arthur couldn’t afford Morgana more time. He urged, “You have to tell me.”

Morgana shook her head, resisting.

“Morgana, please.”
The vision, or whatever it was Morgana was sensing, did not abate. She was trapped in its grasp as surely as Arthur was clutching her arm, insistent she tell him what was frightening her.

“There’s blood on your hands, Arthur, so much blood.” Her words came out reedy and sharp upon each of her anxious breaths.

“Whose blood?”

“I don’t know. I can’t see. It’s not your blood … not by your hand.”

“Try Morgana.”

Morgause said, “You can do it, darling. I’ll guide you.” She whispered words of magic into Morgana’s ear that Arthur couldn’t understand. The air in the room grew cloying, thick and oppressive, and Morgana’s head fell to her chest.

Sometimes Morgana’s visions came in the form of sounds or smells or sensations. Each of her senses were open to receive though rarely all at once. Arthur watched her with her eyes closed, her frown the only indication of her internal struggle. It pained him to sit by doing nothing but wait, but he was powerless to help.

At last, Morgana lifted her face as her shoulders slumped. She said sadly, “I couldn’t see.”

There was something more that she wasn’t saying. The sight of blood alone wasn’t enough to make her tremble. “You felt something,” he said. “Whose blood was it?”

“I don’t know. You crowded me out, Arthur. You were very upset.” Morgana set her mouth in a tight line, deciding she was going to say no more.

Arthur squeezed her hand, too hard. “There’s something else,” he said. He wouldn’t relent and she knew it.

She paused, breathing shakily. “I can only tell you this, my sweet, sweet brother. I’m so sorry but you’re going to lose someone. Someone you love very deeply.”

The list wasn’t very long. Arthur would lay down his life first for each of them. “When? When is it going to happen?” he said. His mouth became too dry to swallow.

“I don’t know,” she said, taking his face in her hand.

Morgause reached across for him too. “It’s a vision, Arthur. It could mean many things. It doesn’t necessarily mean a death.”

The words were well-intentioned but couldn’t temper Arthur’s anguish.

Morgause steadfastly refused to give him Solana. Instead, she pressed a tumbler of Cenred’s precious rum into his palm and kissed his head.

Time passed quickly. More than ever, on this night, Arthur hated to leave. He hated the look on Morgana’s face, her harrowed expression as she scrutinised him, looking for the face of the Arthur she knew as a boy. He wanted to curl on the sofa, put his head in her lap like he used to do when they were younger, when their only concern was what to watch on the television.

Morgana sensed it, like she always did. The years had strengthened her magic as well as her spirit and mind. She curled into Arthur’s side and let him put his arm around her.
When they were children, Morgana’s sensitivity was a gift, nothing more—until it was a curse that could not be tolerated. The recollection of the day Uther had Morgana quietly escorted from their house had left a deep scar. Arthur was told she was going away, to a school on one of the Western Isles, and was then to be married to the Governor there. Through his bedroom window he’d sorrowfully looked down and caught her eye, before she was pushed sobbing into the chauffeured car.

A part of Arthur he’d not previously had to acknowledge had always known that Morgana had magic. Watching Morgana disappear from his life, his eyes were opened and with fierce conviction, like a kraken awakening, Arthur vowed that he would return magic and Morgana to Camelot, over his father’s dead body if need be. He’d been only twelve years old at the time, yet in the ten years since, his conviction hadn’t once faltered.

It never made the news, that it had been impossible to accurately identify the charred remains found on the back seat of the car. Uther had seemed satisfied it was Morgana; that his daughter was dead. Arthur refused to believe it. Then, as the years wore on, the doubts crept in and he began to wonder if it had been Uther’s plan all along, to dispose of his inconvenient sorceress.

They’d been bleak years, not knowing for sure whether Morgana was alive or dead.

It was well past midnight when Morgana suddenly sat bolt upright, interrupting Arthur’s deepening melancholy as she said, “I have a name.”

Morgause, sprawled sleepily on the armchair, jerked into alertness.

Joy had been as rare and precious as tea and perfume in this abandoned section of the Lower Town. When it appeared, it shone. “He’s close,” Morgana said. “He’s coming to find you, Arthur. I can’t see him, but I feel him.”

Arthur was wound too tight to speak.

Morgana smiled with tender care, her eyes shocking and bright like a sunny sky in the depths of winter. “Your warlock, your destiny—his name is Emrys.”
Arthur wasn’t home when Merlin went to bed. The next morning, emerging from his bedroom, Merlin saw Arthur’s door was ajar. Through that narrow aperture he saw Arthur’s covered, motionless form in the dim dawning light, heard the steady in and out of his breathing. Merlin paused a while, postponing the bathroom to watch Arthur sleeping, to stare at his golden hair erupting from the top of his bedclothes. Arthur’s face was out of sight; Merlin had to be content with imagining it, devoid of the daytime’s tautness, soft and slack—ten feet and a league away.

Arthur was still asleep when Merlin left the house half an hour later, with his new camera, purchased using his monthly credit allowance (more than he and his mother had lived on in a year in Ealdor). He’d also treated himself to a remote flash, a case with a long strap and ten rolls of film. All that, and he still had credit over. Not that Merlin had anything to spend it on. He didn’t go out in the evenings because he didn’t have anyone to go out with. Gaius didn’t seem the sort for the cinema or a restaurant and he didn’t want his first time to be on his own.

Giving a nod to the guard, Percy, at the end of the street, Merlin walked towards the park. Merlin had seen him on duty several times now. The man was unforgettable, namely because he was the size of a house. Unlike some of the others who seemed to take their positions far too seriously, fingers dancing over their triggers like there might be an insurgence any second, Percy was always armed first and foremost with a warm smile and friendly wave.

There was a lake at the centre of the park with rowboats retired for the winter, tied up alongside a locked-up cabin. The air was still; the glassy surface of the lake water reflected a mirror image of the trees at its margin and the clouds in the sky above. In the playground there were a few children; on the footpaths adults jogged or walked.

Merlin found a quiet spot beneath a tree and sat at the base of the trunk, on the shaft of an exposed root, and watched. He was still learning how to frame a scene, how to use the camera effectively and wanted to make sure he captured the best of the view. The teacher at his class had said it would take many shots to get one good one—Merlin understood that—but he was naturally loath to waste his film.

He hadn’t been there long when a couple walked past him, a man and a woman holding hands. They were talking and smiling and when the woman looked across at the man she seemed completely besotted. She was clearly in love. Merlin wondered how long it had taken after their match to find their way to happiness.

Children across Albion were taught that in the past it had often been a humiliating and heart-breaking experience, trying to find the right partner. Mistakes were made. Unhappy marriages spilled their misery into the community and worse, into the hearts and minds of innocent children. In a decimated population, these kinds of errors were tantamount to disaster. Government-controlled matching had, in theory, taken away the risk and guaranteed a lifetime of happiness. No one in his right mind could object to that, surely?

Perhaps Merlin had been naïve. When he’d volunteered for marriage out of county, he’d expected to be matched with someone prepared to make a commitment to whoever he was found, to work at their relationship, just as he was. It was a rude awakening, marrying Arthur.

In the end, Merlin took a few pictures of the landscape, focussing on the bare-limbed trees and the
fallen leaves. He was too cold to be outside for long. Dragging his feet, knowing Arthur wouldn’t be there, Merlin reluctantly trudged back to the house.

Merlin stood for a while at the bottom of the steps, before pushing open the front door, wishing for something different this weekend, just for once. He stepped into the hallway to hear the radio on in the kitchen, broadcasting the rousing timbre of marching band. Arthur was home! This was Merlin’s chance. Without taking off his coat he strode straight down the hallway and into the kitchen, forcing his smile as wide as it would go.

“Good afternoon!”

“Hello, Merlin,” Arthur said flatly. He was sitting at the table and didn’t look up. There were three guns in front of him, a selection of small brushes, some rags and a dark-glass bottle Merlin guessed was a cleaning fluid.

Although Arthur’s dismal response wasn’t a good start, greater things had come from smaller beginnings. Merlin couldn’t think of any at that particular juncture because Arthur was there, right in front of him and making no moves to go anywhere. This was the gift Merlin had been waiting for. Merlin put his coat on the back of the chair opposite and sat down. Luring Arthur into a conversation wasn’t going to be easy. Merlin had to think fast.

“What are you doing?”

With a loud and frankly overdone sigh, Arthur said, “What does it look like?”

“I can see you’re cleaning handguns. I meant, why do you have them?”

“For protection.”

“Aren’t we safe here? I thought with the guards on the end of the street and the locks—”

Arthur looked up, blue eyes piercing and earnest. Merlin’s heart slammed against his chest.

“We’re safe,” Arthur said. “This is just a precaution.”

Arthur deftly took one of the guns to pieces, four black metal parts spread out on the cloth, with the cartridge of bullets to one side. He began by cleaning the inside of one of the tubular pieces, sliding a soft brush that looked like a tiny toothbrush on a stick in and out.

Merlin had never been this close to a firearm or seen one disassembled. “Can I help you?” he ventured, reaching across—

“Don’t touch anything!” Arthur snapped, his hand clamping around Merlin’s wrist before he had a chance to make contact with a single piece. Merlin withdrew but Arthur held on. “Unless you know they’re not loaded, you never—” He shook his head and loosened his grip. “Firearms are dangerous.” Finally releasing his hold, Arthur said more gently, “Don’t touch anything, all right?”

With his face burning as if he’d been slapped, Merlin nodded. He closed his hand around the offended skin on his wrist. Arthur hadn’t hurt him. Merlin’s shock came from the speed of Arthur’s reaction—he’d retained the alertness of a soldier despite going to the government offices for most of his working week.

While Merlin had the chance to study him further, he noticed that Arthur had also retained his soldier’s physique. The tantalising stretch of his thin jumper hinted of the contours of Arthur’s broad shoulders and muscular chest—that Merlin hadn’t had the pleasure of seeing, let alone touching.
Merlin had thought about them though, a lot. He’d thought longingly about all the hidden contours of Arthur’s body. And now the lingering heat on his face was for an altogether different reason.

After giving everything a last wipe, Arthur started putting the gun back together. Merlin watched carefully without comment. There was a tube that went into the shell of what Merlin thought was the barrel then he inserted the spring inside that. Next he slid those three pieces onto the handle and clicked it into place. Once finished with the assembly, without the bullets, Arthur pointed the gun upwards and pulled the trigger. Lastly, he repeated the action while holding the sliding part down and seeming satisfied with the result, set the empty firearm to one side.

While Arthur began disassembling the next gun, Merlin asked, “Tell me what the pieces are called?”

Arthur pointed to each in turn. “Slide, recoil spring, barrel.” He didn’t ask Merlin to go away and he didn’t tell him he was being annoying. That was all the encouragement Merlin needed. Quizzing Arthur on the construction and operation of firearms, the relative merits of different types and anything else that came to mind, Merlin was able to keep the conversation going throughout the cleaning of the second gun.

If Arthur thought he was boring Merlin he was sorely mistaken. If he was dropping a hint with his huffs and sighs that Merlin was being a nuisance he was wasting his time. Merlin knew perfectly well how to take a hint—that didn’t mean he would.

Arthur was reassembling the second pistol when Merlin dared to ask, “Would you teach me how to do that?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because a little knowledge can be worse than none at all.”

“So show me properly,” Merlin persisted, “how to load and fire and clean it and everything.”

Arthur looked appalled. “Why would you need to know how to use a gun?”

“What if someone broke in while you’re not here?” Merlin added quietly, “You’re hardly ever here.”

Arthur paused, halfway through checking the second gun. He held it loosely in his palm, like it was an extension of his hand, like it was second nature to have it there. He was considering Merlin’s question, not dismissing it, and Merlin wasn’t quite sure what to make of that.

“If someone were to break in, which is highly unlikely, and you happened to be here…” Arthur deliberated. “You should let them take whatever they want.”

“What if they want to take me?”

Arthur honked out a laugh. He sounded like a donkey—an ass, Merlin scowled which made Arthur laugh harder. Prat, stupid prat. It took him an age to calm from his ugly hee-hawing. Merlin consoled himself that Arthur’s life must be pretty thin on fun for him to be so amused. It had been a question worth asking, Merlin hadn’t really considered before that as Arthur’s husband he might be vulnerable. He’d gone about his business unhindered since he was married and no one had said he shouldn’t.

“If someone tries to kidnap you and you can’t get away from them, go quietly,” Arthur said, making no attempt to straighten his prattish face.
“Oh, you’d love that, wouldn’t you? It wouldn’t surprise me if you’re already hatching a plan to have someone bump me off when I’m least expecting it.”

Merlin was joking, sort of, but Arthur had already used up his paltry supply of mirth. “Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. Nothing bad’s going to happen to you. If you’re worried—”

“I’m not.”

“Good.”

Arthur’s nostrils flared and he might not have said it but Merlin knew exactly what invective was on the tip of his tongue. *Idiot.* Well, that might be, but at least Merlin wasn’t a dickhead.

They sat in silence as Arthur moved on to the third and final gun. Merlin would have flounced off in a huff except he didn’t want to give Arthur the satisfaction. Nor did he want to waste this rare chance he’d got to stare at Arthur’s hands at work and his face deep in concentration, because while Arthur was lacking in mirth, Merlin was completely lacking in a modicum of self-respect.

Every so often, Arthur’s hair would fall forward over his forehead. He’d sweep it away with the back of his wrist and seconds later it would fall down again. Merlin was very close—close enough he could reach across the table and brush Arthur’s hair off his face. He didn’t. He put his hands under his thighs, because sitting on them was the only way to stop himself doing something that was going to piss Arthur off and ruin this quality time they were having together.

Arthur was wiping over the last piece when the telephone rang. It was a modern, dark green affair with the numbers arranged in a square of push-buttons instead of a rotary dial like the one Merlin used to have in Ealdor. Merlin hadn’t used it yet though he would have liked to. Arthur seemed to hate the thing.

It wasn’t for me,” Merlin said after the fourth ring. “I don’t know anyone except you.”

“It’s probably my father,” Arthur griped, standing with the reluctance of a man walking to the noose. He disappeared into the hallway while Merlin leaned back in his chair, to hear Arthur better. He couldn’t make out what Arthur was saying. It sounded like grunts. Perhaps the hearing in his right ear was worse than he thought or perhaps that was how Arthur talked to his father, if it was his father. Merlin gave up and turned his attention to the dismantled gun. He wriggled his fingers; he tapped them on the table. Arthur kept on talking.

In the end, it was too much temptation. Merlin reached over and put the gun back together, the same way Arthur had done. He pulled the trigger, drew back the slide, released and put the gun back on the cloth a full minute before Arthur hung up and came back into the kitchen.

Merlin attempted to warm Arthur’s icy glare with an apologetic grin. “Check it. I did it right. I’m sure I did.”

Arthur did check. He didn’t admonish Merlin either. “You learn fast.”

“I’m good with machines, technical things. I used to repair the machines at the factory I worked in before I came here.”

Arthur looked impressed. At least, he didn’t scoff or snort or pull a silly face. He was placing the
guns in a battered wooden casket when he asked, casually, “If you could have attended Camelot University without having to marry, would you?”

“Everyone has to get married. At least, people like us have to.”

“Do they? Why?” The lightness in his tone was anything but reassuring.

Merlin squirmed. He didn’t know where Arthur was going with this and he didn’t like it. It was a test or a trick or Arthur truly was a Libertine. He’d been out half the night up to goodness-knows-what and perhaps he wanted know what Merlin thought of it.

Swallowing hard, Merlin gave Arthur the only answer he could. “Well, first of all, marriage is the bedrock of a stable society. More importantly, we have to marry because we can have children. It’s our duty. It’s the most efficient way to bring Albion back to full strength.”

Arthur shook his head. He was disappointed with Merlin’s answer, as if Merlin had told him two plus two makes five. “I don’t blame you for volunteering to leave Ealdor, for wanting to go to university. You’re clever and your talents were being wasted but it’s a heavy price to pay, to have to marry and be forced to have children just because you can, and to leave your mother behind.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Strong marriages and families make for a strong nation. We’re one of the few couples that can have children, so we have to have them, to make up for the people that can’t. I didn’t know I was going to end up here, with you. I still trust it was the right match.”

“What a good and obedient student you must have been,” Arthur said mockingly. “Top marks, Merlin.”

Merlin shrank back in his seat, then, like a spring rapidly uncoiling, his hackles rose. How dare Arthur question him like that? He wasn’t the one not taking his vows seriously. “Is this a test? Because I’ve been through this fifty times with the officials in Confinement, and that was after my application.”

“I just want you to be honest.” Arthur leaned forward, his palms flat on the table. This was a test and for the first time in his entire life, Merlin was terrified he didn’t know the right answer.

Did Arthur want Merlin to say out loud that it was wrong to force surrogacy upon fertile girls, no matter the nation’s need? That it wasn’t fair to imprison people in their counties unless they could prove themselves ‘worthy’ of Camelot, or wherever else they might want to go? Men had been hanged for less, their bodies dangled on high posts for the crows to ravage as a reminder of what was considered treason. Or was it really a question of Arthur’s hatred of marriage? What would he have in its place? Promiscuity? Celibacy? No more children?

Merlin wasn’t going to entertain this discussion. He wouldn’t fall into that trap.

Stalling for time, for a way out, Merlin said, “If I answer you one question honestly, will you do the same?”

“It depends. I can’t divulge State secrets.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s got nothing to do with that.”

“Fire away, then,” Arthur said.

“Where did you go last night?”
If Merlin wasn’t mistaken, Arthur flinched before he said dismissively, “To a men’s nightclub in the Lower Town.”

Merlin had half expected Arthur’s answer to be something along those lines. He hadn’t expected it to feel like a punch in the gut. He couldn’t breathe. The reports in the newspapers about those places, hinting about what went on inside… Merlin didn’t want to know any more.

Arthur didn’t even seem to care. “My turn. If you could have moved to Camelot without having to marry, would you?”

Merlin tried his best to keep his voice steady. “It’s a stupid question, given it’s an impossibility for anyone to do that.” Merlin wanted to rage. He wanted to shout at Arthur—that he knew nothing about real life, that he was spoilt and selfish and Merlin was an idiot for thinking he could ever grow to love him. He wanted to punch his stupid crooked tooth right out of his arrogant mouth.

Merlin kicked back his chair and snatched his jacket, about to bolt for his room, away from Arthur and his bullying questions.

Only Arthur wanted his answer and he leapt up, blocking Merlin’s way. “For heaven’s sakes, it’s a hypothetical and very simple question. Did you want to marry?”

“Yes! My answer is yes.”

Arthur stepped back, already looking strangely defeated, but Merlin hadn’t finished. As he pushed past, his whole body shaking, he rammed his palm onto Arthur’s chest and spat out, “I wanted to get married. I wanted to fall in love with someone and have them love me back. But if it’s any consolation, in my worst nightmares I never expected to end up with someone like you.”

Merlin’s answer was as much a surprise to him as it evidently was to Arthur.

Because only half of what he’d said was true, and it wasn’t the half he expected it to be.

Arthur waited a few hours before finally plucking up the courage to tell Merlin of the abundant wonderful news his father had decided to impart over the telephone in the middle of his gun-cleaning session. He hovered at the bottom of the stairs, hand on the banister, one foot on the first step.

The fire of Merlin’s palm on his chest still stung like a brand. Yet it wasn’t fear of another reprisal that was holding Arthur back. It was guilt, for cheating Merlin out of the life he’d signed up for. Merlin didn’t deserve that. But the less attached Merlin was, the easier it would be in the long run to get over Arthur when it was time for him to leave, and the less he knew about Arthur, the less danger he was in should anything go wrong. It was that knowledge that Arthur clung to when he ignored Merlin as he passed him on the stairs or when he caught a glimpse of him buttering toast and had the urge to join him for breakfast.

Unready to face him, knowing he had to, Arthur retreated to the kitchen and made Merlin a cup of tea. Merlin had taken to the luxury beverage immediately, unsurprisingly. The only tea available in the counties was herbal. For something more stimulating, they drank a caffeinated blend of chicory and grain, called Boncafe. It was the closest anyone got to coffee but the taste was rough and only drinkable with a liberal dose of sweetener.

Tentatively, Arthur climbed the stairs, pausing on the landing to listen at Merlin’s door. There was no
sound on the other side. Arthur knocked uncertainly. “Merlin?”

Sounding weary, Merlin said, “What do you want?”

“Can I come in?”

“You can do whatever you like, apparently.”

Merlin was upset about the nightclub. Arthur had known he would be; that he would assume the worst. Arthur had carefully cultivated his sullied reputation for a reason. It was the perfect cover. And now it was the perfect rebuttal.

Arthur pushed the door ajar, a sliver wide enough he could poke his peace-offering through it for Merlin to see. “I made you tea. I have to talk to you.”

“Come in, then.”

Merlin was reclined on the bed, one knee up, a book open on his lap. There was a trace of puffiness around his eyes that Arthur knew was his fault.

Arthur wished he could blame his father for this situation. Uther could have postponed his marriage for another year. If it wasn’t for the insidious way they worked at the Department of Compatibility, Merlin could have been matched to someone who wanted to marry—someone who would cherish his wide, blue eyes and his soft, open smile, someone who would encourage his wit and intellect, someone who would treat him with tenderness and never, ever make him cry.

“You said that tea was for me?” Merlin sat up and crossed his legs.

“Yes.” Arthur handed it to him and stepped back. He wanted to sit on the bed but it felt like an imposition. Merlin was holding the mug to his chest and making no signs of offering Arthur a seat, returning to his book.

Across the room there was a chair tucked under the desk. Arthur turned it around and sat down gingerly, as if fresh from a whipping. “The phone call earlier—it was my father. We’ve got to attend a ball.”

Merlin closed the book and pushed it aside.

“It’s the Annual Mid-Winter in six weeks’ time,” Arthur went on. “We’ll be expected to dance. Together.”

“I don’t know how to dance.”

“Which is why we’ll be getting lessons.”

“Good grief.” Merlin gulped back his tea. Arthur should have put a shot in it; he had some gin knocking about in the back of the larder.

“That’s not all of it,” Arthur said. “Next Saturday a photographer is coming here to take our picture—we’re going to be featured on the programme.”

Merlin looked rightly aghast, before Arthur broke the final piece of news. “Also, we’re to have lunch with my father the day after at the mansion.”

Merlin closed his eyes for a few moments and let out a pained sigh. “Is this how it’s going to be, from now on? We’re going to have to attend engagements?” Merlin didn’t add and pretend how
happy we are. He didn’t need to. Arthur could see it written all over his face.

“I’m afraid so. The honeymoon period is officially over.”

“Some honeymoon,” Merlin said drily. As he slid to the edge of the bed, Arthur caught his eye, watched the corners of his mouth lifting then falling.

From the beginning, Arthur had respected Merlin’s decision to marry out of county. It took no small amount of courage to leave everything behind and venture into the unknown, no matter how miserable your former life was. Watching Merlin pull himself together in the face of rejection, Arthur’s respect burgeoned into admiration. That was all he could afford him. More than that would be too dangerous.

Leon had thought it would take Arthur a year. It had only taken a month to drive Merlin away, to replace the hope in his eyes with anger and hatred. It could have been called a victory, had it not hurt like a defeat.
The chauffeur pulled up promptly at eleven. On the way to the High Chancellor’s Mansion, Merlin sat in the back deliberately wedged up to the door as far from Arthur as he could get, brooding. Earlier that morning, Arthur had furnished him with a sparse and stringent list of suitable topics for discussion at Uther’s lunch table, like Merlin was some kind of fool. Then he’d made sure Merlin was dressed like one for good measure.

According to Merlin’s tutorials at the Confinement Centre, he was clad in what passed in Camelot Society as ‘smart casual’. What a joke. Corduroy trousers, a stiff-collared shirt, a tweed jacket and highly polished shoes—Merlin didn’t know what part of his get-up was casual. That Arthur managed to pull off virtually the same ensemble with such easy aplomb must be down to a lifetime of training. Because it wasn’t genetics, was it? Oh no, they were unquestionably equals, genetically speaking.

Uther was on the steps, waving to greet them as the car pulled up the driveway. He wasn’t wearing a tweed jacket. He was wearing an old cardigan with patches on the elbows. “We’re going to eat in the orangerie. The sun has warmed it beautifully and I thought we’d be more comfortable in there,” Uther said. “You didn’t need to dress up. It’s just us—family.”

“I’ll take my tie off then,” Merlin said, bestowing Arthur a saccharine smile.

Arthur scowled, like he’d been force-fed a lemon.

In the orangerie, a servant, a blue-collar as they were known here, was waiting with a tray of sparkling fruit cocktails more suited to summer. Merlin would have preferred a beer. Fortunately, he wasn’t too fussy when it came to food, or drinks. Uther didn’t seem to go in for asking people what they liked.

The lunch table was positioned in the centre of the room, laid with crisp white linen, heavy silver cutlery and sparkling cut glass. It would have been perfect—were it not for Arthur’s reluctant carcass chilling the balmy air.

They were served roast pork with a variety of vegetables and thick gravy. There was apple sauce, too, which smelled of exotic spice. Merlin’s mouth watered. It was the kind of meal reserved for special occasions at home in Ealdor. He was torn between devouring everything in sight and looking a while longer, savouring the smells and colours on his plate before tasting what promised to be gastronomic bliss.

Arthur was pushing his food around like he’d rather be eating something else entirely, not the meal his father had chosen for them. He cut and chewed and swallowed slowly, not out of appreciation—he was deriving no pleasure from his food—but as if each mouthful was tainted.

Uther attacked his meat, slicing and stabbing at it in case it got away. He chewed quickly and vigorously, swallowing each hurried mouthful with a gulp. His food scarcely touched his lips.

The ladies at the processing factory in Ealdor used to say you could tell how a person would perform in bed by the way they ate their food. It made sense. Merlin was, naturally, unable to speak from experience but if it was anything to go on, he masturbated with gusto.

Shame scorched Merlin’s face, though he hadn’t said a single word out loud about this very
unsuitable topic. It was probably time to stop thinking and start eating, except he was having trouble extricating the vision of Arthur playing with his food from the vision of Arthur toying with a lover. It didn’t help that they didn’t eat together at home. This was one of only a handful of occasions Merlin had been able to indulge in watching Arthur at length—most particularly his mouth.

“Not hungry, Merlin?” Uther remarked, spearing a carrot. His plate was almost cleaned.

“Oh, yes. I was distracted by, well, this is a lovely room.”

“Well, eat up. If you let it go cold it will be spoiled.”

Arthur’s eyebrows shot up as he choked down the cabbage he obviously didn’t like. When his mouth was no longer full, he said, “Don’t worry, father. I know you might not think it to look at him, but Merlin has a healthy appetite.” He offered Merlin a kind, fleeting smile.

Given the week they’d had, it was a surprise to Merlin that Arthur, in a small but what felt like a significant way, had come to his defence. In turn, Merlin found himself wishing he could eat Arthur’s cabbage for him though he didn’t think the offer or the execution would go down well. The best he could do was tuck into the food on his plate and make sure he enjoyed it.

The only sound as they ate was the clink of cutlery on china. As the plates were cleared, without a hint of sarcasm and yet more unexpected kindness, Arthur said, “Merlin, you should tell father about your studies.” He turned to Uther. “He’s too modest to bring it up, but he’s made quite an impression already.”

Merlin’s heart skipped a beat. He thought Arthur hadn’t noticed. He’d left the pile of essays and test papers on the kitchen table, hoping Arthur would pick them up in passing. They lay there, seemingly untouched, for two days until Arthur said, “Do you need those?” with a curt flick of his hand. Merlin had put them away, disappointed and resigned to celebrating his successes alone.

Uther pushed back his chair and folded his arms across his lap. “Making an impression? A good one, I hope?”

“Yes, it’s good,” Merlin said, like he wasn’t sure, though he had no reason to doubt it.

“Then I must hear about it. Glowing academic reports, eh? There haven’t been many of those around here.”

“Not since Morgana,” Arthur said quietly, into his lap, as if he’d been expecting the snide jab and the return had been on the tip of his tongue the whole time.

Were it not for Merlin’s presence, it seemed quite plausible that Arthur and Uther might have come to blows. Uther’s eyes narrowed to slits, his mouth curled into a snarl and his hands tightly closed to fists. Arthur held steady, like he was readying for the attack, and his retaliation. Merlin wouldn’t have been able to cut through the tension with a sword, let alone his butter knife, which was the only implement left on the table. Still, if it came to a fight, he had the feeling that both men could be lethal with significantly less.

Merlin stepped in without further ado, waxing lyrical on his enthusiasm for education. The opportunity to exercise his never-quiet brain and fill it with more than the banalities of machines in motion was everything he’d dreamed of and more. Merlin was only too happy to recount the academic triumphs and tribulations of the last month and divert the Pendragons from conflict.

Arthur poured himself more wine. Uther did not.
“Biology is my favourite subject. We were only learning last week about the breakthroughs in gamete fusion technology.”

From the corner of his eye, Merlin watched Arthur smooth his serviette over his lap. He was looking out into the garden, blinking, pretending not to listen. Merlin wasn’t so easily fooled and he doubted Uther was either. However, if Uther was paying attention to the tightness in Arthur’s jaw and neck or the way his throat worked up and down like he was having trouble swallowing, he wasn’t showing any signs of caring about it. Merlin’s heart broke a little.

He spoke slowly, for once choosing his words carefully, thoughtfully, deliberately. “Everyone keeps talking about the multiplication enzyme stream for joining same-sex gametes, but I think that’s not going to make the biggest impact on the fertility crisis.”

“How so?” Uther said, with an oily smile.

“Well, we know it’s now possible to fuse the chromosomes from the sex cells of any two fertile individuals; two men or two women, as well as male and female, to generate viable offspring—which is truly amazing.”

“It is.”

“But,” Merlin said emphatically, hoping Arthur was paying attention, “I think there are better ways to use the technology. With some radical changes, in theory, Albion’s fertility crisis could be averted in a generation.”

Uther bade Merlin continue.

“Well,” Merlin said, trying to stay calm, rubbing the sudden sweat from his palms onto the legs of his trousers, “it occurred to me that while gamete fusion technology benefits the fertile amongst the population, it might also benefit the many infertile.”

Arthur’s expression was a warning. Merlin pressed on regardless.

“I know it’s important for compatibility that offspring are the biological product of their parents, but since we have a refined compatibility screening process for matching couples, if we had enough surrogates, why not match compatible donors of female or male gametes to give Infertiles children? Use the same system, matching couples to babies?”

It was an obvious and simple solution in Merlin’s mind. Any idiot could have come up with it, though it took a particular kind of idiot to say it out loud.

Uther’s fist ground into his thigh. “No! Absolutely not. The Compatibility Matching System only works for adults. It is not designed for infants. In any case, what person in their right mind would want someone else’s progeny? Therein lays the path to disaster!”

Uther had gone red, from the neck of his brown cardi to the top of his balding head. He was barely able to hiss out, “It’s one thing to adopt a child whose parents are deceased, but to breed hoards of babies to be farmed out like cattle? Preposterous! Not to mention, adoption breeds depressives, criminals and misfits—we’ve seen it time and again. No.”

Where on earth did Uther get his data? If indeed there was any data.

Merlin was about to remark, fully intending to ire Uther more, that a different sort of disaster could lay in wait by forcing procreation upon Fertiles who didn’t want children, or weren’t ready for them, when Arthur interjected, “Merlin’s enthusiasm got the better of him, father. Please, don’t be angry.”
“It’s to be expected, I suppose. You still have a lot to learn.” Uther looked at Merlin like he’d given him a nasty bout of indigestion. Merlin could only wish for it. “Civilised society needs to cultivate the best analytical minds. However, consider this carefully, Merlin—just because we can do something doesn’t mean we should. An important part of your education is remembering what best promotes long-term stability and peace.”

Compatiblity-Stability-Peace. Did Uther seriously think that by drumming his philosophy into the minds of the people he would automatically reach their hearts? Did he think it would work because he willed it?

Uther’s tyranny was as cold and relentless in his home as it was across his peaceful nation.

Merlin wanted to reach out for Arthur and tell him that he understood; that he didn’t blame him for his rebellion. Arthur picked and fought his battles carefully. Merlin saw that now and he couldn’t help sympathising. “I’m sorry,” he said to Uther, doing his best to look contrite, for Arthur’s sake and his alone.

There was no offer of dessert, as was Uther’s habit. Arthur didn’t care. Merlin looked disappointed; he had a sweet tooth, or had at least cultivated one since coming to Camelot. Arthur wasn’t sure why the knowledge gratified him in a way his lunch plate had not. He wasn’t meant to be feeling anything where Merlin was concerned other than indifference.

When they stood, Uther suggested they retire to the study. Arthur suggested a walk. Since Merlin also favoured stretching his legs, Uther bade them take their fill of fresh air without him, uttering something about courtship that Arthur chose to ignore.

The moment they set foot outside, Merlin linked his arm through Arthur’s, doubtless taking advantage of the situation, asking Arthur to take them along the gravel path that dissected the manicured lawn. Arthur didn’t need to look back towards the house to know they were being watched. In spite of it, because of it, he purposefully removed Merlin’s arm from his and lengthened his stride.

Merlin didn’t try to keep up.

At the end of the path, Arthur sat down on the low wall around the rose beds. Merlin joined him, an indignant distance away. Arthur half expected him to ask about Morgana, but there again, Merlin really wasn’t stupid; he already knew he’d get nothing. He was looking up at the sky, taking in deep lungfuls of the brisk air.

Overhead, a flock of birds was flying south, to gentler climes. They’d come back in the spring when the conditions were more favourable. Wistfully, Arthur watched them disappearing over the horizon, and wondered if, like him, Merlin had ever wished he could fly.

Arthur wasn’t sure why Merlin had deliberately antagonised his father. Regardless of his motive, it was foolhardy and dangerous, and he needed warning in no uncertain terms. “Don’t think that being married to me gets you any kind of immunity. You need to be careful what you say, and who you say it to.”

“Why? What do you care?”

“I don’t want to see you harmed, or worse. The punishment for treason is hanging.” There were also
any other number of worse scenarios Arthur wouldn’t mention. Merlin might think he knew what happened to dissidents. He had no idea.

“Your father’s not going to hang me. I don’t get the impression he’s up for doing you any favours.” Then Merlin laughed. It was so obviously forced—and about the saddest thing Arthur had ever seen.

It was early evening and completely dark by the time they got home.

They went to their respective rooms to change. The whole time, Arthur couldn’t stop thinking about Merlin, across the landing. Arthur yearned to make him smile, to make him happy in some small way. He could never admit it, not to anyone, but there were a lot of things Arthur kept hidden. Over the years he’d become very good at it. Like the bar of chocolate he’d tucked away at the back of a drawer, beneath some old jumpers. The glossy paper wrapper was pristine, flawless milk-white. Arthur took it out, ran the tip of his thumb along the edge and … damn it, there was no way he could keep it for himself.

By the time he got downstairs to the living room Merlin had lit a bright-blazing fire and was kneeling on the rug at the hearth, tidying some stray logs back into the basket. The curtains were drawn. It was just them, alone, together with a quiet evening at its beginning. These were the times Arthur dreaded, and craved, and had worked hard to avoid.

He would give Merlin the chocolate, he would leave; he would be strong, like a good soldier. A man carrying the future of a nation on his shoulders could not afford to falter.

Merlin looked up at Arthur like he was too weary to stand. It was little wonder. Lunches with Uther could do that to a man, and poor Merlin had had to suffer Arthur’s petulance as well.

“Here. This is for you.”

Merlin stood, eyed the treat, then Arthur, then the chocolate again. “What is it?”

“Chocolate. Go on, take it.”

Merlin shook his head and shrunk back.

“It’s all right. It’s not contraband. I know someone with a shop in Bohemia. He doesn’t get it often, but when he does he lets me know. It cost me fifty credits.” That was the partial truth, at least. Arthur and his associates had helped the man get his daughter, a natural seer, safely to the Isle of Annis. There were a dozen people like him in Camelot, quietly waiting, trusting in Arthur’s word that one day soon they would be able bring their loved ones home.

When Merlin cautiously stepped closer, Arthur pulled back the paper part of the wrapper and smoothed off some of the silver foil, revealing the corner of the silky brown confection. Merlin’s face lifted instantly and coloured. “That’s really chocolate? The real thing?”

Arthur’s chest swelled, quickly and unexpectedly, and he couldn’t hold back his gladness. “Yes. Do you want it, or not?”

“I suppose. Do you think I’ll like it?”

_Do I think he’ll like it?_ The meaning sunk in and Arthur was honestly dumbfounded. “You’ve never had chocolate before?”

“No. Mum wouldn’t… You could only get it on the black.”
“Then it’s definitely yours,” Arthur said, pushing the bar into Merlin’s hand.

The guileless wonder on Merlin’s face, the excitement that trembled from his reverent fingertips resonated through Arthur, thrilling him, as though he was the one about to taste it for the first time. Merlin gazed awhile then at last peeled back more of the foil, holding the bar close to his face, savouring its aroma, murmuring his approval before he broke off a small piece and handed the rest back to Arthur. “You have some too. We can share it.”

Arthur watched, captivated, as Merlin licked his lips. They glistened luxuriously as he pushed the chocolate onto his tongue … and no sooner had Arthur said, “Suck on it until it melts, you’ll get the most of the flavour,” he realised his own mouth had gone completely dry.

There was absolutely no mistaking the precise moment Merlin’s entire body registered the taste, and the pleasure. The sight of him, the breathtaking and sultry sight of him, and Arthur flushed with heat, with desire.

Merlin’s eyelids briefly flickered closed as he sucked in his cheeks and worked his jaw back and forth. His breathing slowed gradually, deepening, before he finally swallowed, and then, as Arthur was beginning to think Merlin’s appreciation couldn’t be any more erotic, he let out a long, low groan. “That was … I’ve never. Oh. Give me that!”

Merlin snatched the chocolate back and was laughing and laughing, and Arthur couldn’t stop himself from laughing at him, with him—before he paused to contemplate what he’d done. He slumped onto the armchair, tired of bolting the instant his feelings threatened to erupt. Every day the pressure mounted, the temptation increasingly irresistible even as he kept away and kept his door firmly closed.

Merlin was finishing his second piece when he said, “This is why people can’t move across the counties. This is why I can’t ever go back, isn’t it?” As he brandished the chocolate in the air, his tone was light and the colour high on his cheeks, but he had a serious point. He sat down on the sofa next to Arthur’s chair and said, “You know what I’m talking about. Give people a few carefully engineered choices and no matter how rubbish they are, they think they’re free. The shit people put up with back home because there’s money over for beer and puerile entertainment. They think they’ve got it good because the telly shows them how much worse people in the other counties have got it. But they never get to experience anything really amazing, anything spectacular, because if they did, if it was allowed, they’d never be able to forget how miserable they really are.”

Arthur sighed. Merlin was partly right—of course he was—he’d lived it first hand and knew what he was talking about. “That’s an interesting hypothesis. Remind me never to let you get drunk.”

“Don’t be a prat, Arthur.”

“Then don’t be an idiot. The reason you were able to leave Ealdor is because you’re intelligent enough to understand how things work, and why they work. They don’t want people like you there. But that also means you’re intelligent enough to realise you’re treading a fine line. You really shouldn’t be saying any of this to me.”

Despair and frustration tightened over Merlin’s face, hunching him forward, like he was about to take flight, to pounce. “You’re intelligent too. Though you seem to go to a lot of trouble to pretend you’re not. You’re also not your father. What will you do, when it’s your turn?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think, or what I might or might not do. My ‘turn’ won’t be for years, maybe decades yet. You’ve seen how he lives.”
Liar, liar, liar. The lies used to be easy; they used feel good and justified. Each lie brought Arthur closer to being the man he was meant to be. Then Merlin came along, and each untruth was a knife in the shape of a question-mark slicing though Arthur’s skin. Each and every time he opened his lying mouth another wound. Arthur was bleeding away and he didn’t know how much longer until all that was left of him was an empty shell made entirely of lies.

There was another way, though. Maybe. Possibly.

If Arthur’s time to rule came sooner, as it should, as it must, Merlin might take his side. He’d be an asset to a new order, as he got older, more mature. Perhaps he would forgive Arthur for Emrys.

Emrys—the thought of him and Arthur’s blood ran cold. The thought of leaving Merlin for another was becoming too uncomfortable to consider and he wasn’t sure when it happened, how it happened despite his best efforts to avoid it.

Not for the first time, Arthur wondered if the Movement could take Camelot without Emrys. After all, there was no firm guarantee he existed. Could it be done with the loyal friends and allies that were waiting on his word? Could Morgana, Morgause and Cenred be persuaded they didn’t need Emrys, that Arthur didn’t need Emrys?

And if they went forward, would Merlin be prepared to stand with him? It would be a lot to ask when Arthur had given him so little. It would require a leap of faith and a lot of trust…

Meanwhile, Merlin had been doing some thinking of his own.

“Why did you give me this?”

“We didn’t get dessert.”

“That’s not the reason,” Merlin said bitterly.

Arthur had inadvertently shown Merlin something of himself that he hadn’t meant to; he hadn’t meant to show him anything. Merlin had noticed because he was astute. Also, he was watching Arthur every opportunity he could get—not with the tired, cynical stare of his father and his spies— with the youthful eyes of someone clever and hopeful who was desperately looking for something in Arthur he could find to love.

Arthur wanted to be loved. He wanted to be loved by Merlin. He wanted to love him in return. He wanted to taste the chocolate from Merlin’s lips. He wanted to lick over the lush arc of his cupid’s bow and feel his sweet breath against his mouth.

Maybe it was loneliness making Arthur feel this way. Maybe he was only lured by wanting what he couldn’t have. If Arthur had met Merlin on the street or at The Tavern he wouldn’t have looked twice at him, he would have found his company tiresome, juvenile, annoying. Arthur talked himself out of his desire over and over again even when the words meant nothing and the burn of Merlin’s eyes raking over his skin meant everything words couldn’t say.

If Merlin reached out for Arthur right at this moment, if he hooked his hand around the back of his neck and pressed his lips to Arthur’s mouth… Arthur didn’t know if he had the strength to refuse him.

Only, Merlin didn’t take the kiss. He shoved what was left of the bar of chocolate into Arthur’s hand, walked out of the door and up the stairs to his room, leaving Arthur bereft.
Chapter 7

VII

On his way to the Chemistry Building, Merlin stopped by the campus shop and bought an ounce of tobacco. It wasn’t actually tobacco, not the stuff that was grown across the ocean in hotter climes. This stuff was mostly hops, the same as the ones Merlin used to pick when he was a boy. Gaius smoked it in a pipe with some herbs of his own. The smell was aromatic, like nothing Merlin had smelt before. He’d asked if he could try some, only Gaius made some noise about not wanting to get into trouble with Arthur or Uther or both of them. Merlin didn’t push it. He couldn’t afford to lose his one and only friend, septuagenarian or otherwise.

Gaius was humming, singing to himself when Merlin pushed open his door. He had his coat on—a long, hooded, russet-brown affair that looked more like a cloak.

“Going somewhere?” Merlin asked.

“We are going for a walk.”

It was bitter outside, the wind cutting through the gaps between the buildings like shards of broken glass. Merlin wasn’t keen to be back out in it. “I brought you something. Something for Mid-Winter. I wasn’t sure whether you celebrated.” He handed the packet to Gaius. “Those herbs you put in your pipe—”

“Shush,” Gaius said snippily, taking the tobacco with a shaky hand. “I appreciate the gift. Thank you. But the herbs—they’re medicinal. A young twig like you doesn’t need them. Come on. Let’s get some fresh air before it snows.”

In a last-ditch effort to stay inside, Merlin extracted from his satchel a shiny, flat copy of the programme from the Mid-Winter Ball. “I thought you might like to see this. There’s a picture of Arthur and me inside.”

Gaius took it graciously—he’d already suffered Merlin’s bemoaning accounts of the dance lessons—and regarded the portrait studiously. Arthur was sitting on an upholstered armchair with Merlin standing behind him, his hand on his shoulder. They were smiling. They looked happy. Gaius knew it was a front. It had taken him all of five minutes to work it out and Merlin was unable to lie to him no matter how much he wanted to or thought he should.

“How did it go?” Gaius asked.

“Not too bad. I only trod on his toes twice.” Merlin sat on the arm of the chair and talked about the food, the decorations, the band, and refrained from mentioning his uninvited arousal.

Arthur had been intoxicating. When he’d said, soft and low, “Look at me, that’s it. You’ll be fine. I won’t let you fall,” Merlin hadn’t been able to do anything except yield to his hold and let his body take him where it would. At first, it had been fine. Then, when the music had slowed and Arthur drew closer, Merlin’s feet decided not to cooperate and his burgeoning erection threatened to go to full mast. After that, Arthur had drunk quite a lot of whisky and disappeared out onto the veranda with Leon.

Merlin didn’t want to find Arthur attractive, to feel hot sparks of arousal over and over again, simply by recalling the touch of Arthur’s hand or the brush of his cheek as they danced. But there it was.
There must be *something* in that compatibility matching. Merlin couldn’t resist him, no matter how annoyed and discouraged he was by what seemed to be Arthur’s dogged determination for their marriage to be a failure.

The only dim hope that Merlin reached for like a beacon was that Arthur was resolved to prove to his father that the match hadn’t worked.

Mostly, though, Merlin was inclined to believe that Arthur wasn’t attracted to him. Perhaps he’d exaggerated a little too much on certain aspects of his profile questionnaire. Perhaps tall, rugged Leon was more Arthur’s type. They spent enough time together.

“He’s so much like his mother,” Gaius remarked, carefully placing the programme on the only clear space on his desk.

“Did you know her?”

“Very well.”

“Was she lovely?”

“She was a fine woman,” Gaius said, in a way that put an end to the subject.

Arthur’s mother had died in childbirth. That much was common knowledge. Merlin didn’t really know much else about Arthur or his family, except Arthur had also lost his half-sister in a terrorist attack on her car, ten years ago. The news reports said she’d been on her way to be married to a Governor on one of the Western Isles. Arthur had never spoken of her to Merlin, had only mentioned her name once in his presence.

Gaius had been physician to the Pendragons for some years, until shortly after Arthur was born, in fact, though he remained firmly reticent about what he knew. It was probably better that way. If Arthur ever felt inclined to share, Merlin should hear it from him first. That didn’t stop him wondering about the source of Arthur’s anger.

There was no more delaying Gaius. He was determined to go out, nudging Merlin through the door and setting a spritely pace down to the lake before Merlin had a chance to offer to make tea.

Beyond, towards the edge of the campus, there was a worn-out path running alongside a trickling stream that fed into Camelot River. They’d walked this path once before and it seemed that was the way Gaius was heading now. If they kept going, through the break in the wire fence at the campus edge, under two bridges and along the slope at the back of some office buildings, they ended up at a covered metal sluice gate which met the river near the city wall. They couldn’t go any farther than that. Guards patrolled Camelot’s most vulnerable channel in and out of the city. In any case, it was over a mile there and another back again—a long way for an old man even in the best of weather.

They’d reached a stretch of copse and were walking beneath a canopy of bare branches, halfway to the river, before Gaius spoke again. The footpath had widened enough they could stroll side by side on the frozen ground. “These paths are all over Camelot. Before the war, it was easier to go anywhere, everywhere.” He added more quietly though there was no one else except Merlin to hear him, “Without being seen.”

True enough, there were no street lights along here, no sentries or checkpoints, only tall weeds and the traces of a path that was, nowadays at least, rarely trodden. Everywhere else, the safety (and scrutiny) of the citizens of Camelot was guaranteed. Regretfully, it occurred to Merlin that this was probably how Arthur made his way to his den of iniquity in the Lower Town. As far as Merlin was
aware, Arthur had managed to go and return unnoticed, at least three times since their wedding, and likely again tonight.

As if he’d read Merlin’s mind, Gaius said, “Arthur was such a sweet child. He wanted to please everyone.”

“He doesn’t please anyone but himself now.” Sometimes it felt like Arthur was on the cusp of something; he’d look at Merlin in a way that didn’t feel as if he was only tolerating him. It always amounted to nothing. Merlin finally put it down to wishful thinking and stopped folding Arthur’s laundry in protest. “Was it losing his sister? Was that when he changed?”

“I was already retired from the University by then, so I didn’t get to see as much of the High Chancellor or the children as I had been when I was researching. But I would say yes, they were very close, even though they were half-siblings. Arthur blamed his father.”

“I thought it was terrorists. Magic-users.”

“No for her murder, for sending her away to be married in the first place.” Gaius looked sorry and sad.

Merlin supposed it explained a lot about Arthur’s attitude to arranged marriages. He sighed. He also knew what it was to want to blame someone for the loss of a loved one. Before he was born, Merlin’s father had been killed in a factory fire. Faulty wiring started the blaze. That’s what the investigators concluded. Two of the four fire exits had been blocked by boxes of stock and nineteen people died as a result. Not a single person was brought to account. That was the way things were in the counties.

“I wish I could hold it against Arthur,” Merlin said. “But I find it hard to blame him for being how he is.”

“You have a good heart,” Gaius said with much fondness. Then he exhaled wearily. “I wish I could have brought you and your mother to Camelot, before they closed the borders. Sadly, it was impossible. It was a turbulent time.” The colour had faded from Gaius’s cheeks and he shivered. “I think we should turn back. It’s too cold for me today.”

Merlin wanted to ask Gaius about that time, when he was a baby. His mother had rarely spoken of it. But the path had narrowed and by the time they emerged onto the lake there was a fine drizzle. Merlin pulled down his woollen hat, Gaius pulled up his hood, and the conversation was over.

When they got back to Gaius’ rooms, Gaius lit his pipe. The tip teetered on his mouth as he slowly began to drop off. Merlin pressed his thumb to the leaf to kill the flame, tucked a blanket around Gaius’ legs and quietly let himself out.

With the campus mostly closed for the Mid-Winter Break, and nowhere to go except home, Merlin ended up at the bus stop earlier than he’d originally planned. He’d left his gloves in Gaius’ rooms after their walk, not for the first time, and had to pull the sleeves of his jumper over the ends of his frigid fingers. The sleeves weren’t long enough—they kept springing up—but he didn’t want to go back and disturb Gaius from his nap.

Merlin’s mood soured like old milk.

He took a seat at the end of the shelter, tucking his legs underneath to temper the bite of the winter cold. The clouds were thick and looming, promising snow to swathe the ground in pristine white. It never stayed that way for long. The tread of a thousand pairs of fur-lined boots and the roll of buses
and cars would quickly transform that bright, quiet loveliness to squelching, filthy grey. Nothing stayed nice for long, not anywhere. In that regard, Camelot was no different to Ealdor.

“Let me guess. Ring on your finger. That means you’re married. Only you look about fifteen so I’m guessing you’re not yet twenty-one, which means you’re not from Camelot. You were matched with someone from the city. Probably another man, if those boots of yours are anything to go on.”

The man standing at the other end of the shelter was talking about Merlin. There was no one else around but the two of them. Merlin looked down at his boots then glared at the man, who was wearing a short woollen coat and jeans—smart not formal. His hair was shoulder-length, thick and dark, dark brown and he had a fine scruffy beard. Altogether, he was well-packaged, in a cocky sort of way.

Once the man had finished his assessment, he leaned against the shelter and folded his arms across his chest. He looked like he was waiting for Merlin to be impressed.

Merlin rolled his eyes and looked away. He wasn’t going to say anything except the bus wasn’t due for another fifteen minutes. “You saw my picture in the paper. That’s how you know that.”

From the corner of his eye, because he definitely wasn’t encouraging him by looking at him, Merlin saw the man push off the shelter and take a step closer. He was a stride away when he said, “You got me. Not straight away, though. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Merlin said, venturing a quick glance upwards and trying not to smile.

“Ah. Now that look. I’ll bet that’s what made your old man’s heart melt.”

“Not exactly.”

“The Pendragon,” he mused, taking a seat next to Merlin, “is a hard beast to tame. That’s what I’ve heard. Not that I believe it.”

That made Merlin laugh. Not the bit about Arthur being hard to tame, the bit about him being a beast. “What about me? Have you heard anything about me?”

“Merlin Pendragon. Formerly from the Eastern Counties. Wonderkid, sylph-like beauty—” He stopped there, abruptly, as if he’d decided he’d already said too much, then he added, “The rest isn’t as flattering.”

“Don’t bother telling me then.” Merlin let his head fall back against the shelter.

“Having a bad day?”

“You could say that.”

The man nodded his understanding. “I’ve seen you around. Always on your own. What’s that about?”

“You tell me. Because I honestly don’t know. No one even wants to eat lunch with me.”

The man moved closer and lowered his voice. “I don’t know for sure. I can only guess.” From his frown, it seemed he was expecting Merlin not to like what he was about to say.

“Go on,” Merlin said. As unpleasant as the reasons might be, in truth, he wanted to hear them. “Tell me.”
“Your husband’s reputation … he’s not well-liked in certain circles. A lot of decent folk don’t want to be associated with him, and therefore you. It’s also well known his father couldn’t wait to marry him off which makes some people suspicious about you and how you were chosen. There are a lot of snobs in Camelot. Or you could be a spy.”

“I’m not!”

“Okay, okay.”

Merlin was furious. Arthur must have known it was going to be like this for him and he didn’t warn him. Then he was sad, because things were meant to be different here. “So I suppose I won’t be seeing you around then?” Merlin said, willing the bus to be early, to please for once be early and full of people.

“Hey. I don’t care about that. Seriously. If you’re not doing anything now, we could go for a bite to eat and a drink, if you like?” The man offered his open palm and said, “I’m Gwaine, by the way.”

Merlin took his hand gladly and replied, “I’d love to,” just as a bus rounded the corner and it started to pour with freezing rain.

The bus wasn’t the 101, which Merlin took home. This one was going into Bohemia, a small area of the Upper Town where expensive boutique shops lined wide cobbled streets. It was a sign. Merlin was meant to be on it.

They ran from bus to boutique to café, dodging the rain and the harried shoppers. Today was the last day to shop before Mid-Winter. When the browsing and the crowding got too much, they ducked into a restaurant on a side-street away from the bustle. The rain was pounding like hammers against the windows and spitting up the sides of the pavement. Merlin’s legs were wet and his face scorched from cold. Gwaine ordered hot whisky and a pot of tea for them both and they perused the menu while they warmed and dried.

Merlin had to bite the inside of his mouth as he tried to keep a lid on his excitement. He didn’t want Gwaine to know he’d never been anywhere like this before, or that he’d never drunk whisky, hot or cold, or that he didn’t recognise half the food on the menu.

“You’re not married?” Merlin asked, noting Gwaine’s naked fingers for the first time as his own thawed and tingled.

“Not yet. The glorious Compatibility Machine has, as yet, been unable to find me a suitable match.” Gwaine looked inordinately pleased about this. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m too … esoteric.”

Merlin laughed long and loud. Gwaine laughed too, until he was distracted by a young woman sitting alone reading a book, two tables away, with silky red hair and skin like alabaster. Merlin took it as an opportunity to look at Gwaine and ponder. He really was quite … esoteric.

When it arrived, Merlin tucked into his pie and didn’t feel the need to fill the space between mouthfuls with conversation. Nor did Gwaine. Before Merlin had finished his whisky, Gwaine was on his third, his cheeks warmed to a lush pink as he lazily gnawed on his chicken leg. Whether it was the liquor or the company relaxing him, making him comfortable, Merlin wasn’t sure. He didn’t think Gwaine would mind him asking something personal. “Aren’t you worried that the machine won’t find you anyone and that you’ll end up alone?” It wasn’t unheard of.

“Nope. Nothing wrong with being alone.”

“But … don’t you get … lonely?”

Merlin would admit to being naïve, but he wasn’t *that* naïve. He knew exactly what Gwaine meant; Gwaine was a *Libertine*! Merlin’s eyes darted around the restaurant. He hadn’t thought about who might hear them talking or who might see him out with Gwaine.

“Don’t look so scandalised. Everyone’s at it.”

“I’m not.”

“No. Of course you’re not. I didn’t mean you.” Gwaine meant it kindly, Merlin could see that. “Eat up,” he said. “Do you like music?”

This was a difficult question. Merlin answered honestly, “I do. Except, most of what I hear on the radio I don’t.”

“The radio? I’m not talking about that bollocks. I’m talking about records, Merlin. *Imports*.”

“I don’t know—I’ve never heard any.”

“Want to go listen to some?” Gwaine eyes lit up, daring and dangerous.

“I don’t know if I should.”

Gwaine was absolutely, definitely a *Libertine* and Merlin wasn’t nearly as scandalised as he should have been. In fact, he found the idea thrilling. He wanted to go and listen to records. He also wanted to know what other things these outrageous *Libertines* did.

Leaning over the table, Gwaine whispered in Merlin’s ear, “No one will see us. We can leave through the back. I know a little place not far from here that’s got fantastic records. Let me take you. I swear, Merlin, you’ll love it.”

Arthur was pacing the floor as the hour hand on the clock in the kitchen touched eight. He clasped his hands around the back of his neck and squeezed tightly, as if that would force a solution from his brain. Back and forth, back and forth, Arthur paced like a pendulum, each and every step and turn a woeful measure of Merlin’s lengthening absence.

Every Friday night for the past three months, Merlin had been home by six o’clock. There was no special reason for him to be out late tonight; the University was closed for Mid-Winter. Nonetheless, Merlin had checked out with the duty guard in the early afternoon. Arthur initially considered it possible Merlin had gone for a walk or to do some shopping. The weather ruled out the former and the shops would have been closed for two hours by now.

Things had been strained; there was no getting away from it. Since the Mid-Winter ball at the weekend, Arthur had found it more difficult than ever to be in Merlin’s company. Merlin had looked beautiful that night, his pale skin radiant against the midnight-blue velvet of his suit jacket. Arthur had wanted so much to tell him, to lift up his chin and make his eyes shine with happiness.

When they’d danced, as Arthur felt the curve and sway of Merlin’s body he couldn’t help imagining how they might fit together in all the ways that married men should. Then, as the music slowed, to his utter mortification, Arthur’s body betrayed him and he’d fled in panic, drowning his burgeoning
passion with whisky.
The Midnight-blue Suit
Outside, the weather was brutal. If only Merlin would ring to let Arthur know where he was, that he was all right. Only Arthur had made it patently clear that Merlin was free to do as he chose as long as he didn’t bring shame to their door. That much leverage left open a host of possibilities, some too worrisome to contemplate.

Another hour passed and Arthur was left with no choice. He was going to have to go to Leon for help.

He left a note for Merlin on the kitchen table and turning up his collar ventured into the dark. The rain was easing but the pavement was slick. It was going to turn to sheet ice overnight. No one in his right mind would be out late in this. Never mind that Arthur had been planning a sortie of his own.

Just like his fellow denizens at The Tavern, he wasn’t easily deterred. Merlin’s absence, however, was enough reason to cancel his plans. He couldn’t go to the Lower Town not knowing whether Merlin was safe. Leon would have to get a messenger to The Tavern in his stead.

Morgana would be upset—he wouldn’t see her before Mid-Winter now—but she would make do graciously as she always did. At least she had Morgause and Cenred with her.

Arthur had his apology ready when Gwen opened the door.

“Not tonight, Arthur, please,” she said, keeping him on the doorstep in spite of the cold.

Arthur must have looked suitably pitiful because the next moment she changed her mind and pulled him into the house. “You look awful. What’s wrong?”

“Merlin’s missing.”

Gwen took him to the living room, where Leon was sprawled across the sofa in soft, loose trousers, a beer in one hand and the remote control in the other. He sat up as Arthur sat down.

“I’m sorry to barge in,” Arthur said. “Merlin went out this afternoon and hasn’t come home. He always comes home. I can’t go out tonight not knowing where he is.”

Leon stood and placed a firm hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

Gwen came to Arthur’s side, sat on the arm of the chair and put her arm around him. “Can I get you something to drink, love? Have you eaten? You’re white as a ghost.”

“No. I’m fine. I just want him home.” Arthur’s voice almost broke. Home. Some home they had. Not like Gwen and Leon. She’d only been eighteen when they married, like Merlin, and Leon eight years older. Yet they’d taken to each other. They would have liked children, too. Like many infertile couples.

Nimueh’s Legacy, Morgana called it, with no small amount of bitterness. The High Priestess’ curse, made irrevocable upon her execution, had also ensured Uther would never relent his stance against magic.

Gwen rubbed her palm over Arthur’s back. “It’s all right to care about him, Arthur. It’s all right for us to know it.”

“But it’s not all right for him to know it, is it? The very person that needs it most.”

“Did you fight?”
“No.” They didn’t spend enough time together to fight. “I went to work before he was awake. I haven’t seen him since yesterday. He never said anything then about going out today.” Why would he?

“Does he have any friends, anyone he could be with?” Leon asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t think he does.”

Merlin went to the University; he went to his photography class. If he’d made friends at either, Arthur had no idea who they were.

With a nod, Leon disappeared upstairs, to begin the execution of their contingency. He would make contact with one of the other undercover operatives for the Movement, who would in turn get a message to Gregory, which he could relay to Morgana and Morgause and vice versa. Leon would be paging their man immediately and arranging to meet him at their secret rendezvous. Gwen would be his alibi. Arthur regarded her with pride. Out of all of them she had the firmest resolve. Two weeks, that was all it had taken for her to learn how to cheat the polygraph.

There was nothing more Arthur could do here. “I should go home, in case he turns up. I’m sorry. I’ve ruined your night.”

“It’s not the first time and I doubt it will be the last,” Gwen said lovingly. “It’s a good job I personally believe Merlin’s worth it.”

Gwen’s affection was boundless. Arthur depended on her more than he could say. “What the hell am I going to do?” he lamented.

“Ring us, when he gets back?”

That wasn’t what Arthur meant. He nodded anyway.

He was about to head out the door, to leave, when Gwen halted him and ran upstairs. She returned with an envelope. It was inconspicuous, plain brown, the type used in the laboratory offices. It would be from Elyan.

“I know now’s not a good time,” she said. “But I thought you might want to see this before Mid-Winter. I was going to pop over with it tomorrow.”

The information was relevant to Uther’s speech in two days’ time, then. Arthur slipped it into his coat pocket before going to Gwen for a much-needed hug. Her arms couldn’t soothe him, not this time.

Sick to his belly with dread, Arthur rushed home. He called out from the hallway, “Merlin? Are you back?” already knowing there would be no answer.

Arthur wondered how long he should wait to call the Central Security Office, the hospitals … his father. The moment he did, the Reds would be out searching. If Merlin was involved in any activity not deemed completely legitimate, there would be consequences for everyone involved. Arthur might not be able to intervene.

What if something terrible had happened to Merlin?

No news was good news.

There was no need to worry.
Arthur took a chair at the kitchen table and screwed Merlin’s unread note into a ball. Then he put his head in his hands and screwed his eyes shut, refusing to give in and cry.

Cloak and Swagger was, through the front door, a fashionable boutique selling off-the-peg outerwear for Camelot’s young and moneyed. The back door was for stock delivery, and a secret members’ only entry to Basement Beat. Gwaine flashed the man on the door a toothy smile, saying of Merlin, “He’s with me,” as down the stairs they went.

There was a woman in the corner with long, black hair in a ponytail and headphones around her neck. She was flanked by boxes and boxes of records and in front of her were two turntables on a bench. There wasn’t space in the basement for more than thirty or forty people standing. With half a dozen tiny café tables and stools clinging to the edge of the room, and a makeshift bar against the wall opposite the music, the atmosphere was, politely speaking, cosy.

Looking about, listening to the gentle beat of a lilting song like nothing he’d heard before, Merlin’s heart raced, his legs were trembling, and his face threatened to break in two from the force of his grin.

“There she is,” Gwaine said, pulling Merlin towards one of the tables. It was occupied by a petite young woman, with the warm brown eyes and a sunny smile. She leapt up at Gwaine and threw her arms around his neck with unabashed affection. Merlin couldn’t quell the jealous notion that perhaps they were lovers.

She eyed Merlin with markedly less enthusiasm.

Gwaine put his hand to the small of Merlin’s back and pushed him forward. “Freya, this is none other than Merlin Pendragon.”

“I know who he is,” she said to Gwaine. To Merlin, she said evenly, “I’ve seen you at the University. I thought you might be one of Uther’s lackeys. I suppose if you’re with Gwaine you must be all right.”

“He looked like he could use a friendly face,” Gwaine said, turning back to look at Merlin.

It was dark enough Merlin hoped they couldn’t seem him blushing with the shame of it. A charity case, that’s all he was.

“Nice to meet you,” Merlin said, holding out his hand to Freya. But she was already skipping off to the bar, returning with two more glasses. There was what looked like a bottle of wine already open on the table. They huddled around, close as conspirators, while Freya filled their cups to the brim.

Gwaine gave her a hard stare and said to Merlin, “Take it easy with this one. It’s strong stuff.”

“Stronger than whisky?” Merlin asked, to which Freya responded with a lively peal of laughter.

“Strong in a different way,” she clarified, at once softer and as charming as she’d appeared at first glance. “Sip it and if you don’t like how it makes you feel, stop drinking it.”

“What’s it called?” Merlin said.

“Bottoms up, then!”

Freya knocked hers back in one mouthful.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, shivered and refilled her glass before Merlin dared take a single sip. After he did, he was smitten. The Solana was potent, sweet and had an aftertaste like a kick in the balls. Freya and Gwaine were drinking it like children’s cordial.

The music had initially been slow and melodic. Since the arrival of several more people, the woman playing the records had upped the tempo. The sound was mesmerising and completely foreign. Merlin couldn’t even say what instruments were playing, what distant land the singer came from. The music reached inside him and lifted his spirits. The Solana curled warmly around the back of his neck, making it light and loose. Merlin’s head tilted this way and that, in time with the beat.

The next thing he knew, he was being dragged onto the small space in the middle of the room that passed as a dance floor. The Mid-Winter Ball had proved to Merlin in no uncertain terms that he was rubbish at dancing, but this music simply required him to bob along like everyone else. The revellers seemed to know the song.

“You like it?” Gwaine said in Merlin’s ear, above the music.

“Yes!”

“It’s called reggae.”

Reggae. Even the name was foreign and strange. Merlin mouthed the word, which amusingly fit with the lilting rhythm. He tried to decipher the lyrics as he moved. He couldn’t understand everything, only phrases here and there, about illicit love and revolution that surely accounted for why this type of music was illegal. It questioned the status quo. It gave people ideas. Merlin liked it. He liked it a lot.

They took a break between songs. As they sat, Merlin noticed the fine, gold wedding band on Freya’s ring finger. “You’re married?” he asked her, while glancing over at Gwaine.

“Yes. To a Red, believe it or not.” Freya looked pleased about it. She’d noticed Merlin’s side eye and added, “And faithful. Gwaine’s just a friend.”

Merlin blushed again. His tongue was loose from Solana and he didn’t think before he said, “Is he nice to you? Do you like him?”

“Like him? I love him. When I first saw him, at the wedding, I couldn’t believe my eyes. He was huge. I kept thinking there had to be some mistake. I could’ve fit in the palm of his hand. When he saw me, though, he smiled like he was the luckiest man in the world and when I got up close, there were fucking tears in his eyes.”

Merlin was glad for Freya. He said, “That’s amazing,” and tried not to let his envy show.

“I don’t think it’s that easy for most couples. We’re lucky. It’s just a shame we can’t have kids. I’d do anything to have a load of little Percies. I know he would too.”


“I know. He told me he’s seen you. He’s on tonight. Send him my love when you get home?”
“I will.” And now it was pure gladness, not envy that had Merlin say, “Percy’s lucky. No wonder he’s so happy every time I see him.”

Freya’s smile was wide and open, and Merlin knew then that he could call her a friend. Gwaine, too. It was the best Mid-Winter gift he could have hoped for, under his current circumstances.

“You’re lovely,” she said. “I can’t believe what those dickheads in the Student Union have been saying.”

“What have they been saying?”

“Nothing,” Gwaine interrupted.

Still, Freya shook her head and carried on. “All sorts—that you were really a prostitute from the Lower Town that Uther let Arthur marry to stop him straying out at night. Rumour has it he was sweet on this one guy—”

She might as well have pushed Merlin off a cliff. It felt like more than his face falling as Freya reached out for his arm. “It’s all gossip, Merlin. They don’t know you, what you’re really like.”

Merlin mumbled, “It’s fine, it’s fine,” as he refilled his glass.

Arthur was sweet on a guy from the Lower Town.

Arthur was in love with someone else. That was why he didn’t want Merlin.

Of all the possible reasons for Arthur’s distance, that one had never crossed Merlin’s mind.

Merlin gulped down the dregs of the Solana in his glass and staggered to the bar for another bottle.

Arthur was in Merlin’s room, sitting on the bed, counting out seconds and minutes, trying to slow his rabbit heart. Leon had just left. The message was sent to Morgana without a hitch. Dear friend that he was, Leon had also arranged for a few scouts to be on the lookout for Merlin. There had been no news as yet, with the clock only ten more minutes away from midnight. Arthur wouldn’t be able to wait much longer before raising the alarm.

There were clothes strewn over the floor, slung over the back of the chair and hanging from the hook behind the door. Arthur wondered if Merlin ever put anything in his wardrobe or the chest of drawers. He wouldn’t look. It was bad enough that he was here in Merlin’s private space, when he had no right to be.

Merlin’s camera was on the desk. Next to it there were several rolls of film, presumably waiting to be developed. Arthur had never seen any of Merlin’s pictures; he hadn’t offered to show him.

If Merlin came home safely, Arthur promised himself things would be different. He would find a way—

A loud, hammering knock jolted Arthur to his feet. He bounded down the stairs, clearing the last four with a leap, nearly diving headlong through the hall window, before yanking the front door open. There was a Red on the doorstep, holding an ashen and loose-legged Merlin off his hip.

“Quick, let’s get him inside,” he said, heaving Merlin over the threshold before Arthur could reply.
Arthur closed the door behind them. “Yes, yes. Take him upstairs.”

“I’m fine, Percy.” Merlin objected, slurring, “I can get myself up the stairs.”

Percy looked at Arthur apologetically as Merlin stumbled from his hold and leant precariously against the telephone table, struggling with the buttons on his coat.

“Thank you, Percy.” Arthur said, inadequately. He was struggling to think straight. This was somehow exactly what he’d hoped for yet hadn’t expected. “Did someone drive him home?”

“A taxi dropped him at the gatehouse. There was no one else in it. I gave the driver a little extra and took his name. He won’t be a bother.”

Arthur had seen Percy in passing but didn’t know much about him. He was relieved to see he looked confident in his assessment.

“I can’t thank you enough. I’ll make sure you’re reimbursed,” Arthur said, turning to Merlin who was still fumbling with his buttons.

Percy was already opening the door to leave. “It’s no trouble. He’s only been on the sauce.” If Arthur wasn’t mistaken, his reply was fond.

“Not sauce. Solana,” Merlin mumbled, giving up on his coat and sliding down onto the chair to fight the buckles on his boots.

“In that case, plenty of water and a bucket by the bed,” Percy said before he closed the door behind him.

Alone with Merlin, Arthur could release the tirade he’d had building inside him for the past six hours. Except he found that upon opening his mouth, all that fell from his lips was a quiet, “Let me help you.”

Merlin acquiesced. Arthur removed his coat then knelt down at Merlin’s feet to remove his boots. Merlin’s eyes were watery and unfocused, his agitated fingers reaching out for the collar of Arthur’s shirt. He was a quivering wreck. Thankfully, he was going to have a full day to recover. Uther wouldn’t be pleased if he was hung over for Mid-Winter, not with the nation watching them.

“Tell me you had a good time, at least,” Arthur said. “Because you’re going to feel like shit tomorrow.”

Merlin shook his head and his chin tightened. “I did, kind of. I went to a place that plays records.”

Arthur’s heart skipped but there was no point in admonishing him. Not with the state he was in.

He was about to lift Merlin to his feet when Merlin choked out, “Someone told me everything. It’s all right. You can trust me. I promise I won’t tell. It’s not your fault.”


“You’re in love with someone else. That’s who you go to in the Lower Town.” Merlin’s gaze was somewhere on the floor. His anguish was palpable, a weight pressing down hard, thickening the air. Arthur was dizzy and Merlin was swaying like he might fall any moment.

“Merlin, no. I—”

“There’s no need to deny it.” He looked at Arthur, forcing a shallow smile. “I wash our clothes,
don’t I? When you’ve seen him your clothes smell of him. Always the same. I should have realised sooner.”

“No, Merlin.”

This was the best and worst thing that could possibly have happened. Arthur couldn’t have engineered such a ruse if he’d tried; Merlin thought Arthur was in love with Gregory and had promised to keep his secret safe. Oh, the cruel, cruel irony.

Arthur didn’t realise he was crying, not until Merlin swiped his thumb across his cheek, saying, “Don’t. I promise, I won’t tell.”

Arthur had been a liar for a long time. More or less, he’d been able to stomach it. Cowardice was a far more bitter pill to swallow. As he took Merlin in his arms and pulled him to his feet, Arthur barely managed to choke out, “I don’t deserve you,” before helping him up to his room.

Merlin was on the cusp of sleep, tucked snugly into one side of his bed when he said, looking confused, “My head feels like it’s going to split open. There’s someone in here with me.”

“That’s the Solana. It messes with your brain. Try to sleep. It’s the only way.”

Arthur left Merlin’s door ajar and the landing light on before going to his room. He couldn’t settle, the worry warring with the guilt and the grief. In the end, he crept downstairs to the sound of soft snores from Merlin. He took a screwdriver from the drawer, went back upstairs and removed the lock from his bedroom door.

Afterwards, still restless and miserable, Arthur went up to the attic, where he’d hidden the unopened envelope that Gwen had given him. According to the legislature, these bedrooms would one day be occupied by their children, as many as they liked. Surrogates taken from the farming or manufacturing counties would carry the embryos borne from the fusion of their gametes. They weren’t limited by physical constraints, not with their superior genetic make-up and fertility status.

Arthur extracted the envelope from the fireplace and by lamplight sat down to read. Gwen had deciphered the code for him, her neat script beneath the typed print which would look as innocuous as the lost page of a medical supply inventory to the untrained, unsuspecting eye.

It was important, every last word, but the last line… Gwen had left a message of her own just for him. Arthur had to read it several times, to glean the bigger meaning hidden beneath the power of those last few words. It was inconceivable and yet there it was. They’d done it. They’d found their way in.

The dim light from the lamp felt brighter as the tight knots of frustration in Arthur’s mind began to unravel.

For the best part of the morning, Merlin was quietly delivered liberal quantities of tea and a generous helping of bacon and thickly buttered toast.

Arthur tiptoed around him, hardly saying anything, except, “We’ll talk, when you feel better,” with genuine care and tenderness. No fear. Even through the blinding pain of what felt like shrapnel in his eyeballs, Merlin could see with clarity what he’d only glimpsed before, what kind of man Arthur truly was. There was nothing shallow or selfish about him—quite the opposite. Arthur wouldn’t
leave his lover, out of love and loyalty, not belligerence, as Uther would have no doubt believed.

In the eyes of the law, knowing about illegal activity and keeping silent was complicity, and complicity was no less a crime than the act itself. Arthur had been trying to protect Merlin, from the law, and possibly from falling in love with him. He’d succeeded in the former, failed dismally in the latter. It was, ironically, that sad admission that finalised Merlin’s decision to keep Arthur’s secret.

When the pounding in Merlin’s head abated to a dull thud, he emerged from the curtained and hushed haven of his room, to shower and dress. It was two in the afternoon.

Arthur was waiting for him in the kitchen, looking like he hadn’t slept.

“I suppose you remember last night?” he asked.

“Everything,” Merlin said.

He sat down opposite Arthur, on the same seat he’d taken on that November day when Arthur was cleaning his guns. What a different type of conversation this was going to be. Back then, Merlin had wanted to know everything about Arthur and admit nothing of himself. How the tables had turned.

“You don’t need to say anything,” Merlin began. “It’s probably best that you don’t. I understand that.”

Arthur looked grateful. Merlin wanted to reach out for him but he needed to draw on everything he had to be brave and honest. “I have something I need to tell you. It might help, with our situation. It might help you trust me.”

“I already trust you.”

Merlin believed him, believed in his conviction. “Then think of this as collateral.” He also offered up a tentative smile which was returned. It gave him some much-needed strength to say what should have been said long ago. “I lied to the Department of Compatibility.”

“Oh?”

“On the personality profile questions. I wasn’t entirely truthful about my interests, my opinions, my reactions. Some of my answers were the complete opposite of the facts, actually.”

Arthur said nothing. His eyebrows went up, like they did sometimes. It was a sort of exasperated, “Really, Merlin?” kind of expression and not at all angry.

There had been a lot of questions, and it was hard for Merlin to remember each and every one he hadn’t answered truthfully. He did his best while Arthur patiently listened, without interruption or reproof. It took quite some time, but once Merlin had got everything off his chest, he felt better.

Arthur was thinking; his frown was etched deep into his forehead and his lips pursed. Merlin wasn’t worried. If Arthur was going to reach over the table and throttle him he’d have done it by now.

The seconds began to feel like hours. Then, like a bolt from the blue, Arthur slammed his palms on the table and started laughing. He laughed and laughed with his head thrown back and his shoulders shaking. Merlin had expected some anger. If truth be told, quite a lot. They might not be married and in this dreadful position if Merlin had been honest. How could Arthur find that funny?

At last, Arthur stilled and said, “You thought you could cheat on the personality tests? Why on earth would you do that?”
He was, evidently, greatly amused by this revelation. How could he be so utterly clueless?

Merlin arched and snapped, “It’s all right for you, with your friends and your chiselled jaw and piercing blue eyes, and your,” he gestured towards Arthur’s chest, “your muscles. But look at me. I’m skinny and clumsy and I always say the wrong thing and back in Ealdor I had one friend, only one person except my mum who found my company tolerable. So when I found out I was fertile, I had this chance to get away, one chance, just one chance and I didn’t want to mess it up. I wanted everything to be different and perfect and … and … Stop fucking laughing at me! It’s not funny.”

“Merlin, stop,” Arthur said, too sweetly, too affectionately. He closed his fist gently around Merlin’s. “There is nothing wrong with you exactly as you are. Nothing. You didn’t need to lie.”

Merlin’s chest tightened. He found it hard to breathe without gasping. Arthur needed to stop, he needed to stop talking, he needed to stop being nice. Merlin couldn’t hear this. He couldn’t take it. Not from him, not now.

The room started spinning as Arthur continued, “In any case, you can’t cheat on those questionnaires.”

Merlin braced himself. “What do you mean?”

Arthur brushed his thumb softly over Merlin’s wrist. “I’ve seen your results. Exhibits advanced skills in data manipulation. They knew what you were up to. Like I said before, traits like that can be an asset here, where in somewhere like the Eastern Counties they’re a liability.”

“As long as you’re on the right side?” If Merlin’s tone was bitter, it wasn’t directed at Arthur.

“Yes,” Arthur began then promptly closed his mouth in a deliberate pause.

The two of them had a chance to get past the hesitation and awkwardness, to get along with each other. It wasn’t what Merlin wanted, it wasn’t nearly enough, but he wasn’t about to let it go this time. Arthur needed to know he could depend on him with absolute certainty.

“I’m on your side, always,” Merlin said, turning his hand in Arthur’s and gripping it, tight as a soldier’s promise.

“I underestimated you, in every way, and for that and so many things, I’m truly sorry.”

Arthur’s confession was tender and Merlin’s heart shattered for what was right before him and completely beyond his reach. Then, in the wake of Arthur’s fond smile, his face grew taut with worry. “You don’t owe me anything. Remember that, if you should ever be asked that question by … anyone else. Okay?”

Merlin could hardly hold up his head to nod his assent. He was tired and overwhelmed with everything that had happened over the last twenty-four hours. He’d lost Arthur in one way, won him in another, and he didn’t know where that left him.

“Merlin, are you all right?”

“I have a headache. I get them sometimes.”

“It’s a Solana hangover. Guaranteed for two days. And some stress, probably, what with that overactive brain of yours.”

Merlin hoped that was true. The buzzing noise in his right ear—that was new—and what felt like
sparks searing his eyes said it might be otherwise. He reminded himself the medical hadn’t picked up anything physically wrong with him.

He didn’t want to dwell on what else it might be.
Chapter 8

VIII

There was no wind, on this most blessed, snow-covered and freezing Mid-Winter. The carriage bumped over the cobbles and one of the dappled horses at the front of the pack slipped trotting over the ice. Arthur could feel Merlin shivering beside him even in furs and an oversized hat. He pulled him closer and tucked the blanket higher about his waist.

Arthur was under siege as well. The bitter air clawed its way over the top of his gloves, under his cuffs, up his sleeves and around his neck at his collar.

“For pity’s sakes, you two, try to look like you’re enjoying yourselves,” Uther bit out from his lofty throne opposite. “People have been out here for hours waiting to see us.”

With Merlin at the tail end of a hangover and Arthur shouldering enough guilt to level a battalion, he thought they were doing a fine job of putting on a good show. Still, he bit the inside of his cheek and upped his wave.

Merlin was doing his best. He knew what this meant to Uther, and therefore what it meant to his and Arthur’s peace and privacy. His cheeks were flaming and his lips blue, yet he waved at the crowd with practiced regal flair. To Arthur’s amusement, he’d been doing it around the house constantly since the morning.

Mercifully, Uther’s annual Mid-Winter speech was to be televised from his office inside the High Chancellor’s Mansion. The crowds lining the streets, waving their red flags like they wanted nothing more than to freeze their digits off in order to get a glimpse of their ostensible royal family, would have time to make their way home and do what they really wanted to be doing: eating and drinking themselves into a blissful stupor.

Arthur and Merlin were accommodated in the drawing room outside Uther’s office, away from the cameras, alongside the ancillary staff required to facilitate the broadcast. There was a small monitor on a portable stand beside their couch, so they were at liberty to enjoy Uther’s message with the rest of the nation. Merlin sat himself as far from it as he could manage and took apart the tray of sandwiches.

Arthur watched and listened to the monitor closely, scrutinising everything Uther said, and everything he didn’t, though not out of respect or fealty. Know thine enemy. It was a lesson his father had taught him when he was a boy. Arthur learned it well and never forgot it, more so as his allegiance changed. In recent years, however, Uther had not been quite as fastidious.

Uther’s Mid-Winter speech was usually a combination of public relations, rhetoric and out and out lies. Arthur had little trouble distinguishing each from the other, though his main interest was the lies. Uther’s deceptions exposed his—and therefore Albion’s—weaknesses, vulnerabilities.

Interesting then, that Uther steadfastly declared with great enthusiasm that this year, for the first time in two decades, the average birth rate was on the rise.

This was, in fact, the truth. The lie that it hid was the interesting part.

According to the data Gwen had provided Arthur (and he’d take her numbers over his father’s any day) fertility levels, along with death rates, hadn’t changed significantly in the last ten years, which
meant that by rights the population should be in steady decline. Taking into account the official
number of fertile females, there shouldn’t be enough children being born to replace the adults that
were dying. Birth records for the counties showed that to be in evidence. Except for the South.
Something very different was going on there, something secret. Something the people of Albion
might be interested to know about.

Uther was insane. There could be no other charge.

It was time for a change. It was time for a meeting with the key members of the Movement in
Camelot.

Arthur had a plan. And it didn’t involve magic.

In Ealdor, Mid-Winter had been a quiet affair. Merlin and Hunith did what most people did—ate too
much and watched the seasonal television, including the High Chancellor’s address to the nation.
They weren’t exactly patriotic; patriotism required a level of freedom they didn’t possess. For
Hunith, it was tradition. Merlin sat through it to keep her company.

As he bit into another smoked salmon sandwich, Merlin wondered what his mum would be doing
today and found he no longer had an appetite.

All the lonely times in the last four months that Merlin had longed for company, and here he was in a
room full of people wishing he could be alone. Instead, if the last time he was here was anything to
go on, he had an interminable day of familial tension to look forward to. In addition, to add insult to
injury, highlights of their festivities were to be photographed in their complete sordid glory for a four-

As it turned out, Merlin was granted some reprieve. Arthur valiantly acted as a buffer during the
day’s duties. He seemed keenly aware of how Merlin was feeling and probably felt guilty, and
responsible. Knowing that eased some of Merlin’s own pain and bitterness.

Nonetheless, he couldn’t help thinking about how long he would have to endure this lie. Would
Arthur wait until his father’s demise to officially cast Merlin aside? Or was there a chance Arthur’s
affair wouldn’t last? Then what? Would he come to Merlin and expect his arms to be open? Or,
Merlin shamefully thought, would Arthur entertain the possibility of bedding his husband as well as a
secret lover?

Merlin didn’t know how to feel about any of it. He’d never expected to be put in this position. He
was grateful, however, not to be in Arthur’s shoes, even if his own were pinching.

When they headed home it was without the sickening sense of dread that had plagued Merlin every
time he’d reached the front door in the last four months. He was less angry, though sadder. He would
have to live with that. He had no other choice.

No sooner the front door was closed behind them, and Merlin was wearily contemplating how this
evening would pan out, Arthur said, “I want to show you something. Upstairs.”

“Um. Okay,” Merlin said, uncertain. The lock was off Arthur’s door—he hadn’t missed that—but
Arthur couldn’t be inviting him in there, surely?

More confused than ever, Merlin followed Arthur, who was already striding up the stairs.
Arthur’s destination wasn’t his bedroom. He went past that without a second glance, and Merlin’s, and took the second flight of stairs up to the attic. Ordinarily, Merlin never went up there. He had no reason to, and no idea what was waiting for him in that empty, neglected part of the house.

They stopped outside the door of one of the three bedrooms.

“I was thinking it’s a bit of a waste, that we aren’t using these rooms.”

Merlin’s stomach dropped. *He wants to start a family, to cover his tracks.*

“So,” Arthur went on, “if you want, perhaps you could use this smallest one as a darkroom.”

“A darkroom?”

“Yes. I heard photographers like to develop their own film. It gives them more control. You’d be able to do the same, here at home. What do you think?”

“Really? My own darkroom?” Merlin couldn’t contain his astonished delight. “I’ve been using the darkrooms at the University. But you have to book your time in. This is… Arthur, I don’t know what to say.”

If the look on Arthur’s face was anything to go on, Merlin didn’t need to say anything else. It was like a light had gone on inside him and he was glowing. It shone from his smile and from his eyes which were bluer and more radiant than Merlin had ever seen them.

Merlin was glimpsing the Arthur that belonged to someone else, the Arthur that he would never have. His delight was short-lived as his sorrow enveloped him. “This is the best present I’ve ever had,” Merlin forced out past the lump in his throat. He turned away, looking around the empty room under the guise of measuring its potential—anything to stop Arthur seeing him on the verge of tears.

“If you can find out what you need, I’ll get started on it right away.”

“I could help you, if you want,” Merlin said, blinking back the prickling in his eyes, keeping his face firmly turned to the shuttered windows and away from Arthur’s gaze.

“Yes, we could do it together.”

Arthur sounded pleased.

We. Together.

Merlin couldn’t speak another word. He nodded dumbly. Meanwhile, Arthur was stepping closer, until he stopped right behind him. Merlin froze.

Hesitantly at first, Arthur took Merlin’s arm and turned him around. Merlin knew what was coming next and he couldn’t do anything to stop it. Arthur wrapped his arms around Merlin’s shoulders and leaned in to embrace him. Merlin knew he needed to pull away, but he slid his arms around Arthur’s waist and leaned in too, until his face was touching Arthur’s soft, honey hair. He couldn’t hold his breath against Arthur’s scent or shield his body from his warmth, no matter how much it pained him. When Arthur said, “Thank you,” Merlin was completely disarmed and had to close his eyes.

The natural course of things would have been to suffer the hug for a polite few seconds. Merlin endured it then began to relax his hold, the moment already long past the point of what might be deemed friendly. But Arthur didn’t release him. He said, “Don’t. Don’t let go.”
It hurt in Merlin’s bones to keep holding on. He’d never been in this situation before, out of his depth and on the cusp of something. A kiss? Merlin wouldn’t move his head and put his lips where they desperately wanted to go, where another’s had been before him. The seconds stretched for an eternity and Merlin’s blood was pounding past his ears, his legs growing weaker as Arthur kept him on tiptoes at the edge of a precipice.

It felt like a rush of air, sweeping upwards from inside, next, a wave of nausea and tickling inside his nostrils. Merlin pushed Arthur away and took a step backwards, pressing his knuckle to his nose.

“Sorry,” he muttered through his fist, “nosebleed.” He hadn’t had one in years, not since childhood tussling with his old friend Will.

The colour drained from Arthur’s face as he flinched back in horror.

Merlin couldn’t believe it—Arthur a soldier and afraid of the sight of blood.

He pinched below the cartilage in his nose, hard, as Arthur stood frozen an arm’s length away, like he’d gone into shock.

“Would you get me some tissue? I promise I won’t bleed all over you.”

Arthur fled the room and re-emerged a minute later with a wad of toilet roll. He looked stricken. It was pitiful really. Merlin never would have taken Arthur for squeamish. Uther must have had something to say about that—something scathing and harsh. There was a time Merlin might have teased Arthur about it himself. Maybe he still would, later, when Arthur didn’t look like he was about to pass out.

“I’m really fine,” Merlin said lightly. “It’s probably because of being out in the cold this morning then inside where it was too warm.”

“Are you sure? I could call a doctor.”

“Don’t be absurd.” Merlin released his grip and dabbed the tissue around his nostrils. There was only the smallest speck of red. “See, I think it’s stopped already.”

Arthur seemed appeased, though he kept his distance.

Merlin didn’t know what to make of it. One minute he thought he was getting to know Arthur, the next it was like he was looking at a total stranger.
IX

The sure and solid beat of Arthur’s departing footsteps echoed against the polished marble corridors of the State Building. He knew the occupants of each and every one of the government offices he passed. He knew which he could count on as ally and which as foe and which to monitor with highest regularity.

Lots of people had their grievances. It was a question of identifying them and exploiting them, such as the many Infertiles who’d lost access to significant property or land rights because they were no longer permitted to inherit. Their legacies had to be handed over to the government for redistribution to Fertile couples. There weren’t many who took kindly to this arrangement.

The number of allies was good and increasing—a third of the Cabinet, similar numbers in the Reds. Across the counties and within Camelot, when the time came, there would be many sympathisers the Movement hadn’t yet bargained for.

Arthur was leaving earlier than usual. Not enough to draw notice. A week past New Year and the daylight hours were depressingly short. No one wanted to stay late into the evening.

Once home, Arthur didn’t want to hang about, not now he’d made up his mind. He poked his head around the front door to call to Merlin that he was heading directly to Leon’s for a few hours.

There was a bang, a chair toppling, a cry of, “Wait a minute!” and Merlin haring down the stairs waving a card.

“I wanted to show you this before you go,” he said, breathless and effervescent, handing Arthur the card, an invitation to a photography exhibition. The date was a week after Imbolc—a month away. “My photographs, if they’re good enough, some of them will be on display. I have to be there. Can you come too?”

“Yes. Of course I can.” Arthur wouldn’t refuse him, not any longer, not when he didn’t have to. “We’d best hurry up and get that darkroom finished.”

Merlin looked happy for a brief and rare moment. “I’ll see you later?” he asked, hopeful.

It was Friday, after all. Arthur knew what it cost Merlin, to dare to ask, knowing that it had been weeks since Arthur last went to the Lower Town. And if his meeting at Leon’s went to plan, Arthur had every intention of going there tonight. That didn’t mean he could bear to see Merlin sag while his static smile remained.

“I’ll be back by ten.”

“Bye then,” Merlin said, deflated, disappearing back up the stairs before Arthur could catch him closing his eyes, the way he sometimes did, as if that would hide what Arthur could see written over every downward slope and closed angle of his body.

Arthur didn’t know much about this kind of love—the kind that Gwen and Leon had—but he was convinced with each passing day that there was a fledgling kind of love between them. He wanted it to be able to grow and take flight. Was it too much to ask, that he might get to have that? That he didn’t have to spend his whole life beholden to the whims of gods he wasn’t sure he believed in? Or philosophies he definitely didn’t?
Arthur walked down the street to Gwen and Leon’s with nervous trepidation. There was a fresh layer of ice crystallising over the pavement and the street lamps flickered. Winter was taking a firm hold. It was getting harder and harder for Arthur to find the will and the means to make the trip to the Lower Town.

Five of them sat at the table, with a spread of food and warmed wine: Gwen, Leon, Lance, Gwen’s brother Elyan, and Arthur. They toasted the New Year and their health before getting straight to business.

Gentle-spoken Lance went first. “The number of suitable recruits for the Reds is down again. In the spring, we’ve been instructed to begin recruiting from the North, from the livestock farms.” Anger simmered beneath his warm, brown eyes. Otherwise, he was as calm and composed as ever.

Lance had risen through the ranks of the Camelot Reds quickly, the result of his diplomacy and outstanding marksmanship. Ironically, his unwavering sense of fairness and justice had brought him to Arthur—that and the loss of a loved one to the noose. He was as yet unmarried; as a military Infertile he’d been able to extend his single status.

“Who will manage the livestock if they take the men from the North?” Gwen asked. As she and the rest of them well knew, the Northern farms were already losing too many young women.

“No meat rationing will begin again next winter,” Leon replied.

It was to be expected. There were going to be labour shortages everywhere in the coming years.

Elyan’s news was more encouraging, in a manner of speaking. “There’s been unrest, in the Northern and Eastern counties, because of the number of young women taken. It’s doubled over the last three years, while the birth rates have continued to drop. Some villages have lost a quarter of their girls. I don’t think it would take much more to incite revolt.”

More houses were becoming empty. Whole villages were being abandoned as the last of their inhabitants were shipped out and consolidated with other dwindling communities. As each discovery was revealed, the dismal picture of a nation in peril was emerging to those with the means to see it—those sat around this table.

If nothing changed, it might be possible for Albion to function independently for a few years longer. However, it was only a matter of time before the nations over the water in the South and East, over the Great Wall in the North, and across the mountains in the West, began to realise Albion’s vulnerability. They were in imminent danger of invasion, displacement or worse.

Except, Uther’s figures had reported an increase in the population, and they were not a fabrication. Thousands of tiny fingerprints and blood samples were the proof. It was this oversight, using Camelot laboratories for the registration of thousands of otherwise unaccountable births that had planted the seeds of suspicion and had ultimately lead Gwen to her diabolical conclusion. When they put the sparse evidence they had together, Arthur was inclined to agree with her. When he received her note just before Mid-Winter, he was in no doubt she was right.

All other business concluded, the time had come for Gwen to reveal to Elyan and Lance her big secret. It was going to change everything—the direction they thought they’d been headed for the last three years.

Arthur nodded to her and she stood.

“Gentlemen,” she said. “I have one last piece of news, this time not gleaned from the government
administrative offices. I hope you’re ready to be surprised.”

Her chest heaved and she stood more surely. Leon took her hand, her face lit up with a brilliant smile and she joyfully said, “I’m pregnant.”

Leon rose, taller than ever, and took her in an embrace.

Elyan was shaking his head and saying over and over, “You fucking did it. You fucking did it.”

“How?” said Lance. “What’s going on?”

Leon sat down, keeping a hold of Gwen’s hand. She put the other to her belly. It was still flat, nothing showing except her happiness. “Every three months since I was thirteen, I’ve had my mandatory shot of vitamins like a good, good girl. They give me stomach cramps, which seemed strange to me, so I asked Elyan to do some digging. You know how good he is at that.”

He winked at her.

“He sweet-talked his way into the labs, and eventually discovered that one of the main ingredients in my ‘vitamin shot’ is a chemical known as progestogen. It’s a hormone, used once upon a time as a contraceptive. With a bribe here and there, for the last nine months, my vitamins have been a shot of nothing but pure water.”

Lance looked even more puzzled. “Does that mean you’re fertile?”

Leon answered. “Yes, she is. I’m the only one of us who is infertile. We checked that too.”

“Gwen’s fertile, but was matched to Leon, who is infertile. I don’t understand. Why would they do that? And how can you be pregnant, Gwen?” Lance threw his hands up—

As Leon dropped the final bombshell.

“Arthur donated us his semen. In all honesty, we didn’t think it would work. I mean, we did it here, with a thermometer and a syringe. But it worked the third month we tried. We think Gwen’s nearly two months gone.”

Lance was only one of them with no inkling that Gwen had been trying to conceive, so it was hardly surprising that his jaw looked like it was about to hit the table. Of course it did. What they’d done was unspeakable—and terrifyingly wonderful. And Merlin—he didn’t know how close to the mark he’d been that day—he was right. He was right! Arthur loved Gwen and Leon and he would love their baby, but the baby was going to be theirs no matter its biological lineage.

Leon continued. “By our estimates, there are many more fertile females than male. In order to retain the current order, the government couldn’t allow that information to be known, even with the birth rate as low as it is. Until gamete donation isn’t something reviled—”

Arthur could no longer hold back. “I’m sure the general distaste for gamete donation, which my father has done nothing to mitigate, has nothing to do with propriety or compatibility and everything to do with his pride and his ego. We’re in this mess because of him.”

It was time Arthur took charge, to be the leader he was destined to be, the elusive Emrys be damned. He stood, motioning for Gwen and Leon to sit. As they looked up at him, his four friends and comrades, waiting for his word, loyal and dedicated to a fault, Arthur’s chest swelled with pride and determination.
“Now that we know about Gwen, we have material proof of what we could only suspect has been happening across Albion and in the South for the past few years. The Blooms is not only accommodating the few hundred surrogates carrying the offspring of paired fertile males. The Blooms is a farm, where thousands of fertile young women from the counties are being taken to be impregnated, possibly with sperm from fertile men of carefully selected genotypes.”

Elyan asked, “What do you mean, carefully selected genotypes?”

“My guess, the sperm of our best soldiers, farmers, labourers. Anything in short supply. The number of registered infants outstrips the number of fertile couples fivefold, so we can only speculate they’re being raised somewhere secret.”

The disgust and bitterness in that dining room was enough to sour the wine.

Uther was a single-minded and uncompromising man. Arthur had believed it was going to be the nation’s demise, that Uther would let his principles supersede what was best for his people. How wrong he’d been—in the worst way imaginable.

Uther would rather create an army of genetically homogenous minions to carry out Albion’s menial work instead of risking his beloved compatibility matching. This was an altogether different kind of compatibility matching that had nothing to do with nurturing love.

Arthur was more inclined towards a brave, new world, where stability was forged from wider cooperation and friendship, where family was community and community was family, whatever role a person played. On top of that, a world that embraced magic as readily as it embraced science. It might be the stuff of dreams but Arthur was ready to trust in his, just as Morgana did in hers.

“Do we have evidence, anything we can broadcast of what’s going on at the Blooms?” Lance said.

Arthur replied, “Nothing concrete. A few fuzzy photographs, some memos and what now makes sense—one of Morgana’s visions.”

It had happened over a year ago. Morgana had been insistent that a clerk had changed a head count from four thousand to four hundred. Unfortunately, she’d been unable to see what department or region the number pertained to. Without a clue as to its origins, the information had been useless.

Lance rubbed his hands together. “Friends, we have a mission. It’s time to find out exactly what’s going on at the Blooms.”

“More than that,” Arthur said. “If I can persuade Morgause to rally the rebels in the counties, I believe we’ll be ready to take the Inner Citadel by Mid-Summer. Then, all I have to do is get the people on my side.”

Arthur could use rhetoric to discredit the propaganda that the nation had been drip-fed for generations, but there was nothing more compelling than leading by example.

“We’ll have to make your pregnancy public, Gwen. Let everyone know that I have abdicated my rights as parent to your child. You and Leon are the child’s only rightful and legal parents with the full rights and privileges of two biological parents. Then we give everyone who wants a family the chance to do so. They won’t get the financial incentives they do now, we don’t have the resources, but we’ll get our economists to work out something viable. There’ll be a way to make it work. The people will have a choice, whether to marry, who to marry, with help only if they ask for it. There’ll be no more forced surrogacy. Everyone will be able to choose whether or not to have children.”

It was radical. It was going to be chaotic and the results unpredictable. Still, Arthur couldn’t shake
the feeling that it was the right thing to do.

Unsurprisingly, it was Gwen who interrupted Arthur to ask, “Where does Emrys fit in to this?”

“Do you see Emrys here, helping us?” Arthur replied.

“No.”

“Then there is your answer.”

There were nods of approval from around the table and it was agreed. Arthur would take his plan to his sister and Morgause.

Elyan and Lance left, and Arthur went upstairs to change his clothes, painfully aware that he’d told Merlin he’d be home by ten. There was no chance of that now.

He was lacing his boots when Gwen appeared in the doorway, her arms folded across her chest.

“You don’t have to go tonight. We could send a messenger to The Tavern,” she said, as if sensing his reticence.

“Not for this.”

“Then please be careful. Power’s out for the night in the Eastern Counties. It might not last here.”

“Dearest Guinevere, I’m not afraid of the dark.”

She walked over and punched his arm. “Nor am I. Only the things that lurk in it.”

The Evermore Hotel, with its boarded windows and flaking plaster, looked ready to be condemned. Its outward appearance, however, was deceptive. In a suite on the seventh floor, ornate iron oil lamps defied the dark and a paraffin heater was keeping the cold at bay, along with a mountain of blankets. Nested beneath them, Morgana and Cenred were playing cards.

“Morgana cheating again?” Arthur said, following Morgause into the room.

“Arthur!”

“Morgana.” He hugged her and acknowledged Cenred with a nod.

Arthur’s prelude was necessarily short. He sat amidst the fur and wool, and succinctly recounted the evening’s events thus far. At each revelation, Morgana, Morgause and Cenred appeared unsurprised, until the last. Cenred choked on his rum. Morgause’s eyes grew dark. Morgana, always one for melodrama, swooned then composed herself quickly enough to exclaim “You’ve sired a child, with Gwen?”

“I didn’t sleep with her.”

“That’s not the point,” said Morgause.

“No, the point is that as we speak there are in all probability thousands of babies and small children being raised like cattle for what purpose I don’t know except that no good will come of it.”

“Arthur, Arthur, Arthur.” Morgause slapped her palm to her forehead and grabbed a fistful of her bountiful hair, which was highly preferable to where Arthur thought she might attempt to grab. “You
got a married woman pregnant. What were you thinking?"

“We didn’t think it would work.”

For once, Morgause and Morgana were speechless.

Arthur braced himself and continued. “Gwen and Leon and I, we took a huge risk but I think it will pay off. I just need to know if you have enough people to contain any backlash outside Camelot if we take The State Building in the Inner Citadel.”

“I think so,” Morgause said, looking to Cenred for his assent. “When the time comes, it’ll be crowd control in the beginning. You won’t be able to take down the borders between counties for a while.”

Cenred crossed the room to the sideboard, got out the map of Albion and unrolled it across the coffee table. It was tattered and curled at the edges from use and musty from the damp air. Moving matchsticks and buttons across county borders and Cenred’s secret smuggling routes, they talked, as they had many times before. When the Movement moved they would need nationwide coordination. Elyan knew someone in the Central Broadcasting Office, Lance had secured the radio frequencies, Cenred the equipment. Arms, supplies, people could be quickly put into place with minimal notice, upon Arthur’s word.

Three long years of preparation and now they were doing nothing more than playing a waiting game. It made no sense, not when… There was nothing more to impede what Arthur been desperate and anxious to tell them from the instant he’d walked through the door. “I want this done by Mid-Summer, whether or not we have Emrys.”

“We can’t,” Morgana said. “It will never work.”

Arthur had expected that response from Morgause first, not his sister.

“Yes, it will.” He stood firm. “We don’t need Emrys. We have the manpower and enough against Uther to get the people on our side. We can show them that the status quo will either wipe us out or turn us into monsters.”

Still, Morgana wouldn’t have it. “And how will you convince them magic is safe? Or is that no longer a priority?”

“You and Morgause will find a way. You can do that better than I ever could.”

“Not without Emrys,” she bit out through clenched teeth.

Arthur tensed, trying to keep the anger prickling over his skin from escaping his mouth. He had to make her see reason. “Let’s say for the sake of argument we find Emrys, or, by some miracle he finds us, what is he to me, exactly?”

Morgana stood, shoulders back, chin up. Her stance was aggressive, attacking; she wasn’t going to back down. Some of Uther’s lessons, and personality traits, had stuck with her too. “Emrys is your destiny.”

Arthur could have guessed Morgana’s reply and that riled him more than the fact she’d said it. “What does that mean?” he demanded, and more angrily, “Do I have to fuck him? Does he have to fuck me?”

“Arthur!” Morgause stepped in between them, her palms on his chest holding him back. As always on Morgana’s side, though they were meant to be in this together.
Arthur had never spoken to Morgana that way before but living here, it shouldn’t have shocked her. Anyway, she was the one who’d forced him to say it. Why wouldn’t she see what was right in front of her eyes, in the real world, not in some unreliable magical realm?

The room fell silent except for the sputtering flame from the heater. Morgana returned to her seat, crestfallen. She’d been imprisoned here for so long that there had been times Arthur wondered if there was a part of her that was afraid to leave, to return to the world and find her place in it. He hadn’t meant to be harsh. He wasn’t deliberately trying to hurt her. But he wasn’t going to change his mind. Gently, Arthur pleaded, “I need to know, Morgana. I need to know what I’m waiting for.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. “I knew it. You’ve fallen in love with Merlin, haven’t you?” She looked so betrayed, and that wasn’t fair. Couldn’t she see it wasn’t fair? Arthur had risked everything for her and here he was again.

“Yes. I’m in love with him.” Arthur stood his ground, tall and proud. If he was going to say this, it wasn’t going to be with his head hanging. “I really thought at the start of this, the promises I made would mean nothing to me and that I’d be able to leave him. Well, I was wrong. I won’t leave him, not because of the law or destiny, but because he’s loyal and loving and despite me being an absolute shit, he’s stood by me and asked for nothing in return.”

Cenred sniggered and slapped his thigh. “Good God. I told you he wasn’t fucking anyone at the club.”

“Shut up, Cenred,” Morgause said, looking daggers.

Arthur sagged with relief. No one had throttled him. The hardest part was said and the rest was merely details. “If Emrys shows up, we’ll cross that bridge. I’ll do everything I can to work alongside him. Until then the plan is we take Camelot Mid-Summer, without him if need be. Are you with me? Can I still count on you?”

Arthur regarded the three of them, his allies, his family. Six months ago, he would never have dared to challenge Morgana, let alone Morgause or Cenred. He’d lacked the confidence, or perhaps the conviction. He wasn’t sure which. Now though, he knew with certainty that this was right.

The wait felt like hours. Finally Morgause smiled, opened her arms and said with true warmth and affection, “At last, our young prince is ready to be king.” She took Arthur’s right hand and closed her small hands around it. “Of course we’re with you. You’ve never let us down.”

“You’ve never let me down.”

In turn, Morgana softened and coaxed Arthur back to the chair. “You really love him, don’t you?” she said.

“Yes, I do. Please tell me it’s not wrong.”

“I don’t know everything, Arthur. I do know that we’ve been waiting for you to learn to trust yourself. You’re still young, but you’re strong and courageous and you’re ready.”

Outside, a siren wailed in the distance.

Cenred jumped up. “Curfew—in half an hour.” That was his cue to go out, not stay in.

Arthur had nearly another two hours before the potion would fully wear off. He wouldn’t have Morgause change him back—it would be too risky, for him and for Gregory. Better to take his chances in the dark.
Declining Morgause’s offer to stay, Arthur prepared to leave. Before he did, he had one favour to ask of Cenred. They made their way to the back of the hotel together, wrapping themselves up against the cold, ready to brave the night. Arthur wasn’t too proud to ask on Gwen’s behalf, “Soon, in a few months, I need you to get Gwen and Leon out of Camelot, to somewhere safe where she can have the baby.”

Cenred didn’t falter. “It’s done. I know just the place,” he said, sending Arthur on his way with his promise.

Arthur walked into the darkness with the strength of dragon wings beneath his feet.

The streets were clearing as he reached The Tavern. Gregory was waiting for him in the alleyway around the side. They exchanged their boots, their identity cards and tense laughter. There was no time for more. Reds with snarly dogs on long leads were starting their patrol, sending stragglers on their way, checking the identities of anyone suspicious. There was an armoured van parked on the main street with two empty benches and no windows in the back. Any trouble and it would soon fill, taking its occupants to one of the security stations in the Lower Town. Only those with a death wish would choose to end up there.

Arthur couldn’t get through the security gate looking like he did. His next choice to get home would be to use the network of abandoned paths, the narrow spaces between the buildings and fences, to wind his way out of the Lower Town. Eight foot drifts of snow and thick, fresh ice put paid to that. Instead, Arthur was going to have to use the storm drains and sewers—in the pitch black. Arthur could walk the tunnel ledges until they picked up the river. From there he would be able to edge along the frozen bank to the outskirts of the residential Upper Town. The last half a mile home would be easier if the lights were out. Arthur could probably make his way through the back alleyways behind the gardens unnoticed.

He’d been in worse situations than this.

None immediately sprang to mind. But still.

The final siren wailed and the lights went out.

Gregory and Arthur stalked their way around to the back of The Tavern. There was enough dappled moonlight to make out the dark outline in the concrete of a wide drain cover, firmly bolted to the drain beneath and too heavy for a single man to lift.

That was no deterrent to Gregory. He placed his hands on the metal and whispered his words of magic. The cover was warmed, loosened and lifted. Nimbly, Arthur dropped his legs in the hole, found a rung and wasted no time beginning his descent. He was shoulder deep when Gregory put his hand in front of Arthur’s face and said, “Here. This should last you fifteen minutes. Maybe to the river.”

It was a ball of faint blue light. Arthur took it gladly and said, “Be safe.”

“You too,” Gregory said as he lowered the cover.

Arthur was alone in the dank and the pitch-black, unable to see more than a few feet in front of his nose. He’d planned for this eventuality, pacing the darkness with his eyes closed, counting out steps and turns.

No amount of practice could have prepared him for the real thing, or for the stench.
Ten o’clock rolled towards eleven. Then the electricity went off without warning. The house and the street were plunged into brittle darkness and Merlin was left with only the hearth fire for company and warmth. He thought about his mum. Her power was probably off too, probably had been several times already this winter. It was a first for Merlin in Camelot. The drill was the same though—a torch with batteries that weren’t flat, candles and plenty of blankets. He pulled the big armchair to the fireside and bedded in to wait for Arthur.

Who wasn’t home.

Merlin shouldn’t have expected any different, except this was different. If the power was off here, it was off in the Lower Town—which meant a curfew. If Arthur was caught there he’d be arrested. His position might afford him some leniency but not his lover.

Every low howl of wind, every rattle and creak of the house protesting the weather amplified Merlin’s dread. He burrowed deeper beneath his blanket and closed his eyes, chasing sleep and getting nowhere.

The log in the fire popped and cracked and Merlin blinked his eyes open, alerted, because no, the noise wasn’t coming from the fire. There was a scraping sound, tapping, coming from the back of the house, outside the kitchen. A fox, probably, looking for food. They didn’t usually venture this close to the houses. The darkness had made it brave.

Not Merlin. He sat tight and hoped it went away soon.

No such luck. It banged and it knocked. It wasn’t a fox.

Merlin strained to hear better, creeping from his chair to the hallway, out of sight of the kitchen window. Another knock, louder than the last and what sounded like a moan.

Merlin clamped his hand over his mouth, in time to stop his gasp escaping. His heart was pounding fast, frantic. He was only steps to the front door. He could call out for help and the Reds would come running—

And find out that Arthur wasn’t home.

Arthur.

Merlin skidded to the back door, slid to his knees and called softly through the lock, “Arthur, is that you?”

“Please, Merlin, let me in!” It was Arthur, his voice a weak, scratchy whisper.

In that split second, the time taken for no more than a terrified heartbeat, Merlin realised Arthur was in trouble. Not the brawling and boisterous kind of trouble that some young men were apt to pursue on a Friday night, when alcohol and bravado got the better of them. No, this was trouble of the serious kind.

Merlin slammed back the lock, turned the handle and Arthur tumbled in through the door, curled tightly into a ball, his whole body shivering, shaking, breathing in quick, hard sobs.

“Stay there,” Merlin said, and ran to the living room to fetch his warmed blanket.
On Merlin’s return, Arthur hadn’t moved. His head was buried in his arms, his knees drawn up to his chin. He wasn’t wearing any shoes and his socked feet were sodden. Merlin wrapped him in the blanket and lit one of the candles laid out on the kitchen table. Arthur shrunk from the dim light.

“No, don’t look at me,” he said.

Merlin crouched in front of him—as if he was going to obey an order like that—and wrapped his arms around Arthur. “It’s all right,” Merlin soothed, “you’re home, you’re safe.”

After he’d swallowed and gagged past Arthur’s rancid smell, like he’d fallen in a sewage drain, which by the looks of him he might have, Merlin realised something wasn’t quite right. Arthur’s hair was darker than it should be, even in the low light, and when Merlin tilted up Arthur’s reluctant chin he saw something startling, something that ought to be impossible.

Arthur’s face was moving, not in the way a person smiles or grimaces but the bones and flesh contorting and his eyes, they looked not blue but green. The longer Merlin looked in horror and awe the more he thought his own eyes must be deceiving him because moments later the strangeness was gone and there was Arthur, pale and anguished, still shivering in Merlin’s arms.

Perhaps Merlin had awoken from a dream.

No, not a dream. A nightmare.

Where Arthur had magic.

Teeth chattering, eyes wide with fear, Arthur stammered, “You saw.”

Merlin nodded grimly, too shocked to deny it, and Arthur began to sob. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Merlin held him in his arms and whispered, “I’m on your side, remember. I’m on your side, no matter what.” Merlin murmured everything he could think of to calm him. Arthur kept shivering, whether from cold or shock or fear, Merlin didn’t know. All he knew was that he needed to do something. First and foremost he needed to get Arthur warm and clean.

Slowly, carefully, Merlin guided Arthur upstairs to the bathroom.

He ran the bath, relieved for once there was hot water left in the tank, then set to peeling off Arthur’s clothes, his clothes—Merlin had never seen these clothes before, a size too small and damp and torn. Arthur didn’t protest until Merlin reached the shirt that clung stickily to his back. The light from the candles was enough to see the reason. There was a messy gash, the length of Merlin’s hand, oozing blood from Arthur’s shoulder blade.

Easing Arthur into the water, Merlin could see the wound was deep. “Your shoulder,” he said, panicked. “It’s badly cut.”

Arthur didn’t reply. He was closed in on himself and seemed only dimly aware of what Merlin was telling him.

Merlin let the bath fill close to the top, sponging Arthur’s shoulders, arms and back with the hot water, gentling his moans and willing himself to be strong. When Merlin tried to clean Arthur’s wound, Arthur groaned in pain as the blood and soap and water ran in russet rivulets down his back, curling in the water. He didn’t resist, he didn’t complain.

By degrees, Arthur stretched out his legs and his shivering subsided, though his agonised frown remained. His breaths were shaky, his eyelids heavy, his head bobbing forward and jerking up again
as he struggled to stay awake, or conscious, Merlin wasn’t sure.

Merlin didn’t ask him any questions; Arthur offered, stammering, “Barbed wire. River. Ice.”

Arthur had taken the long way home, to avoid being caught out in a curfew. He’d risked his life for his illicit lover. Merlin tried not to dwell on it. Arthur needed him, for this at least.

Just as Merlin had imagined, under circumstances that couldn’t have been more different, Arthur’s body was muscular and strong and that made it all the more frightening to see him tremble. Merlin was scared, very scared. Taking Arthur’s chin in his hand, Merlin turned his face towards him and said firmly, “Arthur, I need to call you an ambulance.”

“No!”

Arthur splashed and flailed and tried to scrabble from the water. He was too agitated, too slippery and heavy for Merlin to stop him. As Arthur flopped from the bath to the floor, Merlin could do nothing but grab a towel, all the towels, and wrap Arthur in them before the bathroom ended up looking like the scene of a massacre.

“All right, all right. No ambulance.” Merlin waited for Arthur to still. “But you need stitches.”

Jammed in the space between the toilet and the bath, peeking out from the towel around his head, Arthur finally calmed enough to rasp, “In my bedroom, drawer by the bed, bottom. Kit.” Then he closed his eyes and the side of his head bumped wearily against the rim of the bath.

Wasting no more time, Merlin ran to Arthur’s bedroom and was barging blindly through the door—as there was a click, a whir and the lights came back on in the street outside and in the hallway downstairs. With the aid of the bedside lamp, Merlin easily found the small green first aid box amongst some books and socks, and a photograph in a silver frame of a girl with long, black hair and glassy-green eyes.

Merlin took the box in one hand, the picture in the other as—

Arthur appeared in the doorway, his damp skin flushed pink, with a towel around his waist and one around his shoulders. “My sister, Morgana,” he said, with remarkable composure.

“I thought so,” Merlin replied, only noticing now his hand was shaking. “Do you miss her?”

“Not as much as she misses me.”

_Misses me._ Present tense. A figure of speech, a vestige of grief?

Merlin put back the picture as Arthur took out pyjamas and an undershirt from his chest of drawers. Merlin knew he ought not to watch as Arthur pulled up the trousers, or let his eyes be drawn to Arthur’s privates, to the nest of dark hair around his groin or the perfect roundness of his backside—too late. That, sadly, was probably the last time Merlin would get to see Arthur naked.

Merlin’s eyes darted from Arthur, still bare to the waist, to the bed and to the first aid box. He opened the lid, nervously sifting over its contents while Arthur turned his shoulder to the mirror to examine his wound.

“You’re going to have to stitch me up.”

“Me? I can’t do it.”
Arthur’s earlier distress was diminishing as Merlin’s increased, and he said so surely Merlin almost believed him, “Yes you can. Oh, Merlin, yes you can.”

“No. I can’t. You’re the one with magic. Can’t you heal yourself or something?”

Arthur settled on the end of the bed and with his arm extended, bade Merlin to sit down next to him. He laced his fingers through Merlin’s and squeezed them tightly. “I don’t have magic. I have a sister with magic, that’s all.” He took the first aid box from Merlin, while his words sunk in like ice thawing over parched ground.

“Your sister? She’s alive?”

“Yes. She’s hidden, she’s safe.”

As if he’d said nothing of note, Arthur pulled thread and a needle from the box. Except his hands were shaking, like Merlin’s, more than Merlin’s, too much. Without another thought, Merlin took the needle and thread from Arthur and did it for him, as he came to his senses, his brain catching up with everything too slow, too slow.

Merlin leaned back to look at Arthur’s shoulder. Smears of blood were congealing and drying on his fevered skin, though more was weeping from the cut. If Arthur wouldn’t seek medical help, Merlin was going to have to do it. He swallowed thickly and shuddered. He wasn’t ready, though he wasn’t deliberately stalling when he said, “That’s where you’ve been tonight? All the nights? With your sister?”

“Yes.”

“There’s no … you don’t have someone else?”

“Only my sister. No one else.” Arthur pressed closer, smiling weakly. “Please, Merlin, I’ll explain if I don’t bleed to death first.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Mop up the blood, clean it with antiseptic then just sew the sides together. It’s not a test. I’d appreciate it if you’re quick, though.”

Looking suddenly ashen, Arthur lurched forward and Merlin had to catch him in his arms.

Merlin reassured himself it was mending, that’s all. He’d sewn up his torn clothes, many times. He’d had to, since he ripped things so often his mother refused to keep doing it for him. Merlin hummed manically while he worked, urging himself on every time Arthur winced, as the needle pierced his skin and the thread pulled the ragged edges of his ripped flesh together.
When Merlin was done, he wiped the wound with antiseptic once more and dressed it with gauze. He helped Arthur put on his undershirt and unflagging, tucked Arthur into his bed before he began picking up the towels. Merlin pressed on with what had to be done though he was fit to drop.

“Come back. Stay with me,” Arthur whispered hoarsely.

“I should clean everything up first. Get rid of the evidence, right?”

“Yes,” Arthur said, eyes closing.
At last, when Merlin was ready to retire, Arthur was fast asleep on his good side facing the middle of the bed. The bedclothes were turned back, ready for Merlin to slip in beside him. Arthur stirred as the bed dipped down, stretched his arm across to find Merlin and pull him closer.

Merlin lay stiffly, unsure of how to position himself or how much contact was allowed. He settled his arm outside the covers, across Arthur’s hip and willed his heart to gentle its clamorous pounding.

“At last,” Arthur sighed contentedly. Merlin felt his breath on his face and then he felt the brief and tender press of his lips. “Sleep now. We’ve got tomorrow.”

Arthur had kissed him!

Merlin couldn’t sleep, not for a long time. Not when he had to go back to every moment of the last five months, to everything he thought he knew about Arthur and examine it with fresh eyes. Eyes that saw a man with a sister with magic, hidden somewhere in the Lower Town, that he’d kept secret—for years—so that no one would find out. So that Uther wouldn’t find out.

There was no secret lover, only a secret love.

Hours into the dead of night and Arthur’s uneasy sleep, it dawned on Merlin that he knew so very little about what it meant to truly love someone. But maybe now, he was beginning to understand.
Chapter 10

X

Merlin awoke to Arthur’s hand nudging him awake, and Uther looming over the bed. *Uther!*


With regret, Merlin realised he was to blame for Uther’s unwelcome appearance. The front door hadn’t been bolted. With everything that had gone on last night and everything he’d had to take care of, he’d forgotten.

Arthur was sitting up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, awake enough to say tersely, “How dare you let yourself in. This is our house and we’re in bed. Get out.”

So this was Arthur royally pissed off. Merlin had never heard him use that tone with Uther before, and he’d never once spoken to Merlin that harshly. Merlin had no idea Arthur had it in him. Any ire that Merlin had witnessed from Arthur thus far had been a spit in the wind in comparison to the tacks he was spitting at Uther.

Uther didn’t flinch. He said levelly, “I’ll be downstairs. Arthur, I’ll see you down there shortly.”

Merlin couldn’t keep up with this melodrama. His mother would have said *you reap what you sow.* Merlin was inclined to agree—he’d wanted to be a part of Arthur’s life without knowing what that might entail. Not that he was complaining, not when in the midst of blinking away sleep Arthur’s hands were on Merlin’s face and his lips were pressing Merlin’s for a kiss before saying, “Let me take care of this. Stay there, right there.”

Twice. Arthur had kissed him twice now and Merlin hadn’t once kissed him back. Talk about looking a gift horse in the mouth.

Quickly enough, Merlin was wide awake—some parts of his anatomy more than others. The living room was directly below Arthur’s bedroom and Merlin could hear raised voices, vibrating up through the floorboards.

He ventured onto the landing, on his way to use the toilet. He wasn’t eavesdropping. It was purely circumstance that allowed him to hear Uther lecturing Arthur about his nocturnal habits. It sounded like he’d said the same thing many times before. It sounded like Arthur had heard it many times before. On his way back, the argument had escalated. When Merlin heard his own name mentioned he froze, momentarily, before deciding it was time he started behaving like he was Arthur’s husband, instead of always wishing Arthur would behave like his.

Merlin marched down the stairs to hear Arthur saying vehemently, “Not that I need to justify it to you, but I have never been unfaithful to my husband. Not once.”

Uther didn’t sound convinced. In fact, he sounded triumphant, as if he’d been desperately waiting for the opportunity to shame Arthur. He at least had the decency to look uncomfortable, albeit for a nanosecond, when Merlin peered around the door.

Arthur and Uther were stood on either side of the coffee table. Between them was an untidy pile of photographs. From what Merlin could see, they were of Arthur.

“Well?” Uther said to Arthur, angrily, waving a picture under his nose that Merlin sickly realised was
of him being lifted into a taxi by Gwaine. ‘Lifted’ being the operative word. Merlin’s guts liquefied. That meant Gwaine was on Uther’s radar as well.

Arthur brushed the picture off like it was nothing. “He’s eighteen. He got drunk. So what?”

“You,” Uther sniped, directing an accusing finger at Merlin, “are no longer part of the hoi polloi.”

Uther didn’t mention Basement Beat or imported records. That didn’t stop Merlin’s furious blush. He was beginning to wish he hadn’t come down the stairs—when Arthur held out his hand and said tenderly, “Come here, sweet,” like he called Merlin that all the time. “Don’t listen to him. He’s an inveterate snob no matter what he says in public.”

Uther wasn’t going to like that. Obviously.

Merlin stepped close to Arthur, who wrapped his arm around him and kissed his temple. Three times now. Three kisses. And a term of endearment.

“I said I was sorry,” Merlin mumbled to Uther.

“Enough is enough. This is your last warning—both of you. I get any more reports like this,” he said, gesticulating with revulsion over the evidence, “and you’ll both have permanent escorts.”

Arthur stiffened, his back ramrod straight, but all he said in calm reply was, “As you wish, father.”

Uther was a man used to having the last word and this time it was reserved for Merlin. “Give my regards to Gaius the next time you see him.”

Merlin felt Arthur’s hold tighten, an imperceptible fraction and he didn’t need any more than that. “I will,” Merlin said. “I’m sure he sends you his.”

Uther deliberated while a sweat broke out on the back of Merlin’s neck. “Gaius and I go back a long, long way,” he said, vaguely. And that was the end of that.

Uther left twenty minutes after he’d arrived. Arthur closed the door quietly behind him then drew the lock across and slumped down the wall.

“I didn’t deliberately keep Gaius a secret.” It was true. He hadn’t been trying to hide his friendship.

“I know.”

“We should go back to bed and pretend that didn’t happen,” Merlin said, not knowing what else to do to make Arthur feel better.

“Arthur didn’t move. He put his head in his hands, looking worn out and half his usual size. “I’ve put you in great danger. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Merlin crouched down, their knees touching, and gave Arthur his hands. “I chose this. I mean, I didn’t know this is what I’d end up with, but the point is, I signed up for a new life and that’s what I got. I don’t regret a thing.”

Merlin realised in that second he really didn’t regret a thing. He’d spent so long longing for something different and something better without dwelling on what constituted that different and better. Arthur had taken him by surprise. He’d slowly emerged from the layers and layers he’d wrapped around himself and Merlin found he liked him very much. More than that, he admired him, respected him and, yes, he was beginning to think that what he was feeling for Arthur was love.
Arthur said, “You don’t know what you’re saying. You don’t know what you’re agreeing to.”

Merlin pulled Arthur to his feet so they were standing toe to toe and circled his arms loosely around his waist. The light filtering through the coloured glass in the front door added a warm glow they didn’t need. Holding Arthur to him, Merlin could have stood barefoot in the snow and still he’d be warm. “Maybe I’m content not to know everything yet. Maybe I trust you and your reasons. Maybe, if you trust me, you’ll find I’m strong enough to carry some of this burden with you.”

Merlin leaned forward until his lips met Arthur’s. He closed his eyes and kissed Arthur with the surety and calm of a bird soaring upwards on a swell of warm air. Arthur made a soft noise in the back of his throat, his lips parted and his tongue slipped against Merlin’s in a long, unhurried dance to the slow-beat music of their soft and urgent breathing.

Arthur’s fingertips skated Merlin’s jaw, downwards over the tendon in his neck and along the seam around the neck of his t-shirt. His mouth followed, exploring. Merlin shivered at his touch. He traced Arthur’s hairline and ran his fingers through his fine, soft hair.

They ran up the stairs hand-in-hand and tumbled down onto the unmade bed, Merlin beneath Arthur’s burning gaze and the warm weight of his chest, which was nothing whatsoever and completely consuming.

Each fevered kiss brought a different part of their bodies closer—biceps and thighs and calves—until they were aligned. Merlin didn’t hold back. He showed his pleasure openly, with so many soft, high groans and the slow undulating roll of his hips at the ardent press of Arthur’s fingers, like electricity, finding the skin of his stomach and back. He was emboldened further by the unmistakeable press of Arthur’s erection against his thigh, mirroring his own arousal, which was rubbing with tantalising and too-meagre friction against the thin fabric of his pyjamas.

Eager and needy, Merlin turned his body towards Arthur, in an attempt to rut against the solid muscle of Arthur’s stomach—just as his cock sprang free through the gap in the front of his pyjamas. Merlin gasped and paused, as hot skin met cool air, and looked down at his escaped erection.

At that exact moment, Arthur did the same. Merlin laughed, partly with embarrassment—he’d tried so hard not to be impatient. He’d been holding back for ages, desperate to grab Arthur’s wrist and urge his hand towards his cock. He needn’t have worried. Arthur sniggered too, dropping his head into the crook of Merlin’s neck before lifting it again to look at him, wide-eyed and sincere. He kissed Merlin softly while trailing his fingers downwards, closing his fist around Merlin’s rigid cock.

“I’ve wanted to touch you for so long,” Arthur said, his thumb swirling over the moisture leaking from the tip.

“Don’t stop now then, yeah?” Merlin said, huffing a laugh that swiftly became a moan as Arthur’s fist began to move in a slow-stroking caress.

This new sensation, being touched by Arthur, so much more intense than when Merlin touched himself, had Merlin panting, pleading, begging. He’d dreamed of this for a long time, with no notion that when it happened in real life it would be as overwhelming as it was.

All Merlin’s childish expectations were surpassed a thousand times over. The heat from Arthur’s body, the heavy sound of his breathing, the scent of his skin and the sure and certain pressure of his fist pulling down on Merlin’s cock were too much. Too few quick strokes and Merlin crested and crashed, crying out and coming over Arthur’s hand, over both their t-shirts and over the sheets.
It didn’t register until he was shaking and gasping through the final waves of his orgasm that Arthur had tensed—his entire body gone rigid. Then he was shuddering, coming, sighing with his cock pressed against the side of Merlin’s thigh.

The curtains filtered the grey wintry light and made everything in the room seem quieter than it really was, in colour and sound and texture. Except Arthur, who was more vivid to Merlin than ever as he lay next to him, sharing the same pillow, face to face.

“Is that going to be your side of the bed from now on?” Arthur asked, shyly.

Merlin wished he had a wise-crack. He wasn’t used to this intensity, this openness and vulnerability. His heart was already full to bursting—pushing upwards and outwards and making his eyes fill.

“Yes.”

Arthur got up, wincing slightly as the stitches on his shoulder pulled, and walked around the edge of the bed. Merlin turned over, to see him take out a small, blue box from the top drawer of the bedside table. Arthur sat down beside Merlin and opened it.

Of course. Arthur had taken it off the moment they got home on their wedding day. Holding the ring between his forefinger and thumb, in front of Merlin, Arthur said solemnly, “If you let me put this on, I swear I’ll make sure I’m deserving of it, every single day for the rest of my life. I won’t ever take it off again.”

Merlin sat up, took the ring from Arthur and placed it on his ring finger. He kissed his fingertips, his palm, the inside of his wrist and along his forearm to his elbow. In turn, Arthur kissed Merlin’s stomach; he grazed his nipples with his teeth and his tongue and worked his way down and down, touching Merlin in all the ways a husband should.

That weekend, they hardly left the bed.

When they did, it was together, to shower, to raid the fridge, to cram their bodies on the sofa like sardines in a tin to watch the television. Arthur was dizzy with desire and their shared warmth and the endless dancing of Merlin’s fingers over his skin, teasing and twirling through his hair above and below and making him breathless and hot and shivery over and again.

By the time Sunday evening arrived, their avid intimacies had mellowed. They were at last able to savour each movement and touch, and unhurriedly let their desire take them where it would—which brought them back to bed, naked, with the covers kicked off. Arthur was on his back, legs spread and on top of him Merlin, his rigid cock nudging with solid determination into Arthur’s crease.

“If you want, we can. I’m ready,” Merlin said, in all likelihood thinking the reason they hadn’t yet fully consummated their marriage was because Arthur was being considerate of his innocence.

Indeed, Merlin was probably waiting for Arthur to show him how it was done.

Everyone had assumed. No one had thought to ask. And somewhere between the exaggeration of a headstrong youth and the lies constructed to keep his secrets safe, a myth had been born about Arthur’s habits and proclivities.

Arthur had a reputation he hadn’t earned and he hadn’t yet plucked up the courage to tell Merlin the truth. To make Arthur’s apprehension worse, Merlin had already moved his things into his newly-
acquired bedside drawers on the left side of their marital bed. In the top drawer, Arthur had spotted a full array of accoutrements to aid their sexual union—things that Arthur didn’t dare ask how Merlin had acquired. Whether he’d brought them with him from Confinement or purchased them since the wedding.

Arthur ran his fingers over the bumps of Merlin’s spine, letting his hand rest on the shallow swell of his backside. “We don’t have to yet. There’s no hurry.”

Merlin quirked his head to one side, probably because Arthur’s erection was digging into his belly and saying something quite different to his mouth. “Don’t you want to?”

There wasn’t a trace of hurt in Merlin’s voice and it didn’t make Arthur’s chest tighten.

“Yes. I do. I just want the time to be right.” Arthur did, he really wanted to. He really wanted Merlin sliding down his cock, or Merlin’s cock buried inside him. He wasn’t sure—which was the least of his problems.

Merlin wouldn’t let up. “You don’t need to worry about me. They covered everything when I was in Confinement. I mean, it was only a textbook but we were encouraged to…” Merlin looked away for a second, grinning a little before he pressed on. “We were taught how to prepare ourselves for, you know? Or I can do you, if you like. I mean, I might not last, but it’ll get better the more we do it, won’t it?”

Arthur had to close his eyes. He screwed up his face trying to find a measly ounce of bravery behind his eyelids where Merlin wasn’t scrutinising him. His expression must have been pained because Merlin squeezed Arthur’s bicep, made a small distressed noise and said, “What did I say? Aren’t we supposed to talk about it?”

“Oh, Merlin.” Arthur tried to look at him, and he managed for an instant, but then he had to settle on the curtains. As if there was inspiration there. It felt like forever to muster up enough saliva to swallow hard and say, “I have no idea what I’m doing. Before you, I’d never gone further than a handjob, and that was only a couple of times.”

“No.” Merlin pushed up onto his wiry arms to get a better disbelieving look at his pathetic specimen of a husband.

Arthur supposed that meant the one and only clumsy blowjob he’d given Merlin, his first ever, hadn’t been altogether unsatisfactory. But it was scant consolation. “Yes,” he replied.

“You’re saying I know more about this than you?”

It was good to know Merlin found the situation gratifying. It might be the only gratification he was going to get until Arthur got a grip on how to fulfil his end of their nuptials. “They didn’t exactly go into the finer details at school,” he said. “And the only thing we got in the Reds was a vague lecture on propriety.”

“People talk. Soldiers surely must talk?”

“Not to the sluttish son of the High Chancellor they don’t.”

Merlin laughed. He pounced up to his hands and knees and laughed. Arthur should have felt humiliated or at least angry. He found he wasn’t even blushing. Merlin’s adoring laughter was exactly the tonic he needed and truthfully, the irony was pretty funny.

Once he was over the shock of Arthur’s unexpected virginity, Merlin sighed and straddled Arthur’s
hips. He placed one palm firmly on Arthur’s stomach and with his other hand, took both their cocks in his fist and held them contemplatively. Both were still half hard, despite the distraction.

Merlin was flushed from his shoulders to the tips of his ears; his hair was a wavy, unruly mess. Sitting on Arthur’s lap, in full, perfect view, Arthur savoured the sight of his slender torso, the smattering of dark hair on his chest and the soft jut of his hip bones. Merlin was as pale as winter, as sultry as summer. The joy of being able to just look at him, without interruption, made Arthur swell with happiness. Merlin really was fucking beautiful. Not that it needed saying.

Or perhaps it did.

There were still some eggshells there, under their feet. Arthur wanted Merlin to be sure he was solid ground, for always, no matter what. Not that he was trying to change the subject. He just wanted Merlin to hear it out loud and undisputedly. “You’re gorgeous. Did you know that?”

Merlin bit into his bottom lip and his blush flared instantly, which only added to his loveliness. “We can do whatever you want, whenever,” Merlin said. He closed his fist tighter, paying particular attention to the tip of Arthur’s cock, which hardened without a stroke.

Arthur didn’t know what he was going to say until the words left his mouth. “I want you like that, on top of me. I want to be inside you.”

“Is your shoulder okay?”

It was sore, but Arthur couldn’t care less—not for this. He nodded and said, “Show me how to get you ready. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. But maybe I’ll prep myself this time.” His eyes were alight as he said, “My gift to you.”

There was a bottle of lubricant in that stash of Merlin’s. There were also, unexpectedly, prophylactics. Let it not be said the doctors at the Confinement Centre weren’t practical.

Arthur sat with his shoulders propped up on pillows with Merlin astride his lap.

Squeezing the lubricant on his forefingers, Merlin lifted his hips and reached behind and into himself, steadying his stance with his other hand on Arthur’s thigh. It was feverishly arousing, watching Merlin’s cock steadily stiffen in front of him, with his lashes fluttering and his lips parted.

Arthur’s arousal was fuelled by Merlin’s. That much had taken no time to learn and so Arthur ran his fingertips the length of Merlin’s cock, and further back, massaging the soft skin of his balls, revelling in his approving murmurs.

“Touch yourself,” Merlin said, eyelids heavy. “It really turns me on.”

Arthur indulged in the most fleeting caress, torn between wanting to indulge in his own pleasure and wanting to be able to last when it came to pleasuring Merlin.

As the strain on Merlin’s face receded, so the tension across his shoulders and in the sharp tendons at his hips increased. Merlin’s cock was engorged, his breathing faltering with every caress of Arthur’s fingers over the angles and contours of his milk-white skin.

“I’m ready,” Merlin said, releasing his slickened fingers.

“Let me feel?”
Merlin’s hole was slippery and relaxed enough that Arthur was easily able to breach him with a single finger. He tried with a second—which was still narrower than his cock—wanting to be sure he wasn’t going to cause Merlin any pain. He’d already done enough of that. He never wanted to do it again.

With no more than a hitch in his breath, Merlin took the intrusion, pushing back like he wanted, like he was hungry for it. Arthur pushed in a third finger and Merlin keened.

He was ready. More ready than Arthur.

Maybe Merlin sensed Arthur’s hesitance, or maybe he was being cautious this first time. Whichever it was, Merlin proceeded much more slowly than Arthur had anticipated. Bracing himself with one hand on Arthur’s thigh, Merlin took Arthur’s cock in the other and placed its tip against his hole. “Yesss, that’s it,” he hissed, using his weight to push down, and still the breach was tight, so tight and laboured.

“Look at you, gorgeous, so gorgeous.” Arthur murmured his encouragements until he had to hold his breath, and Merlin’s narrow hips, as he wondered if he could hold onto his erection.

By the tiniest of increments Merlin lowered himself. Arthur’s cock was enveloped completely, breathtakingly, in heat. His nerves warred with his desire, yet he held still waiting for Merlin to adjust. Miraculously, Arthur’s cock stayed firm, his arousal dulling to a satisfyingly low burn. It was pleasurable, manageable, within his control.

Then Merlin moved, and Arthur was undone.

There was no way for Arthur to tell, as Merlin found a forceful rhythm, which one of them would climax first. He wasn’t familiar enough yet with Merlin’s body that he could read the subtle signals of impending release, from his breathing or the way he dug his fingers into Arthur’s flesh gratifyingly hard enough to leave bruises. In any case, the increasing bright, hard shots of arousal as Merlin slid tight and slickly down his cock diverted Arthur from thinking anything beyond the right here and right now and this, this, yes, this.

With only momentary warning—a blinding pressure in his balls and a surge of sensation that made his cock swell to its utmost rigid—Arthur came on a powerful thrust.

Disappointment followed his sated shudders, because he’d wanted to last. It was short-lived. With Arthur still buried inside him, Merlin was rolling his hips, hard and deep, as he quickly fisted his cock. Then seconds, mere seconds later he arched, crying out and—oh—Arthur hadn’t expected it, not like that at all! Merlin’s hole was clenching in tight pulses around his cock as he came over Arthur’s stomach and chest.

They used the edge of the sheet to make a cursory effort at cleaning themselves up, between sleepy kisses. It was hardly worth it. The sheets were wrecked with wet patches of semen and dried smears of Arthur’s blood, from where his shoulder dressing had been rubbed off and the wound had oozed. He could feel it throbbing as they settled and stilled.

Merlin curled behind Arthur as they lay on their sides, nosing the nape of Arthur’s neck and mumbling some appreciative nonsense about Arthur’s innate prowess between the sheets. "Flattery will get you everywhere," Arthur muttered, grinning madly into the pillow as he laced his fingers through Merlin’s and held them to his heart.

Perhaps, some other time, Arthur would ask Merlin to make love to him in that position, and he could make love to Merlin the same way, too. The possibilities were endless, the ways for Arthur to
touch Merlin, to draw out the arousing moans and sighs of his pleasure and release.

Not right now, though.

The steady rhythm of Merlin breathing was slowing behind Arthur as he fell asleep. That in itself was a beautiful noise, in a space that had been silent for far too long.
Chapter 11

XI

The first time Arthur and Merlin went to the cinema they sat on the back row and kissed throughout the entire film. On the way out, when Merlin lightly remarked he’d actually wanted to see the film, Arthur had gladly marched them back into the queue to see it all over again.

The first time they went to a restaurant, Arthur spent the meal looking moon-eyes at Merlin and gave him half his dessert, from his spoon, even though Merlin had ordered his own.

At the weekends, they walked along the riverbank arm in arm or hand in hand.

The gossip magazines were quick to pick up on it, as was Uther. Their growing love was too big to keep inside themselves, inside their house. Still, they bolted the door at night. They slept naked in the bed that used to be Arthur’s and that they now called theirs, falling asleep curled together like spoons, waking up sprawled.

In almost every respect, Merlin’s life was legions happier than it had ever been before.

Nevertheless, what Merlin hadn’t bargained for was how much more of Arthur he got. There was no shortage of love; Arthur was a man of boundless affection. But that passion also had a darker side.

At first, it was the news. They could be sitting down to a quiet evening, the news on the television (Arthur was far less inclined to want to watch it than Merlin, but he suffered it anyway) and Arthur would run his own commentary, often whilst seething. Merlin wasn’t sure Arthur even realised quite how much he was letting slip. In doing this, Arthur was letting Merlin know things—that he didn’t like, that made him unhappy. It explained a lot. Arthur had a lot of worries on his plate. No wonder his appetite sometimes failed him.

That was only the beginning. By the time Imbolc had passed, Arthur had told Merlin things Merlin was convinced he wasn’t meant to know.

For instance, in the Eastern Counties, starting this harvest, the school leaving age was being lowered to fourteen. During the harvest the schools were to be closed altogether as it was all hands to the crops. There were manpower shortages on the farms and it wasn’t much of a leap to work out that deficit was nationwide.

Thus it was no surprise when Arthur also mentioned that meat would soon be rationed. Merlin had been quite used to that. Hunith used to make a chicken last three or four days between the two of them. If meat was rationed in Camelot, though, even amongst Fertiles, did that mean it was going to be impossible to get altogether out in the farming counties?

No one else knew that Merlin was party to these confidential titbits. Still, the weight of knowing too much was far more burdensome than knowing nothing at all. Merlin couldn’t begin to imagine how Arthur coped; all he knew was that sometimes he didn’t.

Despite doing everything he could to smooth the creases in Arthur’s brow, sometimes Arthur’s face stayed pinched. Merlin tried his best to remain steadfast but sometimes Arthur was simply too much and Merlin would have to shut himself away in his darkroom until Arthur would come and sit outside the door.

When Arthur was ready to be contrite, or at least civil, he’d cough or ‘accidently’ bang the door as
he sat down. Merlin would rinse the chemicals from his prints and hang them to dry, knowing Arthur’s temper had finally settled. Only then would he open the door and regard his husband, curled up to the skirting board looking forlorn. Merlin would ease Arthur’s head onto his shoulder and think about love, and how much it hurt sometimes.

On the whole, apart from that, Arthur was perfect. Merlin was overjoyed to have him in his life, and for the addition of two more friends to his growing circle.

Gwen and Leon came over for drinks before they left for the photography exhibition.

They opened a bottle of Albion wine, made from Eastern County grapes. On this auspicious occasion, Arthur insisted they celebrate with a legitimate beverage, most fittingly from Merlin’s home county.

The wine was dry. Merlin didn’t like it much and neither, it appeared, did Gwen.

“Would you prefer something else?” Merlin offered. “We’ve got gin.”

“No thank you. I might have a glass of water.”

Water? Perhaps Gwen was pacing herself for a long night. She already looked tired. “Are you all right?”

“Fine, sweetheart,” she said, tucking into the cheese straws.

Gwen was easy company. Merlin liked her a lot. He would have valued her for a friend in the beginning but he understood why that wouldn’t have been possible. Leon and Gwen were party to Arthur’s secrets; he wouldn’t have been able to get to Morgana without their help. It took a special person to engender that amount of loyalty and it took a special kind of person to be that loyal.

Merlin hoped he was getting there, stepping up to their league.

The four of them shared a taxi to the gallery. Leon sat in the front and Arthur sat in the middle at the back, one arm around Merlin, his face nestled into his neck, the other around Gwen. Looking at them, Merlin wondered if Arthur’s friendship with Gwen was actually closer than his friendship with Leon. He was protective of her in a way Merlin was sure she didn’t need. Gwen seemed more than capable of looking after herself and if not Leon amply covered her back. Merlin wasn’t jealous. If there was any hint of jealousy on his part, it wasn’t for their affection or their friendship; it was for the missed years when he wasn’t a part of it too.

Arthur held Merlin’s hand as they entered The Foresight Gallery, strutting through the door like he was the proudest man in the land. There were a number of people already at the small but prestigious venue, looking at the exhibits, mingling, sipping at glasses of pink wine. It was an informal event and they were free to do the same.

Music was playing in the background, a recording of a woman singing a lamenting song in a language Merlin didn’t understand. It was sorrowful, depressing. Personally, Merlin would have chosen something more cheerful but Mr Kilgharrah, with his flapping and flouncing, was more theatrically inclined towards doom and gloom.

Merlin’s photography teacher, Mr Theodore Kilgharrah, had at one time been a renowned figure in artistic circles. If they didn’t know it before they came to him, his students were soon acquainted with his infamous ‘The Camera Never Lies’ exhibition of ’43, from back in the days where magic was legal and the photographic plate rarely captured anything but stationary poses.
The photographs from that fateful exhibition were ground-breaking. They depicted objects being levitated with the wave of a hand, fire being lit from untouched logs and humans temporarily deformed into half-man-half-beasts. The pictures were meant to be ironic. The images captured on the film were achieved using trickery, no magic except the reduction of silver. Kilgharrah’s aim was to blur the line between magic and science.

That was all well and good until the acts performed in the photographs—and Kilgharrah’s camera tricks—were considered depraved.

Kilgharrah was relegated to a studio in a quiet part of the Upper Town—his Cave, he called it—and from there he taught photography of the legal kind by invitation only. Merlin guessed it was being married to Arthur that got him his place, but he hoped it was on merit that he’d kept it, and was now exhibiting alongside photographers much more experienced than he.

They’d only been through the door a matter of minutes when Gwen disappeared off to the loo, even though she’d gone just before they left. Leon saw someone he knew and went to talk to them which left Merlin and Arthur free to walk the gallery alone.

“I’m only interested in seeing yours,” Arthur said, leaning in, his words brushing against Merlin’s cheek, sending a shiver down his spine. No one else could hear him. Everyone could see him.

Merlin smiled at the innuendo. “I know,” he said, “but it’s only polite that you look at everyone’s.”

“Yours first then.”

Joined at the elbows and hips, Merlin and Arthur skimmed the other photographers’ work. Merlin’s were displayed in the far corner of the exhibition and had attracted some attention. There were nudges and nods. A couple of rainbow-gowned women turned as Arthur and Merlin approached.

“Here they are,” said a woman with a shocking pile of red hair and lips to match.

Her female companion, perhaps her wife, said, “Arthur Pendragon through the eyes of his husband. I wonder if this is the real you?”

“I couldn’t say. This is the first I’ve seen of them,” Arthur admitted. “Merlin wanted it to be a surprise.”

“And is it?” Merlin asked. Seeing the two portraits framed and hung, Merlin suddenly felt strangely exposed, like he was the one on display. There was a small and fragile piece of his heart up there and he hadn’t thought about that beforehand. No one seemed interested in his landscape shots. Looking at the pictures of Arthur, it was easy to see why.

“Is this how you see me?” Arthur said, to Merlin and not for the benefit of their audience.

“Sometimes.”

The pictures were taken not so long ago, soon after their first night together. As he did every month, Arthur was at the table in the kitchen cleaning his guns. He wasn’t looking at the camera; he was intent upon his work. Merlin, from the first time he’d watched, had been fascinated with this side of Arthur’s character, of his dedicated focus.

Then there were his hands. Arthur would kiss and stroke and touch Merlin’s hands whenever he got the chance. He said Merlin’s fingers, his hands, were the most beautiful he’d ever seen. Merlin saw in Arthur’s much more than beauty. There was strength, determination, dexterity. All Arthur’s finest traits, which he did his best to keep hidden, were there to be seen in the bearing and movement of his
hands if the observer cared to look. In Merlin’s portrait, they were the most sharply focused aspect of the shot, his face more softly in the background.

The second portrait was Arthur laughing, still at the kitchen table, taken minutes after he’d cleaned his guns. Merlin had wanted a shot with Arthur relaxed, not doing anything. Only, Arthur was uncomfortable posing and he’d kept pulling a pouty unnatural face. Out of desperation, Merlin had stripped off every last stitch of his clothes, said something lewd and taken the picture stark naked. Afterwards, Arthur wouldn’t stop saying, over and over, “You’re never going to use that one. You can’t,” which Merlin took as a dare.

Now Arthur was blushing.

“There you are!”

Merlin spun around to see Kilgharrah gliding across the room. He was wearing a long purple coat, its front panels billowing out like wings as he approached with the bold grace of a man a quarter of his age.

“Kilgharrah!”

He hugged Merlin before taking a leisurely moment to regard Arthur. “So this is the young Pendragon?”

Hesitantly, Arthur extended his hand. Kilgharrah was larger than life. That and a tendency to stare could be intimidating, apparently even to the likes of Arthur.

“At last, we meet,” Kilgharrah added. “Though I feel like I already know you.”

“The camera never lies,” Merlin said lightly, attempting to temper the awkwardness with humour.

“Oh, but it does. All the time. Your husband is so much more in the flesh.” Kilgharrah winked, Arthur’s dying blush flared up all over again and the awkwardness passed, evaporated into thin air.

Until Gwaine appeared in the periphery of Merlin’s vision, with a face as dark as a thundercloud. He was swaying, possibly drunk already, as he swiped a glass of wine from the table by the entrance. He downed the wine and took another glass.

Merlin excused himself and hurried to him. “You made it.”

Gwaine looked pleased to see him in a sad and pathetic kind of way. He raised the glass as if to make a toast. Merlin took it from him and placed it upon the nearest table. “What’s wrong?”

Gwaine tried to shrug the sadness away, to put a smile upon his face. Photography, and living with Arthur, had taught Merlin the eyes were the only place to see true happiness. Gwaine’s eyes didn’t lift with his mouth. “The Compatibility Machine has finally caught up with me. I’m to be married in a month.”

For most it would have been a relief, possibly a joy. Not Gwaine. To him it was a prison sentence. He didn’t have Arthur’s means or connections. If Arthur couldn’t wriggle out of marriage there was no chance for Gwaine.

“Shit.” Merlin added half-heartedly, “You never know, you might like her.”

Gwaine’s eyes were glassy, turning red when he said, pleading. “I want adventure, and not the marriage kind.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, hunched his shoulders forward and looked
around the room as if he was preparing to reveal something secret and dangerous.

Merlin asked, “You’re not going to do anything stupid are you?”

“Me? Would I ever?”

“Gwaine?”

Very quietly, he replied, “I’ve heard there’s a man in the Lower Town who can smuggle me out.”

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Maybe I’ll go to sea.”

Merlin knew how that could end, before it began. “Please, don’t do anything rash.”

They didn’t get to discuss it further, as Arthur was coming towards them. Before Merlin could introduce them Gwaine said cheerily, “I’m just going to check out your photos. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Who was that?” Arthur said, scowling at Gwaine’s abrupt departure.

“My friend Gwaine, of the night with the records. He’s finally had his number called, and he’s not happy.”

That discussion was also halted as in walked Percy and Freya. Arthur knew Percy, of course, and the introductions were pleasant and easy.

Merlin was fit to gush at his good fortune, that he had so many dear friends coming to support him. Therefore, when the one friend he wasn’t expecting to turn up arrived right behind Freya and Percy, Merlin was thoroughly and completely, fit-to-bursting elated.

Gaius had even combed his shoulder-length white hair and dressed up for the occasion. Merlin wasn’t sure what he’d call the get-up, which consisted of a burgundy tunic trimmed in brocade and loose black trousers. It was the kind of thing that might have been fashionable, once, a long time ago, when Gaius wasn’t in the habit of locking himself away from civilisation, or as Gaius would say, people. Gaius would never call what they had in Camelot, or in Albion, civilisation.

Merlin grabbed Arthur’s arm and said, “Look who’s here!”

“He came,” Arthur said warmly. “I knew he would. You speak of him so fondly, I knew he must feel the same for you.”

“Yes, but he doesn’t do this kind of thing.”

There they were, all Merlin’s friends in the same room and him having the time of his life. He didn’t know it was possible to feel this kind of joy. They looked like they were enjoying themselves, and the free wine, the photographs were being well-received and the press were, for once, unobtrusive and polite. Arthur even posed with Merlin without having to be coerced.

The only person missing was Hunith.

Merlin knew that Arthur would also be feeling that same enduring residue of sadness that a loved one couldn’t be here. He wondered how many other people in this building, in Camelot, felt it too. He wondered if joy had always come at a price and if it always would.
There was a buzz of talk amongst the group of going to a club after the exhibition, a legitimate venue with a band and a singer. Everyone seemed keen.

Merlin shook off his melancholy, squeezed Arthur’s hand and pulled him in for a kiss.

“What was that for?” Arthur said, smiling against his lips.

“Because I can.”

When Merlin released him, Arthur’s smile died. “Merlin, sweet, your nose.” Arthur whipped his handkerchief from his jacket pocket and dabbed it under Merlin’s nostrils.

“I didn’t realise it was bleeding.”

There was a bright spot of red on Arthur’s white hanky and blood on his fingertips. Arthur ushered Merlin to a row of cushioned benches at the furthest edge of the gallery. He reassured Merlin the bleeding wasn’t heavy, shooing the others away, assuring them they’d join them shortly when Merlin’s overexcitement had subsided.

Merlin sat quietly, pinching his nose. They tried not to draw attention—the press were still hovering—but Kilgharrah seemed to have a sixth sense for this sort of thing.

Swooping in, Kilgharrah clutched Arthur’s arm, lifting him to his feet and said, hardly above a whisper, “It’s time for you to leave. Take him home, Arthur. Best not delay. Once those suppressors fail, there’s no stopping them.”

“Suppressor?” Arthur looked horrified and Merlin—he didn’t know what to think.

“I’m all right. Really,” Merlin said, even as his eyes began to sting and inside his ears throbbed.

Kilgharrah pushed his shoulders back, his eyes darting around the room. Leaning in again, satisfied he wasn’t being watched or heard, he looked at Arthur, not at Merlin and said, “There’s no moon tonight and I’m reliably informed there’s going to be a fire in a small and under-publicised gallery, oh, a couple of hours from now after the patrons have gone home. No one will be harmed, but it will keep the Reds up here busy long enough that you won’t be seen leaving for the Lower Town.” Then he winked.

Arthur listened to his every word, completely engaged. Merlin had no idea what Kilgharrah was babbling on about. The man often spoke in riddles, obfuscating what might be a simple photography tip or a hint about relationships or anything else he cared to share on that particular day. This was different. Arthur was different.

“You photographed my sister once, long ago.” Arthur’s face lifted, a flash of recognition lighting him up.

Kilgharrah nodded and whispered, “Send her my regards.”

He knew. He knew Morgana was still alive. Merlin tried to process what this meant, who Kilgharrah was and why he was telling Arthur to leave. The sparks dancing in front of his eyes were a distraction, and Arthur and Kilgharrah conspiring.

Arthur said, “We’ll go as soon as I can arrange for a car.”

“I have one. My driver will take you back to your house.”
Arthur lifted Merlin to his feet, checking his nose again, which had thankfully abated. Arthur was on high alert, scanning the gallery, holding Merlin too tightly to his side.

Kilgharrah closed in, enveloping them in the wide span of his arms, enough that Merlin could smell his smoky breath. Looking from Merlin first to Arthur, he smiled, showing a full set of strong, yellowed teeth. Finally, gazing back at Merlin with frightening affection, he said, “Take good care, Emrys. Until we meet again.”

“Emrys?” Merlin said, too late. Kilgharrah had released them and sealed his lips with his finger.

Arthur was squeezing Merlin so hard it felt like he was going to break a rib. “It’s you,” he whispered into Merlin’s temple again and again, “It’s you, it’s you.”

Merlin couldn’t move, and had no chance of questioning Kilgharrah, as at that moment Gaius hurried over, ever the physician. He was halted by Kilgharrah a step away from Merlin, who jabbed Gaius the chest as he said, “You, old man, you know what needs to be done. You’re the one who put it there.”

“You know?” Gaius croaked.

“I can hear the bloody thing buzzing from here. It’s a wonder it hasn’t driven the boy insane. You’ll need to go with them. They’ll need your help. Arthur knows where to take you.”

Merlin could hardly keep up. Between straining to listen to their hushed and urgent voices and the pressure building behind his eyes, his nose, his ears, his whole skull feeling like it had shrunk, he was having enough trouble staying on his feet. Arthur’s arm tightened further.

“You know?” Gaius said, eyes searching, his frown wary. “You know?”

“I didn’t have a clue, not until just now. But don’t worry—I’m going to take him somewhere safe.”

Gaius looked at Merlin and said, “I’m sorry. We only did it to protect you. I thought … I thought your mother might tell you.”

“Tell me what? What’s going on?”

“He doesn’t know,” Gaius said to Merlin, to Arthur.

Everyone was talking around Merlin, like he wasn’t there. He didn’t understand what was happening and the throbbing and buzzing and pounding... He clutched the side of his head and tried to focus.

“How long’s he had it?” Arthur asked Gaius.

“His whole life.”

“Why would you do that? Why not get him to Annis?”

“Because I couldn’t do anything more. I was leaving Ealdor the next day.”

To Annis. Where the people with magic went. The pause button in Merlin’s mind jammed and he couldn’t breathe. He knew what this meant, he just couldn’t process it.

Arthur was angry. “You knew about my sister and you did nothing to help her. You’re going to help Merlin, or so help me I’ll have your head.”

Merlin felt sick.
“Yes, of course. I’ll need … I need to go back to my rooms first.”

“Meet us at our house. Talk to Leon—he’ll be able to help you. You mustn’t be seen.”

Gaius nodded and swept away.

The panic in the voices of Merlin’s friends over what started as a stupid nosebleed was frightening. Something big and terrifying was going on, had been going on and Merlin was at the centre of it and everyone knew about it but him. He wanted to ask, to find out. He couldn’t focus. He couldn’t find the words, except to Kilgharrah, “You called me Emrys.”

“Because, that, my dear boy, is who you are. Don’t tell anyone though, not just yet.” Kilgharrah put his ancient hand beneath Merlin’s chin and gently squeezed his jaw, turned on his heel and was gone, loudly congratulating another student and his attendant family.

The nausea was building and Merlin’s ears were ringing and ringing and Gaius was a blur disappearing into a quiet corner with Leon and Arthur’s hands were all over him, like he was checking to see if Merlin was still there.

“I don’t feel well.”

“I know, sweet. Don’t be scared. I’m going to get you help.”

Merlin searched Arthur’s face not knowing what he was looking for. Arthur was pale and his pupils wide and dark. Arthur was afraid, as afraid as Merlin, and that scared Merlin even more. “What’s wrong with me?”

He got no answer.

Arthur was already whisking Merlin towards the exit, holding his handkerchief to Merlin’s nose, and calmly saying to the concerned faces, “It’s just a tiny nosebleed, but we’re heading home. Thanks for all your support!”

As they headed out into the cold night, he said to Merlin, “We’ve got to get back to the house. I’ll explain everything later. You’re going to be fine.”

Merlin was bundled into the car, vaguely aware that his friends were at the doorway watching him leave, and Kilgharrah was there too, waving him off. He slumped into the backseat, his limbs too heavy, too heavy. The tickling around his nostril started once more, and his nose was bleeding again, worse than before.

Arthur held him like he was sure if he let go, Merlin would drift away. Merlin was drifting away, into a sea of light and shimmering gold. He sweated and shivered, one moment the heat of a desert sun roasting him alive, the next cold so chilling it was as if the winter had turned his marrow to ice.

By the time they reached the security gate at the end of their street, Merlin could hardly see. There was a sparkling amber light marring his vision and pain like daggers, spiking him inside, from his head to his fingertips.

“Merlin, baby, close your eyes,” Arthur said. “Hold on to me and I’ll guide you.”

The car stopped and cold air rushed in through the open door. Merlin felt Arthur easing him upwards, arms solid, soothing words brushing his ear, urging him to walk. He had to walk. Merlin felt his feet touch the ground. It was too hard, too hard to move. His legs were gone, he was nothing. He had no substance to control. He had to fight, will himself to move, just move, while Arthur was
begging, “Please, baby, just up the stairs. We can’t let anyone see you like this.”

Arthur was pleading and that was enough. Merlin couldn’t refuse him anything.

When Merlin closed his eyes over the golden light that radiated from them, the glow remained visible in the crack between his eyelids. Arthur couldn’t delay. He left Merlin on the sofa, bolted the front door and closed the curtains at every window. Looking in on him a minute later, to Arthur’s horror, there was blood beading from each of his tear ducts, like rubies placed in the corners of his eyes. Arthur dabbed at them with the hanky, only for them to appear again.

He was powerless to offer succour and it broke his heart.

All Arthur could do was ready them to leave. He went for his handguns first then upstairs to change and pack what he could for the journey ahead. They wouldn’t be able to take much; warm clothes and weapons.

The recent thaw meant they’d be able to take the footpaths. The ground would be wet; they would have to tread carefully, avoiding places where they might leave footprints. Their only saving grace was that it was the beginning of the weekend. No one would miss them for another two days. Even Uther was maintaining a respectful distance of late.

“Please, Gaius, get here soon,” Arthur implored into the ether, as Merlin groaned and his entire body jerked, going first rigid then slack.

Gaius had headed the research in magic-suppression after the war. It was the reason he was moved from his position as the Pendragon family physician. However, when Uther decided suppression would never work the research was finished—before it had really begun. The subjects of the trials were put in quarantine, apart from those quick enough to escape. No one was around to help those poor souls when the long term and often deadly side-effects of magic suppression began to emerge, sometimes years after implantation—except the handful of High Priestesses in hiding at Tintagel. Arthur had to get Merlin to Morgause. Gaius needed to make Merlin fit to travel.

Loud rapping on the glass beside the back door brought Arthur running down the stairs, where he heard Merlin’s pained groans from the living room. Glancing in on him, Arthur saw he was unconscious. The blood from his eyes and nose had painted scarlet tears across his cheeks.

Then Arthur noticed Merlin’s hand. His arm had fallen from the sofa and his hand was resting upon the carpet. Red stains bloomed from each fingertip. He was bleeding from beneath his fingernails.

Arthur’s face crumpled as he staggered to the back door.

Leon, Gwen and Gaius were there. They rushed to Merlin’s side.

“Can he hear us?” Gwen said, clutching Arthur, her eyes filling with tears.

“I don’t know,” Arthur choked out. “He seems to be drifting in and out—”

Merlin opened his eyes and golden light filled the space around him. His back arched, too fiercely, too sharply and he opened his mouth as if to scream out in pain. There was no sound. The agony twisted his face and fresh blood oozed from his nose, his eyes and next, his ears.
Arthur fell to his knees and took Merlin’s hand, wrapped it in the scarf he’d been wearing, trying to stem the bleeding.

Morgana’s words echoed. **Blood on your hands. Someone you love.**

They could still save him. Gaius was here.

“The implant has to be removed,” Gaius said, kneeling alongside Arthur, examining Merlin’s face and hands while he spoke. “We can’t do it here. Once it’s out, there’ll be no telling how his body will react. His magic is strong.”

“We’re taking him to the Lower Town, to Morgana and Morgause.”

Arthur searched Gaius’s face for a reaction.

He was trickling liquid from a syringe into the corner of Merlin’s mouth and the news of Morgana immediately made him start. “Morgana? She lives? Both the girls are alive?”

Gaius hadn’t known then. Arthur had wondered. “Yes, Gaius. They live, and Merlin must, too.”

“Do you have safe passage?”

“We’ll have to go on foot. I hope you’re up to it.”

“I’m slow, but I’m strong.”

With Merlin’s hand in his, Arthur let Gaius work. He was mercifully swift, whispering over a tincture that began as a dull green then fluoresced—infused with magic that Arthur didn’t know Gaius possessed. They poured it into Merlin’s mouth, rubbing his throat, forcing him to swallow.

Gwen returned from the kitchen—Arthur hadn’t seen her leave—with a bowl of water and a flannel. She cleaned the blood away, deftly, without flinching

Slowly but surely, the bleeding subsided and Merlin was roused.

He was drowsy and yielding as the four of them worked around him and on him, to change him into warm clothes, to ready him for the journey ahead. The gods be willing they would have enough time to make it to The Evermore before the potion wore off and Merlin’s captive magic threatened to roast him from the inside out.

It was time to leave. Arthur had two pistols holstered and in his rucksack what meagre possessions of theirs he could squeeze in. It wasn’t much.

Merlin was able to stand. He didn’t say anything, and that told Arthur everything he needed to know. All Merlin’s energy was invested in keeping himself upright, to walking his way out of the Upper Town and away from the life he’d only tasted. He already looked too overwhelmed and exhausted; there was no point in explaining anything yet. There would be time enough for explanations.

The farewells were necessarily brief.

“You have my eternal thanks.” Arthur hugged Leon and Gwen in turn. “I will see you three very soon.”

Gwen didn’t want to let go. Leon had to prise her away. Arthur put his hand to the soft curve of her belly. “I wish I didn’t have to leave, but you’ll be in more danger if I stay.”
They turned off the lights and parted Gwen’s and Leon’s company on the dark side of the back wall, in the alleyway behind the houses.

At the end of the row, the alley joined another and another, until it ended at a broken gate that opened onto a track at the edge of the sub-division. It was narrow and overgrown, the gravel path long replaced by weeds and thick mud. The temperature, however, was on their side. The ground was frozen solid; they wouldn’t leave a trail.

Merlin seemed to be managing a fair pace unaided but when he stumbled close, Arthur could feel the fevered burn of his body next to his, through layers of winter clothes and a thick, woollen coat.

As Kilgharrah had said, it was a moonless night. Arthur was feeling his way through the darkness, using the tips of his boots and his outstretched hands; he strained his hearing to the sounds of the night beyond Merlin’s and Gauis’s laboured breaths. They trod the frozen footpaths steadily and unseen to the periphery of the Upper Town.

“When was the last time you took the train, Gaius?” Arthur asked, voice lowered, as they approached a high chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire that ran alongside the railway.

“I don’t know—twenty years ago. They don’t run like they used to.”

“They don’t run at all for four days of the week, from Thursday to Sunday.” Arthur extracted the wire-cutters from his rucksack. Taking this route they were at more risk of being seen but at less risk of drowning, getting lost or getting trapped in a sewer.

Merlin wheezed and stumbled against the fence while Arthur cut and cut and cut, close to the post where it wouldn’t be noticed. Arthur tried to ignore what he grimly realised was a golden glow coming from Merlin’s eyes, flickering where he was blinking and trying to remain awake, conscious, walking.

The top of the railway track wasn’t lit. Underneath the long arch of the bridge that spanned the road, a bright lamp illuminated the ground. The three of them would be visible from below unless they kept close to the ground, close to the low wall at the sides of the bridge. They would have to crawl.

Their progress was interminably slow. Minutes stretched like torture. Yet Merlin moved, his hand every so often reaching for Arthur’s leg, letting him know he was okay, that he could keep going. Gaius was close behind.

They continued like that, stopping only to rub and ease the smarting from their elbows and knees, past the locked and shuttered checkpoint, not encountering a single soul. Crime from the Lower Town didn’t cross the tracks, at least not the petty kind, the kind born of want, and no one in their right mind would secret themselves in the other direction. Not unless they were insane, or had magic, and neither of those were found in the Upper Town of Camelot. Were they?

At last, past the walled and fenced perimeter of the Lower Town, the three men were able to stretch out and stand. Arthur checked Merlin with his hands, with his lips, and didn’t like what he could feel. Merlin was trembling and fever-hot.

Gaius poured tonic into his mouth, uttering with more worry than Arthur cared to acknowledge, “We must hurry.”

They edged down the bank where the railway crossed a section of blue-collar houses, coming out on a street Arthur didn’t recognise. He knew his way from The Tavern to The Evermore. He didn’t know the rats’ maze of streets that housed the Infertile blues, only which direction they needed to go.
They walked with their heads down, towards where the night sky looked blackest. Gaius’s uneven footsteps were sure and unfailing. The old man wasn’t gasping or struggling to keep up. Merlin wasn’t doing as well. Arthur put his arm around him, held Merlin to his side and whispered, “Not much farther now.”

Merlin groaned softly, and hooked his arm around Arthur’s neck, finally giving in to his fatigue. He wasn’t heavy. He didn’t weigh anything at all. If he had to, Arthur could walk to the shores on the western edge of Albion with Merlin on his shoulder.

Arthur’s senses were primed for every whisper of the wind, every glimmer of light, every footstep on the ground and then the sirens far, far away. A fire engine—maybe two or three.

Two pin-points of light, heading towards them was no more than a stray dog. It paid them no heed and trotted by. Sounds of life behind curtained windows grew less frequent as they walked and walked, Merlin’s feet dragging, sliding as he struggled to move.

The street lights in the Lower Town were thankfully intermittent. There were no checkpoints on the ends of the blue-collar streets, certainly not those housing Infertiles. There were precious few people about and no cars here. They reached the uninhabited edge of the district without drawing attention: where the abandoned flats, offices and industrial units backed up close to the city wall, where there was no illumination, no electricity, save for on the wall itself. The grid had been switched off long ago. No one officially sanctioned by the government lived here anymore.

They paused for breath between a bank of rubble and the side of an old workshop.

“You could leave me here,” Merlin whispered into Arthur’s ear. “You could go back and say I’d run away.”

Arthur’s throat closed. He couldn’t swallow. “Hush. Idiot,” he gasped, shifting his pack, rolling out the tightness in his shoulders, sliding his arm around Merlin.

“Arthur,” Gaius warned, “he’s burning up. We don’t have long.”

“It’s not far now.”

Merlin grew warmer and warmer with each step. Arthur loosened Merlin’s scarf and pulled off his gloves, willing for the north wind to give him some relief. The air remained still.

Their footsteps crunched over gravel and cement, over frozen clumps of weeds and piles of rubbish. Merlin became heavier with each step, his eyelids falling closed.

It had only been a rare few times that Arthur had taken this route. In the past, his disguise had allowed him more flagrant passage in and out of the Lower Town. He had to pause several times to orientate himself in the pitch darkness.

Gaius at least didn’t question him; he followed in silence, checking Merlin and Arthur every time they stopped to take stock. They wouldn’t have made it this far without him.

They approached The Evermore Hotel from the opposite direction. It was dark, looming, nothing but black shapes against an indigo sky and echoes in the air whispering around it. Arthur took more of Merlin’s weight on his side. He murmured words of encouragement, unsure if Merlin could hear them.

It didn’t matter now.
They’d made it.

Rounding the corner, they were greeted by the shadowy form of Cenred. He held out his hands. “Arthur! And this must be Merlin. Come on, they’re waiting for you.”

“Then word came?”

“It did, though there was no need. Morgana’s been in a fit all evening. She’d been saying ‘he’s coming, Emrys is coming’ hours before we got word from you. Who’d have guessed, eh?” He took Merlin’s other side, relieving Arthur of some of his burden.

On the top floor, away and out of sight of the handful of guests that passed like driftwood through the doors of the former hotel, Cenred, Arthur and Merlin, followed by Gaius, made their way to the last room on the right.

The door was open, Morgause hovering in the doorway. Her shirt sleeves were rolled and her hair tied back. “Good job we didn’t top him,” she said weakly.

They staggered through the door and Arthur at last could relieve himself of Merlin’s flagging form. They all helped, lowering him onto the bed, removing his coat and boots. Morgana was there, too, at the head of the bed, holding Merlin’s face and whispering, “There you are.”

Merlin managed to crack open his eyes. He looked pleased to see her, like he recognised her, as she recognised him. He’d seen that old photograph, of course, but this was something more.

The effort cost him. He wheezed and coughed, and a startling foam of blood burst upon his lips. Arthur tried not to cry out as he fell to Merlin’s side.

Morgause sat down on the edge of the bed beside Morgana, looking down on Merlin with awe and tenderness.

His eyes slowly blinked open once more. “Am I dying?” he said, hardly above a whisper.

“Oh no, sweetheart,” Morgause said, taking his hand. “You’re just about to be born.”

“Arthur.” Morgana reached for him, squeezing his shoulder that was only now throbbing with the exhaustion, the agonising toll of the journey here. She said, with uplifting wonder, “This is Emrys. Merlin is Emrys.”

There was no time to take it in. Not time for introductions or discussion. Even as Morgause checked the seals around the window and the door was locked behind them, Morgause was talking urgently to Gaius. “Is this one of yours?”

“Yes.”

“Did you bring the extractor?”

“I don’t have it anymore… It’s been so long.”

As the seconds ebbed away too quickly, Merlin began shaking, his body convulsing and there was no more time for talk. “Please, be quick. Help him,” Arthur pleaded as Morgana held Merlin’s head in her hands, trying to soothe him.

Morgause was pacing like a caged animal in the small space afforded her. “All right. It’s all right. I have one. It’s makeshift but it’s worked before. How long’s it been in?”
Gaius was slumped on the only armchair, the colour of ash. “All his life.”

Arthur saw bandages and towels on the bedside cabinet, a bowl of water, a carafe and a pile of leather straps. Evidently, they were prepared.

Morgause removed a tool from the chest of drawers that Arthur could only describe as a prong, a long sharp prong.

Arthur knew what had to be done but seeing it, the dreadful size of it, he panicked. “No! You’ll kill him!”

Cenred took him, held him back. Arthur was disarmed by his care and surrendered to his unrelenting hold.

“Arthur,” Morgause said gently but firmly, “there’s an implant that has been suppressing Emrys’s—Merlin’s—magic. The only way to take it out is with the help of magic, but the device itself still has to be physically removed.”

Arthur looked at Morgause and at Gaius in turn. “Have you done this before?”

“I have, a few times,” Morgause said.

“I have also, though it’s been many years,” Gaius added, forcing himself up from his seat.

“And you can do it without hurting him?”

Morgause didn’t look sure. She glanced at Gaius. “I’m going to need his help. You’re going to take it out. I’m going to use my magic to find it and release it.”

Arthur and Cenred were positioned at the foot of the bed, holding down Merlin’s legs. Morgana stood by with dressings and water. Morgause sat at the head of the bed, Gaius the same on the other side. They were ready to begin.

Morgause put her hand upon Merlin’s forehead and whispered her words of magic. Merlin settled suddenly, so suddenly that Arthur wondered if he was still breathing. He had to close his eyes as Gaius, hand shaking, inserted the prong into Merlin’s nose.

Arthur pressed down on Merlin’s leg as the tension in his body violently hummed, vibrating into Arthur’s bones.

Time stood still as Arthur held on, held on for Merlin’s life.

“I have it!” Gaius exclaimed and Arthur opened his eyes to an almighty crashing sound, as if the air in the room was crying out with rapturous release, then a roar of wind and blinding light and Arthur, and every one of them, was hurled from the bed. The room was filled with dazzling golden light. Arthur squinted as he tried to fight his way to Merlin, Merlin who was suspended in the air, two feet above the bed. Arthur couldn’t reach him; the air was charged and solid and he was pinned to the floor and—

As quickly as the energy had erupted from Merlin’s body, it subsided. Merlin dropped with a quiet whoosh, landing lightly on the bed.

Arthur rushed to his side, pushed his damp hair back from his clammy brow. Merlin opened his eyes and they were still alight, like summer sun shining from within, golden and warming. Arthur stared for a long time, holding Merlin while their breathing slowed and Merlin’s eyes cooled to blue.
Arthur was vaguely aware of Cenred, Morgause, Morgana and Gaius, stood around the bed, watching and waiting. They would have to keep waiting. Arthur needed to know if Merlin was here, was whole and well.

Arthur felt tingling through his skin. Magic was prickling from Merlin’s every pore and diffusing into the air, into Arthur. It felt like flying. Merlin looked positively euphoric, looking up at Arthur, smiling and at last, his delicate, long fingers finding their way lovingly to Arthur’s face.

No one spoke. The air was charged with magic and promise. There was nothing to say to that, no reverence more befitting than their silent awe.

Merlin eyes didn’t leave Arthur’s as he broke the silence. “It’s so quiet. I can hear everything. I can hear your heart beating. I can hear what it’s saying.” He laughed softly, amused, and said, “Yes, I know it, and I love you too.”
I Can Hear Your Heart Beating
Arthur was asleep on his side by the time Merlin was ready to give into slumber, when the lightning
flashing through his veins was spent. He curled his back to Arthur’s chest, feeling the steady beat of
his heart behind him, the peaceful warmth of his breath. The others had left them alone and Merlin
was thankful. He was drained, not a spare spark of energy to ponder the momentous and dangerous
transformation that had brought him here, except to acknowledge and accept it.

He had magic. He was a warlock—in the making. And it was all right, he was going to be all right.

Merlin drifted off unhindered.

The morning was a different matter.

The activity outside their room found its way inside before Merlin had taken the time to stretch the
sleep from his protesting muscles; for Arthur to rub Merlin’s side and mumble, half asleep, “Do you
want me to tell them to come back later?”

“I don’t think they can wait.”

Morgana entered first. She was a regal beauty, dark where Arthur was blond, green eyes for his blue,
and yet, the same stubborn jaw. She brought breakfast in the shape of herbal tea, toast and a bean
stew on the side. Croissants and marmalade were a thing of the past now. Merlin found he didn’t
care.

“You made this?” he said, between mouthfuls of stew. “It’s delicious.” And he was ravenous.

“Yes,” she replied, evidently pleased.

Arthur left them to get acquainted. He was anxious to begin damage limitation immediately; Merlin
was happy to be left in Morgana’s capable care. There was also much explaining to be done.
Morgana began with Emrys.

He’d been in her dreams and visions for a long time. Emrys was Arthur’s destiny, which didn’t mean
much to Merlin but Morgana said the word destiny with so much reverence Merlin knew it must be
extremely important. He put aside the thought that Arthur hadn’t known he was Emrys until last
night. Merlin would examine what that said about Arthur—and his feelings for Merlin—when there
was more time to do so. It was a good feeling, anyhow, knowing Arthur had always loved him for
who he was and not who he’d turned out to be.

Next, Merlin wanted to know about Morgana and she was more than ready to enlighten him.

When Morgana reached adolescence, what her family had affectionately deemed sensitivity began to
emerge as a distinct magical ability. Uther was beside himself. A tutor disappeared, blamed for
encouraging the young Morgana to channel her precognition. Morgana was sentenced to banishment
and marriage. Uther couldn’t bring himself to have her executed, but neither could he be discovered
harbouring a sorceress. It was less than ten years since The Great Purge and people’s memories were
still fresh with grief from the loss of loved ones. Not to mention Uther was a man of principle and
unrelenting single-mindedness.

He found a Governor, situated on one of the smaller Western Isles sympathetic to Uther’s dilemma, with a penchant for young beauties. His mansion was remote, there was no way on or off the island and implementation of Albion Law there … well, Uther was willing to turn a blind eye.

Only Uther wasn’t the only one with singular purpose. The tutor, a Mr Alvarr, escaped quarantine. In collusion with none other than Morgause, who had been trying for some years to make contact with her maternal half-sister, their group was able to intercept the car carrying Morgana westwards. An explosion, some pertinent remains and as far as anyone was concerned, Morgana was dead. If Uther thought otherwise, he never gave any indication of it.

For several years, Morgana and Morgause hid out in the west in a remote farmhouse in Tintagel, sheltered by Cenred and a handful of other outlaws. When Arthur turned eighteen and enrolled in the Reds, contact was made. Not a year later, a secret organisation to return magic to Albion, the Movement, was born. Meanwhile, studying the Old Religion in the west, Morgana’s abilities grew in strength and her visions brought her back to Camelot, to her beloved Arthur, to the Movement and ultimately Arthur’s destiny.

Morgana’s and Arthur’s stories were spellbinding. Nonetheless, Merlin—Emrys—was the main attraction that first day.

Morgause used magic to heat Merlin a steaming bath. He was, unsurprisingly, stinking and filthy. She sat outside the door while Arthur washed Merlin’s hair and scrubbed his back, just as Merlin had done for him not so very long and a different lifetime ago. Calmly, she talked through what was happening to Merlin’s body as it readjusted to its new physiology.

“Don’t worry about the sparks in the water, either of you,” she said as Arthur let out a hilarious squawk—Merlin had stretched out the tingling in his fingers and a bolt of yellow light had shot forth, leaving a charred stain on the tile on the opposite wall.

“Are you sure?” Arthur said, unconvinced.

“Absolutely,” Morgause replied. “He’s just discharging. It’s like the magic equivalent of a wet dream.”

The sound of Morgause laughing outside the door made Merlin’s heart soar higher than Arthur’s laughter next to him. He got the feeling there hadn’t been much of that around here, not for a long time.

Later Gaius came and sat on the edge of the bed, his careworn hand resting on Merlin’s leg. Merlin was sorry he’d been dragged into this, if eternally grateful. “I would have died if it wasn’t for you.”

“You might have died because of me.” He added, “Your father knew, before you were born, that you were going to have magic.”

“How?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

When Merlin thought back to his mother, to what she had and hadn’t told him of his father, Balinor, it made sense; he’d had magic. Merlin had inherited his gift from his father.
Hunith’s grief had brought Merlin early. The borders were closing and a premature infant would never have got through or made the journey to Annis. So Gaius did the best he could and implanted a suppressor. The magic that sealed it there made it imperceptible to those without magic, and most of those with it.

In the last ten years, neither Morgause nor Gaius had seen or heard of more than a dozen survivors with suppressors. All wanted them removed. Most were severely injured by the procedure; two had died.

Merlin didn’t linger on what might have happened if he hadn’t signed up for marriage out of county, if he hadn’t been matched by the Compatibility Machines to Arthur. There again, perhaps Morgana was right. Perhaps Merlin’s match to Arthur was destiny.

No matter which it was—science, destiny or a combination of the two—Merlin didn’t much care. All he knew was that he was ready to do everything in his power to help Arthur and the Movement.

During the day, Arthur poked his head around the door every so often, bringing Merlin things to eat, some pamphlets and banned books to read. Merlin could see his worry wrapped around him like a shroud and didn’t bemoan the fleetingness of the visits. Everyone was harried, except Merlin, who was still too tired to move. He dozed on and off until the evening came and Arthur reclaimed him for himself.

Afterwards, Merlin took Arthur in his arms and waited for him to tell him the worst and the best.

“No one has missed us yet. I expect my father thinks we’re simply not answering the phone. We’ve got one more day’s grace at most.”

“Then what?”

“He’ll tear this city apart looking for us.”

Merlin’s first thoughts went to their friends. Anyone associated with either of them would be targets for interrogation. Arthur wouldn’t talk about what happened to suspects, to traitors. That told Merlin everything he needed to know.

“We can’t stay here, can we?”

“No.”

“Where will we go?”

“Tintagel. My mother used to live there, on the headland. That place is long gone. There’s a farmhouse nearby we can use, surrounded by magic. No one will find us there.” Arthur reached for the beer on the bedside table and swigged from the bottle, passing it to Merlin after a few mouthfuls. “Don’t worry, while you’ve been up here socialising, Cenred and I have been getting us ready to leave. Morgause and Morgana will be coming with us.”

“What about Gaius?”

“Him too.”

Merlin was relieved. Despite the dire situation they’d found themselves in, Gaius seemed remarkably cheerful. Merlin had even heard him whistling as he brewed Merlin tinctures and teas to speed his recovery. His awakening, Gaius liked to call it.
On the whole, Merlin felt the same as he did before the suppressor was removed. He just felt more, and not in an overwhelming way. Quite the opposite. He was filled with an all-encompassing sense of calm and well-being that was completely incongruous with his new identity of magic-wielding fugitive.

No one seemed to know what role Merlin would play in returning magic to Camelot. Morgana was certain he would be the key to their success. Merlin was as honoured and excited by the prospect as he was daunted and scared. Overnight, his existence, his world had become bigger than he could imagine or comprehend. He would never, ever again mutter a single word about his life being not enough.

“I need to tell you about Gwen and Leon,” Arthur said, looking sheepish. “About the baby and the Blooms, about Lance and Elyan—”

“Elyan?”

“Yes, he’s Gwen’s brother.”

Merlin drained the bottle of beer and listened while Arthur talked and talked. Arthur talked until he was shaking with sorrow and fear for the allies and the unborn child he’d left behind, for the enormity of the task ahead.

Once again, Merlin was left feeling very small.

The next day, Sunday, Arthur took Merlin to Morgana’s rooms. Morgause was there. She said that she would help Merlin with his magic, teach him how to use it to its full extent when they got to Tintagel. Until then, Merlin was to expend some of his excess energy heating water and recharging batteries.

While Morgana and Arthur worked tirelessly on packing and removing every trace of their presence, Merlin was given a box containing all the batteries they could find and told to get to work.

Bundled in a blanket while the others bustled from room to room, Merlin put the box in his lap and took out the batteries one by one in the way Morgause had shown him. He closed his hand around each in turn and felt for the dormant, expended charge inside. There was no way to explain how he felt the charge moving and realigning, no more than he could explain how he saw or heard.

Morgause told him to get through as many as he could. Perhaps, like her, he’d be able to charge a dozen in one sitting.

The first couple melted out of shape in his hand. The next few fizzed and leaked acid. Merlin cringed. They couldn’t afford to waste them. He had to relax. He closed his eyes, thought about lazy Sunday mornings and the vastness of the sky until he eased, shifted down three mental gears. Then he tried again.

In less than an hour, Merlin successfully recharged the rest of the boxful, some thirty or so batteries.

Waiting for the others to return, alone in Morgana’s room, Merlin saw a television on the side. There was a shirt draped over it and the back was thick with dust. It was probably never used. There was no mains electricity; they got by with a makeshift generator they used for more essential items.

Nonetheless, Merlin thought it might be of use to find the news. Arthur had taught him much about how to interpret what was reported and what wasn’t. As of this morning the radio had been silent, no mention of anything of note on any of the frequencies they tried. Lunchtime was approaching, and the midday news.
When Merlin plugged the television set into the generator and switched it on there was nothing, not even a pop or a blink. Merlin pushed his palm down, around the box that housed the tubes in the back. He listened; he concentrated on the form and function of the components housed in plastic.

There was movement under Merlin’s palm. Molecules were in motion.

Morgana came striding in with a holdall. “No use, Merlin. It doesn’t work.”

“Oh. Are you sure?” he said, as there was a crackle beneath his fingertips, a bright light in the middle of the screen and moments later—it was hard to make out—a fuzzy and buzzing picture of what looked like a sporting event.

Morgana shrieked. Arthur came running and by that time, there it was as clear as day. On the television two men were jousting like knights of old.

“It’s not broken,” Merlin said proudly.

Morgana gaped.

“He has a way with machines,” Arthur offered, looking at Merlin like he’d hung the moon.

“No shit,” Morgana said in disbelief. “That’s a colour picture, Arthur—on a black and white television.”

Worry had driven away any chance of sleep and Arthur soldiered through Sunday in a daze. Gwen and Leon were uppermost in his thoughts, then the rest of his allies and last but not least, Hunith. If he was lucky they had a maximum of another twenty hours to execute their next move. Nine o’clock sharp on Monday morning Arthur would be expected at work. Uther didn’t tolerate tardiness.

A radio operator was in a room on the top floor, scanning the airwaves. Updates were coming in from moles, spies and lookouts every hour. No one had missed him or Merlin, not since they left Kilgharrah’s gallery Friday night—or that was what Uther would have them believe.

Arthur’s paranoia was justified.

The moment Uther found out they were missing, he would stop at nothing to find them, regardless of whether he viewed their disappearance as by fair means or foul. If the Movement was exposed the repercussions would be disastrous; it could jeopardise all of Arthur’s plans and many, many lives.

“Dinner,” Merlin said, plonking a tray down next to the pile of blue-prints and maps blurring in front of Arthur’s vision.

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

Merlin sat down on the edge of the desk and pushed back Arthur’s hair. “You’re exhausted. You can barely keep your eyes open.”

“What’s that?”

On the tray, alongside the bowl of stew, was a small box the size of a telephone. Indeed, it looked like a telephone without the casing. It looked like—
“Well, while you’ve been up here moping about, I’ve been making myself useful. This is a blue box.”

“Does it work?”

“It does now.” Merlin was puffed up, exuberant and glowing. Magic—the freedom to exist with it and use it—had made him blossom. He looked like he’d grown two inches overnight.

Arthur perked up. A blue box. It could be inserted into any operational phone loop and used to hijack the signal and send it here there and everywhere before it reached its destination. The result: the user could make phone calls for free and better still, the calls were untraceable. It would enable them to make phone calls to Camelot, or anywhere in Albion for that matter, when they got to Tintagel.

Cenred had secured a four by four which would seat all six of them for when they made it beyond the city wall. Under the cover of darkness they were (somehow) going to walk their way out of Camelot. When they were safely away, Arthur would be able to make that phone call to Uther.

Now all he had to do was think of what to say to divert him.

Arthur ate his stew alone, deliberating. As soon as he’d had his fill, he made his way back to Morgana’s rooms. He could hear raised voices in the corridor—Morgause and Cenred. He knew what was troubling them.

There had been no time to put together disguises or fake identities. Morgana was meant to be dead, Morgause and Cenred existed off the grid, Arthur and Merlin were high-profile and instantly recognisable and Gaius had history. None of them could afford to be seen by anyone beyond the walls of The Evermore. More of a problem, they couldn’t be seen going through the wall.

For years, Cenred had been paying off a handful of Reds that patrolled the northern section of the service tunnels that ran inside and through the city wall. His smuggling had been based around a carefully timed schedule that didn’t coincide with this evening’s plans.

Sidling in to join Merlin and Morgana on the sofa, Arthur listened to Morgause thrashing out the value of force and fatalities while Cenred urged for something—anything—that would cause less disruption. The integrity of his smuggling route depended on it.

Gaius was in the corner of the room, keeping out of the dispute.

Then Merlin suggested an invisibility spell.

It produced a mixture of mirth and mockery from those with more established magical abilities and a, “Really, Merlin? This is real magic, not a child’s fiction.”

After that he stayed quiet, eventually leaving them to argue.

Arthur found him in the next room, packing up the last of their supplies, which included a plethora of once-defunct devices that he’d managed to salvage and restore.

“Are you going to be able to carry that?”

“Yep.” Merlin didn’t look up from tightening the buckles on the outside pockets.

Arthur took a peek in the pack. Delicately, he said, “It looks heavy. You’ve been through a lot this last couple of days.”
“I’m not an invalid, or an idiot. I know how much I can carry.”

Arthur pressed his face to the back of Merlin’s neck, smelled his solid warmth and wrapped his arms around his shoulders. “I never said you were.”

Merlin was tense and unyielding.

“I need you,” Arthur said, unthinkingly, selfishly, before he had a chance to stop himself. He stepped back, gave Merlin some space and busied himself on the other side of the room. He was being unfair; he shouldn’t have said it but it was true and it was too late to take it back. Chancing a look in Merlin’s direction, Arthur hoped Merlin could see his regret.

It looked like Merlin hadn’t even heard him. He was winding a length of fine wire around a piece of card and smoothing it with his fingers like it was his only concern. The rejection hurt as it pierced Arthur’s chest and lodged its stinger in his heart.

Then, just like that, out of the blue, Merlin put his hands on his hips, his mouth lifting at the corners—totally oblivious to Arthur’s momentary crisis of confidence—and said, “All right. What if I could cut the power, just on the section of the wall we want to go through? That would allow us to make it through without being seen, wouldn’t it?”

“It would. Our only problem is the locks.”

“Mechanical or electronic?”

“Electronic?” Arthur wasn’t sure, especially not while he was in the midst of trying to assimilate the potential scope of Merlin’s newfound capabilities and the inflating effect of his pert smile.

“That means there are magnets, solenoids inside. If I can disrupt the polarity…”

“You could do that?”

“I think so. There’s probably a back-up generator, and an alarm, so on second thoughts I’d have to fry the circuitry to the entire section…” He paused, deep in thought. “If I could make it look like a power surge, an accident, not sabotage…”

If Morgana was right, if Emrys was the key to their success, if this was the way it was meant to have played out all along, Arthur had to trust Merlin, trust in his quickly-emerging inherent ability. Perhaps he’d been preparing for this his whole life without even realising it.

Arthur didn’t need to hear any more. “Let’s do it. I’ll go and tell the others.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Merlin eyes lit up and he threw his arms around Arthur’s neck. “I won’t let you down.”

They left The Evermore in pairs, Morgana with Cenred, Morgause with Gauis, and Arthur with Merlin, taking different routes to the same destination. In the unlikely event anyone saw two shadowy figures scraping over the rubble or scuttling between the derelict buildings, they would look less suspicious, less gang-like than a group of six.

Arthur and Merlin left first, scarves across their faces, picking their way like scavengers over the
exposed ground between the hotel and the industrial buildings close to the wall. Their rendezvous was the disused telephone exchange. Without obstacles, it would take an hour to get there.

Behind broken doors and smashed out windows there were signs of life. If the illegal occupants weren’t disturbed, Arthur and Merlin wouldn’t encounter any trouble. The Reds rarely patrolled down here. Every so often the High Council talked of cleaning out the abandoned slums, razing the area and grassing it over. There was no talk of redevelopment. As entire streets in the Upper Town became empty, as the Camelot coffers and population dwindled, the wasteland in the farthest corners of the Lower Town grew like a cancer. There were no funds to cut it out, none to bandage it over. As a result, it was infected with those who didn’t find the Compatibility Regime to their liking.

Arthur kept Merlin close, using his hands to signal their next move, to guide them in the right direction.

The night was cloudy and scant light shone from the sliver of pale moon, but as they got closer to the wall the sweep of spotlights threatened to illuminate their progress. They clung to the alleyways between the buildings, where the darkness swallowed their silhouettes and the lay of the ground was a mystery under their feet.

They were halfway along the narrow passage between two small manufacturing buildings, minutes from their destination, when a shadow passed across the opening at the end, there then gone. Arthur’s heart leapt to his throat. All at once, he spun his head around to where they’d entered and shot out his arm, halting Merlin behind him. Arthur saw exactly what he hoped he wouldn’t. The end of the passage was filled with the outlines of two people. A quick glance back, and there were two more ahead of them. They were surrounded.

Instinctively, Arthur slid his hand towards the inside of his coat—and took pause—as Merlin whispered, “Give me the guns. Both of them.”

Firearms were a mistake. “No. Too loud.”

Arthur had one blade, a flick-knife wedged down the side of his boot. Four against one. Merlin wouldn’t stand a chance.

One of the figures blocking their exit took a step closer. Arthur pressed his back to the wall. Adrenaline surged and at once the night seemed brighter, his vision sharper. He could smell their intent. It wasn’t friendly.

“Trust me,” Merlin’s voice trembled in the inches of air between them. “Please.”

What to do? Bargain? Arthur would have to bargain. They had weapons and a few provisions. “Let me talk to them first,” he whispered. Then he called out to the gang. “We’re passing through. We don’t want any trouble,” while he moved his arm slowly to his holster, slipping the first weapon free.

Merlin’s hand was there, ready, closing around his. In tiny increments, he extracted the first pistol then the second from Arthur’s anxious fingers, as Arthur prayed the shadows had obscured his movements and that Merlin knew what he was doing.

“Those are big packs,” the gruff voice of a man said, at their exit, keeping his distance. “What’s in them?”

Arthur wasn’t expecting Merlin to answer. “Just a bunch of surveillance junk—bugs, cameras, batteries—stuff we can sell on the black. If you let us go, we’ll give you half.”

Curses. Maybe that would have worked in Ealdor.
The same man replied, “How about we just take all of it?”

“I had a feeling he might say that,” Arthur said under his breath, as the glint of the man’s blade caught the tail end of a searchlight overhead.

The rucksacks they could lose. Their anonymity was another matter. There was only one way this could end and it seemed Merlin knew it too. The touch of Merlin’s hand returned then the warm metal grip of one of the pistols. Arthur closed his fingers around it as Merlin said, “When you fire, I think it’s going to kick back a lot more than usual. You take the two at the front; I’ll take the two behind.”

As far as Arthur knew, Merlin had never fired a gun. This was going to end badly. Arthur had the space between heartbeats to think about how they were going to come out of this alive, to consider the vulnerability of their friends that were out here in the dark, too, not to mention the searchlights on the top of the wall and this gang roaming the abandoned Lower Town who might also be wielding guns.

The four edged closer, blades glinted, someone behind growled, “In for the kill.”

Arthur twisted his body, backing up to Merlin, extending his left arm to flatten him as close as to the wall as possible. If Arthur was quick he could take out the two in front and the two behind without Merlin discharging a shot. Just in case Merlin did fire, Arthur murmured, “When you do it, aim straight, don’t hesitate, don’t think about it.”

Arthur’s scarf fell from his face. Time slowed. Seconds stretched and narrowed, converging on this one objective. Widening his stance, Arthur braced himself—and fired four shots in quick succession. The two ahead fell, Arthur reeled and stumbled as the kickback reverberated through him, shaking and sickening him to his core. He struggled to stand, to spin and fire at the other two—too late—Merlin’s trembling hand was still aloft, holding the pistol. The slumped bodies of the other two gang members filled the passage behind them.

It was over as quickly as it had begun. But there was no ringing in Arthur’s ears. The shots hadn’t broken the night’s hush as they should have. They hadn’t made a sound above the click of the trigger.

Arthur didn’t ask Merlin what he’d done or how he’d done it. Unthinking, he took the weapon from him, grabbed his arm and fled the passage. They dodged the arc of the searchlight, crouching in doorways, behind mounds of rubbish and piles of rubble, not pausing for breath or respite.

When they reached the exchange, the door was open. The others were there, waiting.

Arthur was queasy, dizzy and disorientated. The adrenaline rush of the skirmish couldn’t explain away the rapid stuttering of his heart, the splitting pain in his bones or the pounding in his skull. It was difficult for Arthur to see Merlin’s face, to see if he was faring any better.

Cenred joked, “What kept you, you old ladies?”


Morgana gasped.

“Are you both all right?” Gaius said, reaching out for Merlin’s wrist.

Merlin stammered, “A bit shaken.”
He was more than a bit shaken. Whatever magic he’d used to silence the guns in the alleyway had taken a physically heavy toll on him, too. Arthur could hear the tremor of his pain, like an echo of his own.

“If you can’t go on, we’ll find another way,” Arthur said, reaching out for Merlin, getting no more than a bunch of his sleeve as he angled for the door with Cenred.

“There is no other way,” Cenred said. “Don’t worry. We’ll be in and out.”

Arthur slid down the wall, resting on his haunches, taking his knees to his chest and trying to regain some composure, to breathe through the shivering in his bones, while Cenred and Merlin left for the substation.

Their success was soon evident—sparks flew, next an almighty bang, lights went out, sirens sounded for a brief few seconds and died. Panicked voices sounded on top of the wall, where narrow beams of meagre torchlight spun aimlessly into the sky and over the ground, signalling the complete and thorough decimation of the power.

Arthur battled lead in his legs to stand, to run. There was enough ambient light to negotiate the ground while the sounds of panic atop the wall were a beacon. Laden, they jogged heavily over tarmac and straggly weeds: Morgana and Morgause at the head, Gaius making a decent pace closely behind them, Arthur at the rear. Merlin and Cenred were already at the top of the railed steps, inside the open doorway with a torch. A Red lay face down on the floor. Arthur couldn’t tell if he was alive.

Inside the empty tunnel, they illuminated their escape by torchlight. Arthur dragged his legs up the stairs, stumbled forwards to Merlin, the fleeting brush of his hand the only reassurance he could give him and take for himself. His rucksack grew heavier by the second. He was moving through solid air and his lungs screamed in protest.

Sixty feet, that’s all, to the other end of the tunnel, to the fire escape, to freedom. They dropped from the hatch, tumbling down a grassy bank, clawing through shrubs and squelching through mud. Arthur focused on moving forward, keeping Merlin in his sight, two steps ahead of him, while he wheezed and panted for air.

When they reached the four by four, choking, gasping, sweating and shaking, Arthur fell to his knees as the contents of his gut lurch ed up and out. Next to him, Merlin was on the ground, heaving and gagging as Morgause held his head. Their stomachs emptied, they were bundled onto the back seat. The rucksacks were thrown in behind them as finally Cenred re-emerged through the undergrowth half-carrying Gaius.

Morgause took the wheel and pulled gently away with the headlights off.

Arthur clung to Merlin as he was claimed by the blackness, from outside and within.

Hours must have passed. Prickling dryness glued down Arthur’s eyelids but there was light beyond. He ached to his bones.

“He’s waking up,” Merlin said, his voice rough, hoarse.

Arthur blinked as Merlin, looking as wretched as Arthur felt, put a flask of water to his parched lips. He sucked back a greedy mouthful, spilling half of it down his chin before shifting and stretching in his seat.

They were on a deserted dirt road, high hedges flanking its sides. The brightening sky was striped
with muted pink and grey. Soft mist billowed past the window.

“I’m sorry,” Merlin said. “When we fired the guns, I had to send the sound somewhere—into our bodies.”

“You mean we were human silencers?” Arthur croaked.

“Sorry,” Merlin said again, “I didn’t realise it would be so…” He grinned. “Fucking awful.”

Arthur reached out and cuffed him, hugged him and kissed his face with his scratchy chapped lips and his stinking breath.

It didn’t matter. They were alive. They were safe. Thanks to Merlin, thanks to Emrys—the one and the same.

Epilogue

Arthur was asking about the blue box the moment Merlin hobbled into the farmhouse with his rucksack full of treasure. Since Merlin’s awakening, Arthur had spent every conscious moment worrying—and he had worrying aplenty to be done yet.

“I could call my father from anywhere,” Arthur said, “and he wouldn’t know where I was calling from? I could tell him that we’re at home?”

Merlin had been thinking about this since he awoke in the four by four, contemplating the vibration of copper. “Better than that. I can trick him, send the signal through a fake location. From anywhere you want.”

That pleased Arthur very much. Evidently, he’d already thought this through because he didn’t have to ponder on his reply. “Send the signal north. Mercia. Breedon. There are abandoned villages all around there, acres of hills and woodland. It would take weeks to search the area.”

Arthur got out a map and they sat side by side at the farmhouse table.

Merlin studied the roads and the topography from Tintagel to Breedon. He tuned the incessant humming in his fingers to the electromagnetic waves pulsing through copper wire. Settling his hands upon the blue box, Merlin focused on his task.

The others came in as Merlin said solemnly, “I’m ready.”

Gathered in the farmhouse kitchen, they stilled, straining to hear the other end of the line.

Arthur rang Uther at home.

There was no greeting, only, “You called me away from breakfast. This had better be good.”

It was, oh, it really was. Merlin had to censor his grin, concentrate on resonance. It was easier once Arthur started speaking, once he took control. Urging Uther to listen carefully to every word, to record it if necessary, to trace the call and to not interrupt, Arthur began.

“Six months ago I made a promise, in front of you, the High Council, the whole of Albion. I promised a man I didn’t know—matched to me by the Compatibility Machines in your own government—that I would look after him until the day I die. So imagine my surprise, father, when Merlin and I discovered just two days ago that he has magic, suppressed by an implant in his skull.
What’s more, that suppressor was put in and then, for Merlin’s safety, removed by our very own Gaius.”

Arthur had done it, and only implicated the three of them.

The phone line stayed silent and Merlin wondered whether Uther was still there, or if he’d passed out at his desk. Of course, he hadn’t. He was made of sterner stuff.

At last, he said, “Where are you?”

“Why don’t you check?” Arthur glanced at Merlin. Merlin smiled and nodded. “I think you’ll find we’re in Mercia.”

Uther didn’t question the truth in Arthur’s words. ‘Come back. I’ll send a car. We can talk about this, we can find an equitable solution.”


But it was Uther who was more shaken than Merlin expected. “That wasn’t my fault. The car—that wasn’t my fault. I never meant for her to be harmed.”

Morgana’s eyes narrowed. She shook her head. Woe betide Uther when she got her hands on him.

She put her hand on Arthur’s shoulder and squeezed. He looked up at her, he looked at Merlin, at each of them in turn and said, “Don’t look for us, father. I love my husband with all my heart and I promised him I would look after him. That’s what I intend to do. Don’t look for us.”

Uther made a noise of protest that was cut short. Arthur had hung up.

The first reports of Arthur and Merlin’s disappearance were vague, a matter of days after their escape. Uther was looking for them. It didn’t matter. He couldn’t find what he couldn’t see. The farmhouse was protected by a charm, a long way west of Camelot, and further still from Mercia.

Not long after, news came that Kilgharrah had been arrested for arson.

Merlin was beside himself. His magic burned in his bones and he thought he might shake apart from the pain of it. But Morgause took his hand and they walked the moor around the cottage while she strengthened the charm, funnelling Merlin’s grief and rage into an impenetrable wall.

During their many hours together, Morgause told Merlin that Tintagel was the birthplace of magic. She said the rocks were infused with it. Merlin could feel it, vibrating the earth. It spoke to him when he walked the cliffs by the sea, its words rising on the wind and telling him her secrets.

He discovered, barefoot by the water, there were yet more answers to be found in the sand, in the silicon.

Arthur was the rock that Merlin clung to when his feet weren’t steady, when the power residing in his nervous system, pent up for too long, made him dizzy and helpless. Merlin did the same for Arthur when his worries bruised the skin around his eyes and he cried out in his sleep.

On dry days, Morgana kept the windows and doors open, no matter how cold the wind blew. She
ran like a child over the grass and plucked snowdrops then crocuses from the garden. There was a record player in the parlour and loud music was her biggest delight. Her zeal was infectious. Gaius could on occasion be caught swaying to a beat, Morgause and Cenred too, between the business of rallying revolutionaries across the nation and watching Uther’s every move.

To that end, the radio scanner and the television were on constantly in the kitchen, fuelled by old car batteries. Until, through a process of trial and error and the loss of the kitchen curtains to a stray spark, Merlin rigged wire and blades on a pole and the wind powered their needs.

Gwen, Leon and Percival continued to report to work, Freya hadn't missed a lecture and Hunith was safe and well in Ealdor. But there was no news of Gwaine.

Relief and regret were constant companions in poor place of absent friends.

Fast weeks went by and then a compatriot of Arthur’s, a Lieutenant-General Lance du Lac, sent word he was headed south a week hence, to the Blooms, with a raiding party and a film crew.

Arthur said it was time to start packing.

The next day, unexpectedly, Cenred returned from a sortie in Camelot with Gwen and Leon in the car, and to further everyone’s astonishment, Gwaine.

For this gift, Merlin’s joy broke the clouds in the sky, despite their days in Tintagel being numbered.

“I wish you had your camera,” Arthur said wistfully, turning in Merlin’s arms as they gazed from the cliff top to the glistening grey sea.

“No need,” Merlin said. He pointed to his temple and then to Arthur’s. “It’s all up here.” They were together now and always would be. They would forever share the memory, even if they never got to return to this particular spot.

They walked back to the farmhouse arm in arm. Through an open window Merlin heard singing. They crossed the grass, peering in over the parlour sill. Morgause, Morgana and Gwen were on the sofa, their voices blending in sweet harmony. Gwaine was on the footstool by the fire, strumming the guitar he’d found in the attic to the song he’d written in the days after Merlin and Arthur disappeared.

Merlin had already learned the words and the tune. They all had. It had an easy melody and refrain, like an anthem, like a call. With his arm wrapped surely about Arthur’s shoulders, Merlin joined the song. Arthur too.

Their voices were louder than the doubts and the danger. Their song was going to reach every corner of every town and village in Albion.

Very soon, the whole nation would be singing.

Chapter End Notes

Several novels inspired this work. The main ones are *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret
Atwood, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *Nineteen Eight Four* by George Orwell. Fans might also notice the shout to John Wyndham.

While the bulk of what happens in the story is pure fiction, the blue box is in fact, to an extent, a real thing. Find out more, [here](#).

Comments are welcome here or on [Livejournal](#).

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Works inspired by this one:

- [[Podfic] Counterpoint by PlaneJane by fire_juggler](#)

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